IRISH PRISON WRITING AND THE VICTORIAN PENITENTIARY

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Abstract

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The penitentiary was a key institution of the Victorian era. This social control was designed by assembling modern ideas of religion, science, administrative theory, architecture, and philosophy into a means for the production of a more manageable population. Its engineers distilled a broad body of knowledge about what humans were supposed to be into a comprehensive and enormously expensive technology. As such, the institution’s attempt to strip the inmate of her/his subjectivity and reinscribe the state’s consensus values offers one of the most legible readings of nineteenth-century English social systems available. The literary analysis of prison writing reveals the ambitious scale of this technology by depicting its human consequences.

Chapter one analyzes Michel Foucault, Erving Goffman and Edward Said’s approaches to the penitentiary in a productive tension, suggesting that the consequences of the wall-to-wall and minute-to-minute management of the prisoner’s experience are as significant as the broad social agenda the prison enacts.

In chapter two I argue that public intellectual and radical MP Michael Davitt reconstructs his subjectivity through his representation of criminality in Leaves from a Prison Diary; or, Lectures to a ‘Solitary’ Audience (1885), a social critique using
an empirical study of crime and criminals based on his nine years in seven English prisons. I read this intellectual study of the criminal as a means by which Davitt’s publication reconstructed his identity.

Chapter three analyzes *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* and Oscar Wilde’s two other post-prison publications discursive understanding of penal discipline, arguing that after prison Wilde refined and redefined his aesthetics to concentrate on the conflict between individuals and the mechanism of the penitentiary.

In chapter four I examine nationalist leader Tom Clarke’s *Glimpses of an Irish Felon’s Prison Diary* as a radical manual on surviving and resisting imprisonment drawn from nearly fifteen years segregated from the population of a convict prison as a Fenian.

In the final chapter I map further study of Irish prison writing, suggesting directions for the extension of the theoretical tools available to understand the institution, the inmate’s experience and the possibility of resistance.
For my family, past, present and future.
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CHAPTER 1:
INTRODUCTION

My object all sublime
I shall achieve in time--
To let the punishment fit the crime--
The punishment fit the crime;
And make each prisoner pent
Unwillingly represent
A source of innocent merriment!
Of innocent merriment!
- Gilbert & Sullivan, *The Mikado*

The prison appears to be a magnificent muse, inspiring a long list of inmates:
Miguel Cervantes, Eldridge Cleaver, Alexander Solzhenitsin, Ngugi wa Thiong’o,
Angela Davis, Emma Goldman, Peter Kropotkin, Fyodor Dostoevsky, Brendan
Behan, Ezra Pound, and Léopold Sédar Senghor are only a few of the authors whose
works could be read in a post-prison context. Of course, imprisonment does not
inspire the vast majority of inmates to put pen to paper. On the surface, the prison is a
simple idea: confine people who harm people to keep them from harming more
people. The state and its citizens are protected by the segregation of anti-social
individuals and these individuals are better able to function within the state and
among its citizens after they have been punished. Paradoxically, these bromides are
understandable here in the United States given the importance of the penal system to
social management and the consequent scale of imprisonment. It is regrettable, but
reasonable that the country with the largest proportional prison population and most
expensive penal system in history would be satisfied with a simple answer to a complex problem. The prison is a social collaboration based on absolute control. To the extent that it is designed to return inmates to the outside world, this control is intended to break the inmate/person apart through social isolation and the careful manipulation of time, space and sensory input in order to reshape political identity by reshaping who the convict is.

Because manipulation of the inmate’s identity is the central project of penal institutions, literary criticism can make a singular contribution to understanding the prison. Prison writing is a way to comprehend the ambition of scale for this technology by depicting its human consequences. As sites of discursive conflict and resistance, these texts also reveal the limitations of the penitentiary’s impact on the individual. Instead of looking outward at the societal consequences of imprisonment, through detailed analysis literary study understands the practical application of scientific, bureaucratic, economic and theological arts to the problem of the criminal. Critical readings of prison texts inform and are informed by the historical context of the work, but the writer is also necessarily in a state of conflict with her/his context. The peculiar relationship between the writer and a technology designed to erase her/him creates a situation in which description of prison itself is act of resistance. This leads to the deceptively simple question at the core of this project: how does a person’s writing reclaim a subjectivity that has been shattered by the technology of the penitentiary?

This study concentrates on a key development in the history of prisons and the history of modernity: the establishment of the late-nineteenth-century English
penitentiary through analysis of published works by Irish prisoners in the historical context of the authors’ imprisonment. The Victorian prison was an attempt to standardize punishment in order to erase the criminal’s subjectivity and reinscribe him/her with consensus values of the state. The conditions inside it were well documented, so there is ample contextual evidence for interpretations of the writings of three ex-inmates of late-nineteenth-century English prisons. According to criteria explained below, I have selected three prominent texts by writers who were imprisoned in Victorian prisons and wrote about it afterwards: Michael Davitt’s sociological study *Leaves From a Prison Diary*, Oscar Wilde’s protest poem *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*, and Tom Clarke’s training text *Glimpses of an Irish Felon’s Prison Life*.

The penitentiary was the third modern attempt to manage crime in the United Kingdom. Increased urban migration, industrialism and a significant reduction of the number of capital crimes led to a consistent rise in the number of imprisoned criminals. In 1717 parliament passed the Transportation Act, the first attempt to manage crime, opened up the American colonies’ markets to English convict imports. Transportation functioned as a moral sewer for undesirables, who were often successfully recycled into members of prosperous colonial endeavors. After the founding of the United States, Parliament shifted to penal colonies in Australia and Van Diemen’s Land. Ships sailed for Botany Bay in 1787 and continued to export criminals to New South Wales until 1840. As the balance of economic benefit shifted towards voluntary immigrants and power shifted to colonial administrators, transportation ended in 1867, by which time the modern penitentiary system that
replaced it had become well established. In the lull between the establishment of the United States and the first attempt to colonize Australasia, the government established the prison hulk as a stopgap measure (albeit one that lasted for eighty-one years). The Imperial Navy had many obsolete ships of the line designed and constructed to discipline sailors were easily translated into discipline among criminals. These hulks offered a secure, mobile work force in Britain, Ireland and Bermuda but recycled ships did not provide enough control over the convict in a standardized environment. Thus, the Victorian penitentiary was created as such an environment and by the middle of the nineteenth century these approaches were phased out and the penitentiary was phased in.

The entire history of the Victorian penal system can be understood as an attempt to progressively increase the central regulation of punishment. Pentonville Prison was erected in 1842 as an international model for control, and its design was repeated in various versions during the government’s half-century project of prison construction. This period of expansion was accompanied by a legislative effort to centralize the prison under the authority of the Home Office. The prison was fused with the jail in 1865 and all local authority was centralized between 1877 and 1898, the period of Wilde, Clarke and one-third of Davitt’s sentences. Bragging about his comprehensive authority, prison commissioner Evelyn Ruggles-Brise once said, “It is now 4.30 in the afternoon and I know that just now, at every local and convict prison in England, the same things in general are being done, and in general they are being done the same way” (Radzinowicz & Hood 583).
The prison did more than control the convict’s experience of time—in form, the building integrated British political aims with Victorian architecture. In The Fabrication of Virtue Robin Evans describes the modern prison as the culmination of an architecture “that fixed the shape of experience . . . a vessel of conscience and [a] pattern giver to society, extending its boundaries way beyond the limits customarily ascribed to it either as an art or as a prosaic utility” (6). Held in a structure built for constant surveillance—and (perhaps more effectively) the isolated individual’s awareness of this constant surveillance—the convict’s monastic whitewashed cell was intended to author his moral, spiritual, and political renaissance. In Power/Knowledge Michel Foucault outlines the inherent contradiction in the ambitious design of a building that is simultaneously a fortress and an educator: “In the Panopticon, there is used a form close to that of the castle—a keep surrounded by walls—to paradoxically create a space of exact legibility” (154). The panopticon was the peak of utilitarian innovation for the interpretation and practice of Jeremy Bentham’s notion of ideal punishment: minimum resources to facilitate maximum disengagement from the inmate’s idea of selfhood.

The Victorian penitentiary reflects the deep-seated religious convictions of civil servants and parliamentarians, evidenced in the belief that Christian redemption could originate in the architecture of a building. The total control over the external environment of an individual amounts to a technology designed to destroy and reconstruct the individual’s internal subjectivity (in practice, however, the system generally stopped with the first step). Although the nineteenth-century prison is often described as a utilitarian institution, it is actually a technology which employs
utilitarian practices as a means to a spiritual end. The inmate’s environment was not controlled by rigid measurement of discrete quantities of food, exercise, work, prayer and church as commodities simply for the sake of efficiency. Far from the guiding principle of the penal process, the instrumental approach maintained a space designed for a distinctly non-utilitarian outcome, the convict’s religious redemption. The system assumes that the absolute people perceived to be inferior – by notions of criminality connected to ideas of pseudo-biological identity categories such as race, ethnicity and class – could lead to their reintegration into society as better Christians and, consequently, better subjects.

The rules of prison discipline attempted to strip the prisoner of any sense of individuality, writing a new more integrated identity—drawn from a convergence of the church and the state—on to the felon. In the convict prison, inmates’ physical segregation in the cell was only one step in the attempt to erase identity through isolation. After their trial, criminals were stripped of their name, clothes and hair; given pointless, solitary work; and fed meals calculated to provide two-thirds the calories measured in the diet of England’s free poor people. This curious institution audaciously deprived the convict of nutrition, as much sensory input as possible, and any and all human contact incidental or meaningful in the service of state management. It enacted isolation through standardization with mind-boggling attention to detail and little understanding of the practical effects of this attempt to erase the aberrant’s individuality.

The prison system sought to reinforce this erasure by mandating inmates’ complete silence in prison. Inspired by St Paul’s admonition from his Epistle to the
Corinthians: “evil communication corrupts” (Romans 8:7). The policy of silence was originally drawn from the Quaker’s adaptation of the silent reflection to the Eastern State Penitentiary in Philadelphia. Theoretically, observing silence at all times would create a blank space for the inmate upon whom God (manifested—blasphemously—by the state in the design and administration of the penitentiary) could inscribe penitence and reform on the criminal’s newly receptive soul. The system relied upon the belief that the environment of the prison was so antiseptic and pristine that redemption could be achieved by a system of absolute silence.

While it was intended as a measure of social control that combined modern ideas of religion, science, administrative theory, architecture, and philosophy in order to create a more manageable population, in practice the penitentiary served as a technology for the manufacture of criminality. The Prison System (later Prison Commission) created a permanent criminal class within economically poor communities composed largely of emigrants from rural England and the Celtic fringe and other segments of working-class England. Of course, the massive state expenditures on prisons cannot be established as a cause of high recidivism rates and rising crime levels in nineteenth-century England—the institution itself seems small compared to the broader social, economic and political changes attendant with the expansion of the British Empire—but it cannot be reasonably connected to any relief of significant measures of criminal behavior, rehabilitation, or incarceration and the methods for destroying a convict’s subjectivity were undoubtedly more reliable than the methods for rebuilding it.
Our current understanding of the technology of the prison has, of course, been shaped by the writings of Michel Foucault, most prominently *Discipline & Punish: The Birth of the Prison* which traces the movement of the carcer al from various apparatuses for punishment within a society into a discipline that defines and directs the society itself. Concentrating on the development of the regulatory function of the prison in broad terms, he defines the application of the study of the prison to a broad social analysis and intellectual history: “in penal justice, the prison transformed the punitive procedure into a penitentiary technique; the carcer al archipelago transported this technique from the penal institution to the entire social body” (298). In an interview with J. J. Brochier, Foucault elaborates on the scale of a disciplinary system in which “power reaches into the very grain of individuals, touches their bodies and inserts itself into their actions and attitudes, their discourses, learning processes and everyday lives.”¹

However, this interview also expresses the limitations inherent to the application of Foucauldian disciplinary analysis to critical readings of prison writing; penal discipline is “a synaptic regime of power, a regime of its exercise within the social body, rather than from above it” (*Power/Knowledge* 39). In *State, Power, Socialism*, Nico Poulantzas argues that Foucault “underestimates the role of the state itself” (77), consequently underestimating the subject’s ability to resist the state’s influence. If power operates within rather than from above, the prisoner is simply a more lucid illustration of all of an individual’s experience as a disciplined subject

internalizing the values and methods of the state. If criminal, judge, jailer, and citizen are all playing intertwined roles in the drama of discipline, the prisoner’s ability to frame his experiences, let alone to form them into a resistant subjectivity, is questionable at best.

In “Criticism Between Culture and System,” Edward Said concentrates on the limits of Foucauldian notions of control found in the discussion of resistance to the prison and the social order it signifies. He objects to the amorality (or perhaps moral parity) assumed by Foucault’s nod to ubiquitous penal discipline: “If power oppresses and controls and manipulates, then everything that resists it is not morally equal to power. Resistance cannot equally be an adversarial alternative to power and a dependent function of it” (Said 246). He goes on to provide a circumspect assessment of the workings of discipline — insisting that no system is capable of such complete, faceless control. Throughout this critique, Said has a distinct understanding of the determined, if self-consciously muted, political engagement underlying Foucault’s apparently ambiguous situation of power.

Temperamentally, and no doubt because [Foucault] is an intellectual uniquely gifted to see that intellectuals are part of the system of discursive power, he has written his books in solidarity with society’s silent victims, to make visible the actuality of discourse and to make audible the repressed voice of its subjects. (Said 216)

Foucault is a demanding instructor as he employs the theoretical conceit of teaching the reader how to read his work, but he does discuss resistance at certain key points in
the text. The conspicuous absence of a prolonged discussion of any fissures in this
disciplinary technology fits within the didactic forms of writing that define the
iconoclast’s elusive body of work. While Foucault’s brilliant analysis of discipline as
the engine of modernity certainly does not deal with the question of resistance or
agency at great length, the conclusion to and inspiration for Discipline & Punish hint
at Said’s understanding of solidarity. In a passage in the final chapter Foucault
appears almost optimistic as he insists that the entrenchment of mechanisms of
discipline is neither certain nor a constant: “This does not mean that [the penal
system] cannot be altered, nor that it is once and for all indispensable to our kind of
society” (305). Although he does neglect the notion of political agency for most of
the work, Foucault’s entire engagement with “writing the history of the present” (30-31) is defined by resistance from its inception. He credits the 1970s prisoner-rights
movement’s “revolts, at the level of the body, against the very body of the prison”
with the overall framework for Discipline & Punish. In this reading of Foucauldian
penal discipline, the writing inmate’s apprehension of the state’s discursive power
within and his use of this knowledge to articulate the state’s power from above are
themselves acts of resistance.

Despite Foucault’s insight into the matrices of punishment, he does not offer a
disciplined exploration of the interactions between people and the contextual details
of the institution. Irving Goffman deals with a smaller scale reality of the prison. In
contrast to Foucault’s sweeping social analysis of Western Civilization, Goffman’s
perspective arose from a year of field work at St. Elizabeth’s Hospital in Washington
D.C., where he observed with enormous imagination the day to day effects of the
institution. My understanding of both the prison and its central role in modern societies—Victorian or otherwise, is best framed by the work of Erving Goffman whose *Asylums: Essays on the Social Situation of Mental Patients and Other Inmates* develops a sociological version of the structure of the self by attempting to comprehend and categorize the individual experiences of inmates in what he calls total institutions: “a place of residence and work where a large number of like-situated individuals cut off from the wider society for an appreciable period of time, together lead an enclosed, formally administered round of life” (xiii). These institutions are defined by four factors:

1. All aspects of life are conducted in the same place and under the same single authority.

2. Each phase of a member’s daily activity is carried on in the immediate company of a large batch of others, all of whom are treated alike and required to do the same thing together.

3. All phases of the day’s activities are tightly scheduled, with one activity leading at a pre-arranged time into the next, the whole sequence of activities being imposed from above.

4. The various enforced activities are brought together into a single rational plan purportedly designed to fulfill the official aims of the institution. (6)

Goffman’s study does suggest a broader social critique—the definition includes mental hospitals, military barracks and nursing homes with the prison— but
his work is more closely defined than Foucault’s abstractions. His work attends to
the individual inmate’s experience of these institutions and the way s/he makes sense
of the experience for themselves. An individual who can construct meaning can resist
a prison: a vital component in the study of a technology designed literally from the
ground up to control the body, mind and soul.

The power of the state may be virtually absolute in the penitentiary, but these
texts make the case that a critical record of prison memories is a part of the
reconstruction of subjectivity as the authors write in order to create distance between
the self and dehumanizing experiences. Prisoners give form to the violence of their
experiences through a variety of innovative literary techniques which is why their
works suggest a commitment to telling their stories in fragmented form. One need
only examine the titles chosen by each writer to get a sense of the fractures of
coherent form coincident with the standardization of the prison: Michael Davitt’s
Leaves From a Prison Diary (1885), Oscar Wilde’s Ballad of Reading Gaol (1898),
and Tom Clarke’s Glimpses of an Irish Felon’s Prison Life (1922*2). The tightly
controlled prison is described in a loose form: the disheveled pile of written Leaves,
the base orality of the Ballad song form, and finally, the longest, most violent
sentence is depicted in mere Glimpses.

Each text depicts a particular moment in a particular prison specifically
designed to deconstruct subjectivity. In an attempt to define a methodology to
interpret written responses to the technology of the penitentiary, I have limited the
texts examined according to according to the following criteria: the authors were Irish

2 See Chapter Three.
prisoners who served a sentence of penal servitude in English prisons; the works were written outside of prison; the texts engage with the standardized experience of the penitentiary; and the prison writing was published. In what follows I will discuss the reasons why I have used these criteria.

I choose works written after imprisonment because the same conditions to which the writer responds made the act of reconstruction impossible; The works of Irish prison literature actually written in prison (Mitchel’s *Jail Journal*, Davitt’s *Jottings in Solitary*, Wilde’s *De Profundis*) demonstrate the effects of constant surveillance and the pernicious influence of self-censorship resulting in a startling lack of subjectivity in the inmate’s desperate attempt to write himself out of the cell. The material constraints of the prison (inmates were seldom allowed reading materials, pen or paper) and the psychological impact of the technology of the penitentiary (the effects of the comprehensive discipline of silence and censorship) severely limit the number and quality of texts that were composed in prison. Such desperation is readily apparent in Wilde’s famous letter to Alfred Douglas. The material conditions of the composition demonstrate the heavy censorship of the author’s work. He was permitted to write by candlelight for forty-five minutes at the end of each day. First thing in the morning, a warder would take the grocer’s ledger in which he wrote to the prison governor for inspection. The book would then be returned to Wilde in the evening. Upon his release, he was permitted to make copies of the work from the ledger. The text reads as the composition of a prisoner, rather than a writer attempting to reestablish an identity separate from the prison. His work is dominated by imaginative interpretations of Christ clearly influenced by the
religious aspects penitentiary life. With an appeal to Christian charity, Wilde is clearly seeking forgiveness for himself and (rather unconvincingly) granting Douglas clemency as well. Accepting the terms of the prison he takes responsibility for his transgressions and expresses shame over his actions. Wilde’s prose poem is a fascinating work of art, but it tells the story of an aspect of imprisonment that is important, but distinct from the scope of this project.

The standardization that was the foundation of the Victorian penitentiary offers a clear context from which to read these works. The system’s buildings, rules, and practices are all well documented and evidence suggests that these prisons were generally successful in maintaining this anonymous uniform discipline among the prisoners. These non-typical inmates’ literary responses to this technology provide a record of the complexities of such an ambitious penal organization.

The focus of this dissertation is not only on work composed after imprisonment, but published versions of these texts. The publication of prison writing suggests that bearing witness to the experience is a dimension of the construction of lost subjectivity. The act of publication itself explains how these three authors understand what they are doing and the fact they want to publish suggests reasons why they are writing in the first place. It suggests the ability to bear witness to a public and the capacity to create an audience for both the identity each author is rebuilding and the social critiques integrated into this reconstruction. Finding a readership with an appetite for their critiques also provides some measure of public justification for their incarceration, and the possibility of redemption through a critique of the prison rather than accession to it. The author’s experience in this
system was partially vindicated by the publication of each of these texts, quite openly in the cases of Davitt and Clarke, whose celebrity and influence were directly connected to their incarceration. The wide distribution of *The Ballad* leads to more complex questions of validation. However, while Wilde’s prior literary notoriety and his experience as a convict influenced the decision to print the anonymous limited edition first run of the poem, the fact remains that the only poem he completed in the three years he lived after prison was drawn directly from his memories.

Limiting texts to prisoners with an explicitly Irish identity writing about their experiences in English prisons brings a productive tension to the study. Their national origins suggest cultural affinity with their fellow citizens of the United Kingdom originating in geographical proximity, language and a common government. They also suggest social variance from their colonizers originating in the economic and cultural disadvantages of English rule. Irish writers have a profound familiarity with a British imperial structure that works very hard to look at other peoples and see themselves, and—in areas such as education and language—is often successful. They are also evidence of the diversity and mobility of the nineteenth-century Irish that was a consequence of this structure. Davitt, Wilde and Clarke are, respectively, an Irish refugee to industrial England, a son of Irish nationalists from the Dublin elite who was well-received in London society, and an American citizen raised in British military garrisons in the Isle of Wight, South Africa and Ireland. The “Irishness” of each writer is complex, but for each man this complexity does not extend to being English.
The complexity attendant upon these writers’ Irish identity extends to a
criteria I have deliberately left out of this project: the construction of the political
prisoner. As Irish men criminalized under dubious legal circumstances in English
courts, all three authors could be characterized by this term. Working definitions of
the political prisoner are important, and range from Abbie Hoffman’s assertion that
all prisoners are political prisoners, to Amnesty International’s notion of a “prisoner
of conscience,” a person imprisoned because of their race, religion, color, language,
sexual orientation, belief, or lifestyle who has not used or advocated violence. In this
dissertation I do not develop an understanding of the political prisoner (theoretical or
practical), hence I do not employ the term. All crime exists within a socio-political
context, but the term “political prisoner” suggests distinctions between the crime,
circumstances of arrest, trial and imprisonment based on the inmate’s belief system.
In attempting to organize a clear argument out of these three authors’ work, I focus
instead on the attempted uniformity of the prison system and the particular
subjectivities these authors articulate for themselves, regardless of how the writer-
convict might be externally defined.

These three works of published Irish prison writing are well-suited to
cultivating an understanding of the ambitious technology of the penitentiary from the
perspective of Irish prisoners. Davitt, Wilde and Clarke wrote in forms that connected
them to Irish culture: a convict with a basic education writes a scholarly text of social
criticism to prove he can; a famous and influential man of letters employs the street
ballad – a poetic form inflected by the Irish poetic tradition and popular in urban Irish
communities in England; an unrepentant radical develops a manual for other Irish radicals facing imprisonment.

In chapter one I argue that Michael Davitt reconstructs his subjectivity through his representation of criminality in *Leaves from a Prison Diary; or, Lectures to a ‘Solitary’ Audience* (1885), an empirical study of crime and criminals based on research conducted during his nine years in seven English prisons. Davitt’s intellectual study of the criminal is a means of reestablishing the author’s identity after prison. The book partially justifies his imprisonment simply by its publication. Davitt’s anecdotal analysis of the tricks and traits of the criminal classes found in prison foregrounds a reform agenda and the observational distance he establishes in the study sets him apart from the criminal inmates. However, he does extend the authority of the text and its ability to regenerate subjectivity to his fellow prisoners through a detailed critique of the poetry found on walls, under beds and inside of mugs in the prison. By distancing himself from the “common” criminal and ordinary prison “experience,” he argues for his own subjectivity but incorporates an anonymous posse of poets into this argument by preserving their impermanent art.

In chapter two I read Oscar Wilde’s post-prison publications for their discursive understanding of penal discipline. Wilde uses dramatic examples to force a choice between the individual and the prison in the first letter; he incorporates critiques of prison conditions into *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*; and he argues for remediation of the illness, insomnia and insanity endemic to penitentiary life in his final published letter. Wilde’s earlier journalism, criticism, fiction and theater relied on the sophisticated deployment of paradoxes to hide the author’s beliefs in plain
sight: it presented the audience with a range of possible interpretations and provoking them to choose whether his trademark epigrams are the work of a cheerful, sublime wit, a world-weary ironist, or an individual somewhere in between. Wilde refined and redefined his aesthetics after prison, concentrating on the conflict between individuals and the mechanism of the penitentiary.

In chapter three I read Tom Clarke’s *Glimpses of an Irish Felon’s Prison Diary* as a radical manual on surviving and resisting imprisonment drawn from nearly fifteen years in convict prison segregated from the population as a Fenian. The text provides practical advice for a younger generation of Irish republicans, for whom he predicts the penitentiary will be inevitable. Using a reading progressing from a single passage to a full “glimpse” (or chapter), to the text, to the audience of the text, and on to its critical context, I outline the reassertion of subjectivity through pedagogical form.

I conclude with a map for further study of Irish prison writing. First, I discuss the expansion of theoretical understandings of the authors, their works, the prison and the subject. Then I discuss the broad range of texts that could be added to this critique by unwinding each of the criteria established according the present methodology.
CHAPTER 2:
THE PRISON WRITING OF MICHAEL DAVITT

In W.B. Yeats’ *Autobiography* the poet describes one of Michael Davitt’s character flaws. He believed Davitt’s years in prison had impaired his mind, character and judgment: “nine years’ imprisonment at the most plastic period of his life had jarred or broken his contact with reality.”¹ Davitt’s first imprisonment did change him. Seven and a half years of the penitentiary’s authority over every aspect of his life down to the minute had threatened and then shattered Davitt’s contact with reality. His prison writing chronicled the onset of mental illness in many of his fellow Irish political prisoners and it is possible, indeed likely, that he suffered from many of the same symptoms.

However, Davitt’s first imprisonment also marked the most significant turning point in his life. All of Davitt’s political and intellectual contributions were built upon his first seven and a half years in prison. His broad body of work as an activist and organizer would suggest that if Davitt was broken by prison, he was made by it as well.

He was incarcerated again at the height of the Land League’s success as a popular movement. After his release, he collected much of his research and

reflections into the three-volume *Leaves From a Prison Diary: or Lectures to a Solitary Audience* (1885). This essay argues that *Leaves* is a book created to rebuild the subjectivity eaten away by Davitt’s prison experiences. Specifically it focuses on *Leaves’* depiction of other prisoners as a means of reenacting elements of his former identity while he incorporates his experiences in prison into the cultivation of a new sense of self.

Michael Davitt was born in Straide, County Mayo in March of 1846. His earliest memory was his family’s eviction at the age of four. His mother refused to stay in the local workhouse (which would have segregated her children according to sex) and after a brief period of homelessness the family immigrated to the industrial town of Haslingden in Lancashire. At the age of eleven Davitt left school in order to work in the local textile mills. He was employed in three different mills over a period of a few months but his career ended when his arm was mangled in a factory machine at Stillfoxe’s Mill. When the mill refused to compensate the family (the machine he was using was restricted to operators over the age of eighteen), a philanthropist paid for the boy to attend the local Wesleyan school. As an educated young adult, Davitt worked for a printing shop and began to associate with nationalist organizations. At nineteen he took the oath of the Irish Republican Brotherhood and two years later he participated in the abortive Fenian uprising of 1867.²

Davitt distinguished himself in the disastrous raid on Chester Castle when the unit’s leader fled with all of the resources as soon as it was clear the revolutionaries were expected. By pawning his revolver, undergarments and overcoat he was able to raise enough money for all the IRB men to return home. He later organized Irish nationalists to protect Catholic Churches in and around Haslingen during anti-Irish riots. His competence attracted the attention of IRB leaders and Davitt was appointed to the Supreme Council as the member from North England. He began to work buying guns for the Fenians and was arrested at Paddington Station with £135 on his person, just as a gunsmith from Birmingham arrived with a bag with thirty guns in it. After a professional informant testified he had seen Davitt at several meetings of the IRB, he was convicted of treason felony. Both Davitt and John Wilson, the gunsmith apprehended along with him, were sentenced to penal servitude. In his final statement before the court, Davitt asked the judge to add Wilson’s sentence to his own, because the merchant had no knowledge of Davitt’s true identity. The judge refused and he was sentenced to fifteen years on July 11, 1870.

The crime “misprison of treason, of felony” was a response to the growing nationalist movement in Ireland created in 1848 at the twilight of penal transportation. According to John Russell, treason (the capital crime of attempting to physically harm the sovereign) “often offered a great obstacle to the punishment of those who have committed very serious offences.”³ At the same time sedition (writing

or speech against the state) was only a misdemeanor. The new crime of treason felony offered serious sentences of penal servitude with a lower threshold of evidence than treason. Robert Peel vigorously argued: “I think it right that men who have not the dignity of traitors should not be allowed to cover themselves with the illusion that they are traitors. I wish to see them reduced to the position of felons.”

Young Irelanders convicted of treason felony for their roles in the 1848 Rebellion were exiled (most to Van Diemen’s Land) but with the end of transportation by 1866, almost all of the other treason felony men were sentenced to penal servitude.

The next generation of Irish nationalist prisoners stood out from the rest of the prison population in a number of important ways: they were well-educated, refused to allow themselves to be identified as criminals, had legal support provided by a well-funded amnesty movement and their treatment was subject to constant scrutiny by nationalist newspapers in Ireland, Britain and the United States. Fenian inmates challenged the fundamental penal principle of standardized control and lost. They refused to accede to their official classification as criminals and suffered in return. Michael Davitt describes his dealings with prison authorities.

They have done their worst for me so far as their treatment of me is concerned and continue to deny me even the privileges of the common herd I am compelled to associate with. But I am sustained by the consciousness of my

imputed ‘crime’ being an honourable one and that no degradation can lower me in the esteem of my friends.\textsuperscript{5}

English hostility towards Irish rebels and the preponderance of British Army veterans working as prison warders created an environment in many ways more severe than that of the average convict. Furthermore, their comparatively long sentences meant they lived in these conditions for more years than all but the most reprehensible criminals. The IRB inmates, nationalist newspapers argued, received punishment that was disproportionate to other prisoners.

Davitt described his experiences in convict prisons in his first publication, “Some Particulars of Treatment While a Prisoner.”\textsuperscript{6} The pamphlet portrays the grim conditions, humiliating searches and general hopelessness of a silent life in which every decision of the body and mind is regulated by the state. Prison work was especially hard on the disabled Davitt: he had to pick oakum with his teeth, cart stones with a crude harness and use one hand to smash bones for fertilizer. The


\textsuperscript{6} Michael Davitt, \textit{Michael Davitt: Collected Writings, 1868-1906} ed. Carla King, vol. 1 (Bristol: Thoemmes Press and Edition Synapse, 2001) 43-80. The full title is “Some Particulars of Treatment While a Prisoner in Clerkenwell, Newgate, Millbank, Portsmouth, and Dartmoor prisons, with a few remarks upon penal discipline and the exceptional punishment of the Fenian prisoners, as an argument in favour of a more lenient treatment of those still in prison; with some suggestions as to an inquiry into the working of the penal servitude act and the management of convict establishments in England and Ireland.”
pamphlet followed several letters that Davitt smuggled out of prison and printed in the *Irish Freeman*. He recounts the indignity of the state’s collapse of bodily integrity coincident with the prison search, providing the most vivid description of any prisoner before Brendan Behan’s *Borstal Boy* (1958). At least five times in Clerkenwell Prison alone, he was

stripped naked and compelled to undergo the indignity of being searched in a manner almost too disgusting to describe. Each article of dress was minutely examined by one warder while another was employed in watching, lest I should resent the insult to which I was subjected in being made to stand naked in presence of two warders, one whom was coolly satisfying himself that I had nothing concealed on my person. (44)

The warder’s invasive gaze anticipated Davitt’s entry in to a prison cell whose stark design was calculated to further extend state authority into his sense of self. Speaking, let alone writing, was denied to all prisoners under the policy of strict silence.

During the whole of my stay in Millbank my conversation with prisoners—at the risk of being punished, of course—as also with warders and chaplains, would not occupy me twenty minutes to repeat, could I collect all of the scattered words spoken to me in the whole of that ten months. I recollect many weeks going by without my exchanging a word with a single human being. (51)
Penitentiary discipline was absolute in this atmosphere of enforced silence: “[o]bservance of rules was uniformly strict” and (quoting fellow Irish political prisoner John Mitchel) if guards detect a prisoner has found a brief instant of contentment “by some of the many arts practiced for this purpose, [warders] end the momentary forgetfulness of imprisonment by an exercise of the almost uncontrolled power they wield over their unfortunate charges” (72, 49). Repeated deviation from this system resulted in punishments of reduced diet, solitary confinement and/or a longer sentence.

Davitt records prison conditions and their physical and mental consequences in great detail. In its attempt to reform (or at least neutralize) the criminal, the penitentiary tried to eliminate a person by eliminating human contact and personal expression. Davitt describes the ways the cell was constructed to render the inmate’s mind blank through exposure to a whitewashed nine by eight cell. The space was furnished with a bed of three planks three inches off the ground at the foot and six inches at the head, a bucket with three purposes: cleaning, a stool for seated work ten hours a day and a nighttime toilet.

Work inside and outside the cell was another mechanism of discipline. The inmate would rise at 6:00AM and scrub the stone floor (Davitt was given the same amount of time as other prisoners and learned to use the bucket handle to wring out his washcloth with one hand). He would then work until 8:45PM except for meals, an hour or less of exercise and chapel. Michael Davitt entered prison six feet tall and left five feet, ten and one-half inches a result of his stooped cell-work picking oakum or turning the crank. When he was transferred to Dartmoor, Davitt was assigned to
outdoor labor crews. Along with several other prisoners, he was hooked to a harness intended to fix under the arms of prisoners – because this was impossible for him, Davitt’s harness went around his neck – and pulled carts full of “stones, coal, manure and rubbish of all descriptions” (59). When he was injured at this work, he was assigned the job of bone breaking next to the prison cesspool.

Prison discipline controlled the body with a carefully regulated diet. Food was, as Oscar Wilde writes, “enough to sustain existence, but not life.” Breakfast consisted of eight ounces of bread an three quarters of a pint of cocoa; dinner was six ounces of bread, one pound of potatoes and four ounces of meat with bone four days a week, a pint of beef shin soup one day, suet pudding one day and for Sunday dinner inmates received twelve ounces of bread, four ounces of cheese and a pint of water. Supper was six ounces of bread and a pint of prison soup called “skilly.” The strict rationing led to inmates going to desperate extremes to alleviate a permanent state of hunger.

notwithstanding that a highly offensive smell is purposely given to prison candles to prevent their being eating instead of burned, men are driven, by a system of half-starvation, into an animal-like voracity, and anything that a dog would eat is nowise repugnant to their taste. I have seen men eat old poultices buried in heaps of rubbish, and have seen bits of candles pulled out of the prison cesspool and eaten after the human soil was wiped off them. (59)

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Dartmoor’s construction also limited the amount of air inmates received. The only ventilation in the cellblock came from an eighteen by six window at the end of the corridor and air could only enter the cell through a two and a half- to three-inch gap under the door. Prisoners often had to get on their knees and put their mouth under the door for the often foul air generated by the close quarters of the cell – all of their buckets contained the prisoner’s excreta, which could not be emptied between 8PM and 5AM, so digestive illnesses “were made known by a nasal telegram all over the whole ward, announcing an addition to the overtainted atmosphere” (57).

The restrictions on the prisoner extended beyond the body and into the mind. Given the theological basis for the penitentiary, Davitt expected the representatives of the church to act according to the teachings ideals of Christ. Quoting the speech Othello delivered during his arrest, the experience apologetically tells of the lack of true Christian feeling in the prison.

I regret being compelled, in the interests of truth, to relate anything that may reflect upon the want of Christian charity exhibited by ministers of religion in prisons; but as I purpose “nothing to exaggerate nor aught to set down in malice,” neither do I intend to withhold anything that may assist in exposing the harsh and vindictive manner in which Irish political prisoners are treated under cover of a falsely-termed “humane” system of imprisonment. (46)

When the prison chaplain came to visit Davitt, he remained outside the cell’s open door shouting: “You won’t kill me if I come in will you?” (46).
Davitt’s distinguished position among nationalists who had undergone the initiation of incarceration provided him with a number of opportunities. After years of political pressure from Irish MPs, Davitt was released on a ticket-of-leave in 1877. His first priority was fundraising tours in the United States for his fellow convict and reluctant co-conspirator John Wilson. Towards the end of the tour, he began to incorporate his ideas for land reform into his speeches. During his imprisonment, he claimed, he began to formulate a strategy for Irish nationalism that built popular and political support around the common concern of land issues: "when I was in prison I spent my time thinking of what plan could be proposed which would unite all Irishmen upon some one common ground." The accuracy of this statement has been called in to question by Laurence Marley, who argues that Davitt did not have the background to formulate the strategy of the agrarian movement and it was a combination of exposure to Irish American radicals during his tour and local activists in rural communities. Whatever the actual origins of the new plan, Davitt understood the value of placing the origins of his ideas and his leadership in the prison cell for political and sensational effect: he had more public value as a victim of the injustice of British rule inspired to pilot both agrarian reform and Irish nationalism.


Davitt’s effective leadership of the Land League led him to prison once again. Whatever its provenance, the Mayo Land League emerged in August of 1879. By October of the same the strategy of passive resistance for fair rent and tenant’s rights, which Davitt thought of as a social guerilla movement, had grown into the National Land League. In his final novel, *The Landleaguers*, Trollope accused the League of “acting in compliance with teaching which has come to them from America. They claim to be masters of their bodies. Never were a people less fitted to exercise such dominion of control.”\(^{10}\) It was organized for and by people who were, according to *Fraser’s* magazine “reckless of the future, ignorant beyond belief, and caring only for the gratification of the moment.”\(^{11}\) Despite this supposedly benighted talent pool, the movement proved successful enough to attract serious attention from both Dublin Castle and Westminster. Home Secretary William Harcourt consulted the Attorney General Henry James about the possibility of rescinding Davitt’s ticket-of-leave without explicit justification. James offered five legal justifications for his arrest and Davitt was brought to the Castle after a public meeting. On February 3, 1881 Police arrested Davitt as he was crossing Carlisle Bridge and shipped him to England in the middle of the night. He was arraigned in an impromptu court session, refused bail and immediately sent to Millbank Prison. According to the Irish Parliamentary Party, Davitt was arrested on flimsy legal grounds and his imprisonment prompted a public


\(^{11}\) “The New Departure in Ireland” *Fraser’s Magazine* 629 (1882) 661.
outcry. Thirty-six MPs were expelled from the House of Commons for their vocal opposition to his arrest. ¹²

Because of Davitt’s prominence in the Land League, his second long imprisonment was considerably more public than his first. ¹³ He was elected to parliament in 1882, but in Regina v. Davitt, the court ruled he could not hold elected office as a prisoner. Because the conditions under which he was held were subject to considerable scrutiny and his health after seven previous years in prison was already in question, he was allowed to see his own Doctor, J. E. Kenny, who suggested:

Ordinary discipline alone of a convict prisoner is nearly certain to prove gravely detrimental to his constitution, and should he be kept in prison a considerable length of time, it must be under a very great relaxation of the usual rules if serious consequences are to be avoided. ¹⁴

The General Counsel and Home Secretary agreed, but Prison Commissioner Evelyn Ruggles Brise strongly protested any relaxation of prison rules for any circumstances,


¹³ For more details on Davitt’s imprisonment, see T.W. Moody, “Michael Davitt in Penal Servitude” Studies xxx (1941) 517-30 and xxxi (1942) 16-30.

rightly seeing it as the first in a long line of political and medical concessions, disturbing an institution intended to run with the standardized movement of a well-wound clock. The vigilance of Irish journalists in the United States and the United Kingdom put considerable pressure on these important men, as did Davitt’s prior health complaints, political importance and the questionable legal reasoning behind his arrest. They ultimately assented to the wishes of his doctor and allowed him “skilled medical attendance, ample leisure, and plenty of books and newspapers.” 15

The books and writing materials prescribed him access to means of communication that were unprecedented in the Victorian penitentiary system. When a baby bird fell out of its nest and had a narrow escape from the infirmary cat, Davitt was even permitted to have a pet.

While was in prison he kept a detailed journal of his scholarly work with the intent of publishing it upon his release. He left Portland prison on May 7, 1882 with a journal amounting to several hundred pages consisting of a draft of an autobiography, his self-taught lessons in European languages and notes from the various philosophical and economic texts he had studied. 16 Nineteen months after his remittal Davitt combined some of this material with further analysis of social ills and British and Irish politics to publish Leaves from an Irish Felon’s Prison Diary, or Lectures to a Solitary Audience, a book framed as a series of speeches from his prison cell in Portland. Much of the book bears little or no resemblance to an actual account


of his prison experiences: most of his recollections took place during his first imprisonment when he did not have the means to record them.

The three-volume *Leaves* is a balancing act: he tells amusing, bizarre and tragic stories of his time in prison and wrestles with the broad ideas he encountered in prison. Davitt defies the prison’s cardinal rule of silence and defies the isolation of solitary confinement by presenting *Leaves* as a collection of addresses to a bird in his cell. The dedication reads: “to the memory of the little confiding friend whose playful moods and loving familiarity helped to cheer the solitude of a convict cell; to my pet Blackbird “Joe,” These prison jottings are affectionately dedicated.”

He contracts Joe as his chairman and audient for an ambitious social agenda, which extends well beyond the prison:

[W]e shall come to the wider and more congenial field of society beyond these walls, and inquire into those of its conditions of social organization which beget not only the larger part of the crime we shall have to dwell upon by and by, but the mass of wretchedness and poverty that presses upon the lives of millions who work, but who have to surrender too much of their earnings and their liberties to those who neither toil nor spin. We shall conclude, as I have already indicated, with an endeavor to point out how those blessings of liberty and peace . . . may be evolved from existing political and social systems, and brought within the reach and enjoyment of all.” (6-7)

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The first volume of the book concentrates on the classification of the criminal as observed from within the prison itself; the second offers a broad range of public works as a solution to the problem of crime; the third volume is an extended critique of the British economic and political mismanagement of Ireland and a design for a free, productive Ireland.

The first volume of *Leaves* documents all of the familiar tropes of the Irish prison narrative that dismantle subjectivity: apathetic priests, jarring body searches, numbing boredom, anti-Catholic sentiments among prison staff and (perhaps most importantly for nineteenth-century Irish Nationalist in prison) sympathy from criminals who recognize that the political prisoner is not one of their own. As gentle as his prison time may have been relative to every other convict’s experience, Davitt’s prison circumstances were far from ideal: he was not allowed to speak; he was not allowed any materials related to current events; his reading list was subject to the prison governor’s approval; and – like Wilde’s letter published as *De Profundis*—Davitt’s notes were subject to examination at any time. Even under these gentler circumstances, his life was not his own. The work’s fragmentary title is an honest assessment of both the loss of subjectivity caused by the total institution and his attempt to archive these memories into book form. It piles together the leaves of identity stripped and scattered by years of incarceration, re-collecting his incarceration by separating him from the criminal.

With this recollection, Davitt attempts to reclaim subjectivity by documenting his experience with the legitimacy of the printed word. Not only did he have the unique opportunity to put words on a page when he wanted to, he had the option of
having them printed. *Leaves* translates Davitt’s particular knowledge of the penitentiary into intellectual capital; the text validates his experience by its very existence: signifying that there was enough interest in his insights to justify its publication in the United Kingdom and the United States. The book was widely reviewed, cited in many late nineteenth-century works on crime and criminals and appeared on the syllabus for a University of Wisconsin class on criminology. Incarcerated but not a criminal, Davitt ascribes himself the position of a scholar who is observing, arriving at conclusions and making recommendations. As in the earlier *Prison Life* (1871) of Jeremiah O’Donovan-Rossa, Davitt’s self-ascribed position is an explicit argument for his independence from the criminal and the ordinary prisoner. However, instead of a memoirist, he is an outside observer whose main asset is (paradoxically) his mastery of the workings inside the prison.

*Leaves* is also uncharacteristic of prison writing by O'Donovan-Rossa because, the text acknowledges (albeit ironically) the prison’s authority and judgment. Davitt takes the ability of the prison to regulate a functioning society as the beginning

18 Frederick Howard Wines, *Syllabus of a Course of Lectures on Crime and the Criminal* (Madison: Tracy & Gibbs, 1893). While the *New York Times* did not approved of Davitt’s record or his connection of crime to poverty, its review praised “the novelty of the subject and the store of curious facts which it contains.” He was reviewed in *All the Year Round* and in a whimsical article on “The pets of authors;” the magazine also featured Davitt’s Blackbird alongside Kropotkin’s cat (*All the Year Round a Weekly Journal, Conducted by Charles Dickens* 36:867 ((1885)) 402). Davitt’s work also served as a source for writers within prison in *Papers in Penology Second Series Compiled by the Editor of “the Summary”* (Elmira : N.Y.S. Reformatory Press, 1891), a book that was, “entirely the work of inmates editorially & mechanically” and composed at a New York State Reformatory.
assumption of his classification of criminals. This technique sets the terms for the
development of his study of criminals to a broad proposal of socio-economic reform. His
classification of criminals challenges the intellectual underpinnings of the British
penal system. Davitt reasons that because the prison is intended as an institution of
reformation, those who behave well in the prison are the most reformed. Convicts
who receive their punishment without complaint, therefore, are finding their
penalization edifying, while convicts who resist penal discipline are not benefiting
from their experience in prison. He argues that out of a population of 1200, half of
the inmates will commit no violations, a quarter of them will be generally well
behaved, 250 will be reported for punishment frequently and fifty inmates will be
completely unmanageable (17-18). He then creates a hierarchy of criminal
classification based on this behavioral model. The results are provocative: violent
criminals (such as rapists, robbers and brutes) are classed as among the best
criminals, while economic criminals (such as swindlers, confidence men and
blackmailers) are at the lowest end of the model.

His sly reasoning makes the bald accusation that the penitentiary is not
functioning according to its intellectual and material architecture: if the most
committed and best behaved convicts are the most incorrigible, the capability of the
institution as a site of reform and preparation for reintegration into society is seriously
called into question. Because the lowest classes of criminals commit nonviolent
property crimes, Davitt widens the scope of the critique to include more British social
technologies. Based on the prison experience, the “worst” criminals commit the most
marginal crimes, while the “best” criminals commit the most despicable felonies.
The lowest criminals commit property crimes, but are not extremely poor. They are motivated by greed and often prey on the bourgeois. These criminals commit offenses based on artifice: the “sanctimonious fraud” steals under the guise of ecclesiastical respectability; the “snide pitcher” counterfeits coin; begging letter writers, quack doctors, bogus noblemen, “magsmen” con people out of their money on the street; and, the most glaring example of a criminal phony, young men from good homes follow the examples set in “the literature of rascaldom” and turn to crime after reading about the adventures of Highwaymen such as Three Fingered Jack (AKA William Earle, “the Terror of Jamaica”), Blueskin or Dick Turpin (121). The author reserves a special ire for men of some means who adapt the garb and demeanor of a poor beggar for easy money.

Their prowling in the guise of beggars subjects the real mendicant, the broken down workmen or victim of misfortune who dreads the stigma of the workhouse pauperism to unjust and unmerited suspicion which often makes it difficult for the poor creatures to obtain a crust outside the institute which they dread to enter. (123)

In an analysis which connects to his upbringing in industrial England, the working class individual suffers as a result of the property offender.

These “magsmen” who take advantage of the generosity of others and take money away from those who really need it are not victims of circumstance. According to Davitt, they are evidence of a damaged society: “All the roguery and dishonesty that is begotten of our boasted civilization superintended upon all that is
deceitful and unprincipled in depraved human nature would seem to write in the finished production of one of these rascals” (Leaves 48). As shadows of western civilization, inmates who have committed property crimes are evidence of the flaws of a social system: a system that would presumably be improved by adapting the socialist reforms Davitt advocates.

He takes particular delight in exposing the “bogus nobleman” as examples of the flaws in the British class-based capitalism. Even as inmates, these counterfeit Russian counts, fake model Major-Generals and artificial heirs-apparent maintain their pompous behavior and fabulous lies.

Nothing could be more laughter provoking to anyone capable of finding food for amusements in the eccentricities of human character than this standard deportment and conversation of these exquisite shams. (96)

Davitt records the treatment Sir Roger Tichborne receives in prison (based on the two years he spent imprisoned with the sham noble) with unrestrained glee. Despite his flimsy back-stories, the prison population and even the guards defer to the imaginary higher station of the ignoble inmate. Inmates and warders held him in such high regard that “to settle an argument upon any topic—legal, political, or disciplinary required but the assertion ‘Sir Roger Tichborne says so’” (78). The fraudulent aristocrat exploits a vulnerability particular to the British system of government because like the society itself criminals defer to social status – a vulnerability that would not exist in a republican system. Treason felony was still a very real possibility and the example provides Davitt with the opportunity to make his
point in a manner that is, by extension, sufficiently critical but not sufficiently treasonous to earn the author yet another trip to prison for “inciting to lawlessness.”

The lowest of all of the criminals who are symptoms of flaws in British economic policy practice “The Common Bounce:” blackmailing men who have been coerced into homosexual activity.

Of all the scoundrels that stalk abroad in the world unhung for undetected enormities, this is the most infamous. I never had one of this class pointed out to me in Dartmoor without feeling a sort of longing for some Draconian law or other that would rid mankind at once and for ever of such monsters, and save human nature the shame of having them appeared clothed in the forms of men. (132)

The worst criminals are motivated by money and are willing to twist their identity and rob themselves and others of their dignity for coin. The most egregious offenders remain unmoved by the penitentiary and minor criminals (those who take property without force) are unable to remain intact within the technology. The most incorrigible prisoners are greedy men, jockeying for position in their economic system, emphasizing both the injustice in a penal network that merges the two and a political system that values private property.

Davitt’s treatment of the issue of malingering defines the distinction between social and physiological criminality. He reserves special disdain for the inmate practice of “putting on the barmy stick” not because the prisoners’ simulations of insanity are disingenuous and not because he disdains the practice of malingering on
principle (142). Davitt recognizes the value of these practices as one of the few opportunities individual prisoners have for even the most modest measure of control over their time served. Davitt critiques the practice in part because it is a waste: the special surveillance under which potential fakers are placed "makes it well-nigh impossible for an impostor to deceive his watchers for any length of time," but mostly because the behavior of uncooperative, "faiking" prisoners known as "her majesty's bad bargains" lead “to the injury of the poor wretches who really do become insane in prisons, as it prolongs the period during which the prisoner exhibits such symptoms must be kept under close observation in order to test the case. Davitt reserves some of his most severe criticisms of his fellow inmates for those who imitate madness, thus subjecting prisoners who are actually suffering to “unmerited suspicion and the danger of neglect” (143).

This relentless criticism of the cruelty of the malingerer, and the damage he does to what little civil community exists in the prison, suggests that the problem lies with the institution as much as the criminal. The anecdotal observations illustrate broader absurdities in the prison’s treatment of the insane. In one horrible incident, he describes a prison doctor’s failsafe method for sussing out whether a convict is faking mental illness to avoid his twelve hours of work a day, or whether he is actually sick.

Dr. — —, of that establishment [C— convict prison], was noted for the number of fraudulent ailments which he had exposed as having been successfully passed off upon the medical officers of other prisons. Upon any convict showing symptoms of insanity, real or imaginary, he was at once
placed under close observation. He would be located in an empty cell, and the
first day’s proceedings would commence by the administration of a powerful
aperient disguised in some article of food. The patient would be then hurried
into a warm bath, and, during the absence from his cell, an ordinary empty
dinner-tin would be slipped inside the door, and the observations of the
watching warder continued after the bathing was over. When the medicine
began to operate, the patient would utilise the dinner-tin as the only utensil or
convenient article to be found in his cell. This would all be noted, of course,
through the spy-hole by the warder. Dinner time comes round. The tin is
smuggled out of the cell without the act being noticed by the patient, and is,
after a while, handed in again as if containing the rations of the prisoner. He
is again closely watched. *If he eats of the contents, he is believed to be insane.*
*If he does not, he is reported to the director for a flogging for simulating
madness.* (143-44)

Although he is ostensibly discussing one doctor’s crude techniques for distinguishing
between “authentic” and “inauthentic” madness, this depiction collapses the
distinction between the two. The prison’s impossible choices uncover the endless
surveillance, repeated invasion of the body, unsanitary practices and violations of
basic decency that characterize incarceration. His analysis extends beyond a
comparison between states of sanity towards the author’s reestablishment of
subjectivity through a critique of the reasoning behind the institution itself.
Maintained by a massive government bureaucracy and a willfully ignorant public, the
logic of the penitentiary – represented here as the logic of medicine – is unspooled by the scrutiny of a former inmate.

Leaves transitions from this account of circular logic to emphasize prison writing’s ability to invert the surveillance of the penitentiary through prison writing. In the seventeenth lecture to Joe, entitled “Prison Poetry,” Davitt moves from his own scholarly critique of the prison to the raw art of the penitentiary cell. As an example of subjectivity in an environment meticulously constructed to destroy it, prison writing suggests that criminal behavior is not a destiny—and that small elements of the experience of imprisonment can be navigated and passed on to other inmates and, through Leaves, preserved by publication. The text protests the censorship, limited correspondence and lack of opportunities for self expression judged necessary for the technology to appropriately erase the criminal’s own identity and replace it with a pious, hard-working citizen of the state. The text continually references anecdotal experiences in order to remind the reader of the writer’s authority, however in other chapters of the book these minor narratives give the author a platform from which to offer a moral lesson or detail the atrocities of the prison system. While he attempts to apply the mode of detachment used in the rest of his study -- distancing himself from the subject material and produce a study based on observation -- the topic proves to be a difficult fit for his sociological observations. The conceit of scholarly distance between the author and the subject matter is traversed by the Chinese box effect of writing a study of prison literature within a work of prison literature. The detachment cultivated between the criminal and the political prisoner throughout the book is challenged by the common urge of inmates
to document an experience they share. Passing on information to each other, attempting to amuse one another, cataloguing the vagaries of the human heart, complaining about conditions all amount to an attempt to record an identity of the inmate in a penitentiary system designed to erase individual distinctions and methods of expressing oneself by punishing communication that does not fall under the control of the bureaucracy.

*Leaves* connects the process of the author’s subjectivity recovery to his fellow inmates, allowing them to anonymously reclaim a portion of who they were when they defied silence, the most fundamental prison dictum. *Leaves* explains the unlikely resilience of prison poetry despite the formidable opposition to the form. Penal policy moved inmates from one cell to another and one prison to another, and it was unlikely he would be in the same chamber twice, so there was a constant traffic of these works throughout the English Prison System. There were numerous opportunities to record verse of a significant amount of time. The prisoners’ twenty-three hours a day in their cells provided opportunities to find mediums suited to their needs. The bottom of mugs, underside of dinner plates, inner boards of prison bunks provided more stable writing surfaces than the cell walls, but all of the writing was vulnerable and short-lived. The forbidden graffiti’s temporary existence is constantly under threat: it is erased, destroyed or painted over as soon as authorities discover it.

In this lecture Davitt progresses from establishing his subjectivity through the text. By letting his fellow inmates speak for themselves, he facilitates the rebuilding
of their own subjectivities as well.\textsuperscript{19} He introduces the unorthodox anthology of verse by explaining the material and formal limitations of carceral poetics:

The poetry of prison walls, cell-doors, slates, can-bottom tin knives and margins of books must, in the first place be necessarily of a fragmentary nature, and be wanting in that descriptive power which would require for its exposition more stanzas than one, or more lines than from four to twelve—the ordinary range of most poetic flights of convict genius. (157)

This playful description of the form transitions rapidly to the consequences if the writer gets caught: genuine discomfort, hunger and even the extension of the inmate’s sentence by costing him the marks required for a ticket-of-leave. “Prison critics” (warders) consider the work, “no matter how truly inspired or instinctive with condensed thought or beauty,” defacement of prison property and the perpetrator’s work is “made a vulgar question of bread and water to the hungry author when translated on a slip of paper in the form of a report for the final opinion of that stern

\textsuperscript{19} His careful and hilarious record of written verse inspired by prison experiences has an interesting collection of subheadings:

reviewer, the governor” (158). However unpleasant the results of “bread and water criticism” are, Davitt maintains his darkly comedic disposition towards the subject while he incorporates a flair for the literary into his editorial duties:

Chateaubriand has remarked that man or bird is never so prone to sing as when caged. Whether this be really so or not I cannot venture to say, but certain I am that the criminal “muse: would never be heard, if “stone walls did not a prison make, nor iron bars a cage. (157)

Davitt records the distance between the inmates’ life in prison and the life he left outside by preserving ephemeral prison poetry in which prisoners counsel one another. The challenges of previous relationships are chronicled in the dual author, two-stanza poem “Jones, his Lucy, and the Critic.” First stanza scrawled in the margin of a book is sentimental doggerel in which the speaker pines for his distant love:

Good-bye-lucy dear
I’m parted from you for seven long year.
- Alf Jones

Writing underneath this passage, a critic answers the original poem with his own commentary for the lovelorn writer, dramatically changing the tone of the work with a dark, misogynistic answer:
If lucy dear is like most gals
She’ll give a few sighs or moans,
But soon will find among your pals
Another Alfred Jones. (159)

All of the instruction for fellow prisoners recorded in verse did not contain such mean-spirited humor and harsh advice for the incarcerated. Davitt also records the efforts of writers to give guidance to other inmates. After ten years in prison, Crutchy Quinn uses a nail on the bottom of a dinner tin to give a comprehensive account of the conditions in eight of Her Majesty’s prisons:

Millbank for thick shins and graft the pump
Broadmoor for all laggs go off their chump
Brixton for good toke and cocoa with fat
Dartmoor for bad grub but plenty of chat
Portsmouth a blooming bad place for hard work
Chatham on Sunday gives four ounce of pork
Portland is worst of the lot to joke in
For fetching a lagging there’s no place like Woking. (161)

This work describes the differences in a prison system explicitly designed and carefully monitored to provide a uniform experience for prisoners classified as convicts. With the exception of Woking (the more lenient hospital prison), all of these facilities offer an accidentally varied experience of the “standardized” penal system,
possibly due to each building’s administration or architectural design. The work is also a valuable record of the slang that survives an experience which prohibits all speech to fellow prisoners: “graft the pump” means the pointless labor of turning the crank of a machine a particular number of times in the cell each day; “Broadmoor for all laggs go off their chump” means the prison drives inmates crazy; “toke” is food; “fetching a lagging” is serving out one’s sentence. The work is more than a warning to other convicts or a colorful example of prison language. It is indicative of an illicit dialogue within the cell, reflecting an idiom of the prison (often referred to as “prisonese”) that is common enough to denote a significant communication between many prisoners in a system built on the enforcement of official silence.

This collection of prison poets has merit beyond their ability to amuse: they offer a distinct contribution to the study of nineteenth-century crime. Perhaps the chapter’s most significant contribution is preserving these scribbled lines (in all of their candid vulgarity) outside of their own transitory context. The number of works that reference Leaves offers some measure of the book’s success at conserving writing which would otherwise be forfeit to prison authorities. “Poetry in Prison” is the chapter most frequently cited by late nineteenth-century writers on crime. Several of his poems are reprinted without attribution, a high complement which was committed by psychologist Havelock Ellis in his first book The Criminal (1890).

Ellis was one of a community of psychologists working in the nascent field of criminology who were influenced by the rapidly growing school of thought defined by Cesare Lombroso. Applying social Darwinian and positivist reasoning to the problem of criminality, Lombroso had arrived at the conclusion that criminality was
the result of atavism—a physiological return to a primitive state. He documented the physiognomy of prisoners, measuring details such as toe length, teeth, palm lines and small bones in the nose and eye socket. By confining his observations to relatively small sample groups of criminals, he was able to gain enough evidence to prove (to himself and, quite amazingly, others) that crime was a symptom of a man or woman’s evolutionary regression. According to this notion the criminal was an “atavistic phenomenon reproducing a type of the past.” The authors of prison poetry were thus primitive, incomplete humans, “veritable savages in the midst of this brilliant European civilization” and their writing further justified their classification.  

Graffiti in any form was evidence of the evolution of a society (or lack thereof): “one can measure the cultural development of a country by the amount of graffiti on the bathroom walls.”

While Lombroso discussed prison writing as evidence of the social degeneration of the criminal in Palimsesti del Carcere (1891), and Criminal Man, Michael Davitt was convinced enough of the value of graffiti that he added his own verse to a wall in Newgate.

Giving way to the seeming inspiration of the place, and picturing jurors’ faces round that dismal den-dark and frowning—into which the sun’s rays never

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entered, lit only by a noisy jet of gas which seemed to sing the death-song of
the liberty of all who entered the walls which it had blackened—I stood upon
the form which extended round the place, and wrote upon a yet uncovered
portion of the low sloping roof—

“M.D. expects ten years for the crime of being an Irish nationalist, and the
victim of an informer’s perjury.

“July 1870.” (149)

For Michael Davitt, prison writing has a wider range of functions beyond
empirical evidence. It promotes survival, passes on advice and entertains the felons.
Lombroso’s exegesis of the criminal denies his subjectivity—a complicating factor in
the sealed environment of positivist thought. Evidence built out of physiognomy,
racial traits and self-expression does not allow for an analysis that takes into account
the effect of the penitentiary experience on the atavistic criminal. Nor does it permit
the criminal’s capability for sophisticated communication in prison. *Leaves*
anthology established criminal identity as a social rather than a physiological
construction. These imprisoned but surreptitiously defiant writers (including the
author himself) document both the emotional effects of prison and the convict’s
desire to exert a measure of control over his environment.

In addition to their disagreement over the merit of prison graffiti and the
potential for the subjectivity of the inmates who write it, there is one area in which
Davitt and Lombroso are in complete agreement: that the political offender exists in a
separate category from the atavistic criminal (this is a compromised term: Davitt would call him a “political prisoner,” and for Lombroso he would be a “political criminal”). Both men saw political lawbreaking as a result of inadequate social conditions. The politically progressive Lombroso saw it as evidence of insufficiently progressive policy, curable by more civil rights and democratic reforms: “In a country where political reforms keep pace with the aspirations of the people, insurrections seldom or never occur” (Lombroso 229). Davitt sees the political prisoner as a necessary (indeed inevitable) consequence of cultural and economical flaws of the imperial state. As he writes in volume three of *Leaves*, he idealistically believed that the Irish nation was the inevitable consequence of the ethical distribution of economic and political power and optimistically believed that this principled conclusion was inevitable.

According to Michael Davitt, the penitentiary creates delinquency: it is a technology that “mechanically reduces [inmates] to a uniform level of disciplined brutes” (249). But within this deliberate, dehumanizing machine, the inmate may (through self expression) be able to break free of this uniformity. *Leaves from a Prison Diary* is Davitt’s attempt to write himself out of prison with a book that, as a published collection of observations and proposals, distances the author from criminality. However, he is also concerned with the criminal’s subjectivity and preserves these identities by extending the textual authority to include the ephemera of other prisoners in a productive and sympathetic context.
CHAPTER 3:
AFTER “HUMANITY’S MACHINE”: OSCAR WILDE’S POST-PRISON WRITING

In *Oscar Wilde*, Richard Ellmann describes the doomed writer’s inexplicably sanguine attitude towards prison when he decided against escaping to France:

[Wilde] preferred to be a great figure, doomed by fate and the unjust laws of a foreign country. Suffering was more becoming than embarrassment. Writers after all, had been prisoners before him. Cunninghame Graham and Blunt came to mind. His mind would survive, superior to any indignities his inferiors could heap upon him.\(^1\)

It is difficult to imagine an inmate less suited to the penitentiary than Wilde. A man who could read a two-hundred page book in twenty minutes and reviewed more than a hundred books in one year was allowed only a Bible and a hymn book for most of his sentence; a playwright with two performances running in the West End was denied writing materials until the final months of his imprisonment; a fashion maven

\(^1\) Richard Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde* (New York: Knopf, 1988) 456. R. B. Cunninghame Graham & Wilfrid Scawen Blunt were Scottish and English radicals (respectively) whose imprisonment significantly enhanced their careers.
who dressed extravagantly in velvet and wore carnations in his button-hole was provided with ill-fitting prison clothes marked only with the broad arrow; an aesthete who escorted his hairdresser to the Louvre to make sure his classical Roman curls were properly coiffed had his head cropped by fellow inmates with dull scissors; an epicurean who spent fabulous amounts of cash in restaurants was given bread cut with chalk and soup made from pork fat; the artist who portrayed the idle ennui of characters such as Dorian and Ernest was exposed to the grinding boredom of the prison cell; the man William Butler Yeats called “certainly the greatest talker of his time” was not permitted to speak; the socialite who thrived at vibrant salons since he was very young was allowed only two visits a year; the antinomian who capitalized the word “individualism” in the Soul of Man had every element of his daily life standardized and dictated down to his bodily functions. Instead of crafting the endless artistic opportunities provided by masks of ironic detachment described in The Truth of Masks, Wilde tramped the yard with the convict’s triangular fustian mask of cosmic irony.

The aesthetic Wilde articulates in “The Truth of Masks” reflects the relativity inherent in describing and, presumably, crafting the beautiful. With a combination of antinomian, Hegelian and classical thought, the writer arranges art as a metaphysical pose:

Not that I agree with everything that I have said in this essay. There is much with which I entirely disagree. The essay simply represents an artistic

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standpoint, and in aesthetic criticism attitude is everything. For in art there is no such thing as a universal truth. A Truth in art is that whose contradictory is also true. And just as it is only in art-criticism, and through it, that we can apprehend the Platonic theory of ideas, so it is only in art-criticism, and through it, that we can realize Hegel’s system of contraries. The truths of metaphysics are the truths of masks.³

Wilde’s polar, paradoxical understanding of “the truths of masks” collapses under the pressures of his trials, disgrace, and imprisonment. In his subsequent exposés of the Victorian prison, the contradictory is not “also true.” For the inmate there are no masks of interpretation. The penitentiary imposes meaningless work, constant surveillance, strict silence, persistent illness and the inmate’s rough cloth mask to maintain the anonymity of the convict number.

The decaying life revealed in Wilde’s later letters is evidence of physical, emotional and mental destruction wrought by imprisonment, but instead of charting the destructive impact of incarceration, however, this chapter focuses on the three works Wilde created to recover a piece of his fragmented identity. The technology of the penitentiary was built on a logic that was an eerie negative of Wilde’s character and artistic philosophy. The English prison system was designed to use anonymity, silence, and pointless labor to return criminals to a state of grace, and thus assimilate them into the Imperial state of Britain. Bearing witness through his own and others’

stories, Wilde protests his treatment in prison, critiques the apparati of the penitentiary, advocates for the redress of individual issues and suggests systematic reforms. Wilde’s life rapidly declined after he left prison, but the author left a record of protest that is worth analyzing as a reclamation – however transitory – of the identity and subjectivity shattered by the technology he calls “Humanity’s Machine” in *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*.

Relating *The Ballad* to his aesthetic philosophy, Wilde called the poem “a kind of denial of my former principles.” The technology of the prison reoriented his commitment to “the truth of masks” and this may explain much of the critical silence surrounding most of Wilde’s late work. The approaches of the various schools of Wilde studies which have emerged in the last twenty to thirty years make assumptions developed from work composed before his imprisonment and apply these assumptions to his writing afterwards. Because no single theory can adequately explain Wilde’s complex body of work, one can expect scholars to deal with the texts most sympathetic to their critical assumptions and ignore work that falls outside of these predetermined boundaries. If the sum of Wilde’s writing can be understood by his queerness, aestheticism, Irishness, or business acumen – to list the dominant identity-based interpretations of the present moment – then these methods of reading simply incorporate Wilde’s later life into the broader theory and fail to fully account for the reversal that occurs in these final works.

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My work proceeds from the assumption that prison essentially broke Oscar Wilde’s identity and his final works are marked by a significant change in his aesthetic. There has been no critical analysis of Wilde’s final public letters advocating prison reform. *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* has never been read as a poem written in-between these two letters and no recent reading of *The Ballad* focuses on the writer’s prison experience. Through an examination of these works’ origins in his prison experience, this chapter presents evidence for Wilde’s political coordination of his last works with an Irish and Irish-English audience.

While there is an established relationship between Wilde’s work and his (occasionally radical) politics, the experience of the prison made his social aims more explicit; for example, he referred to *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* as “propaganda.”

Several of the author’s leftist and populist contemporaries read Wilde as a prison reformer. Emma Goldman and Jack London wrote about his post-prison work as just that. What for lack of a better term can be described “the Irish” readings of Wilde offer interpretations of Wilde’s post-prison writings which find parallels between his work and the historical and literary context of Ireland. By introducing the national component in Wilde’s writing, these scholars allow a reading that synthesizes his

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literary and political aims and opens up the possibility of a reading of his late work as prison writing. These last three works published in his lifetime have collectively received no prolonged critical attention, despite Wilde’s placement of *The Ballad* both between these two prison reform letters and within the contexts of the public outcry from Irish nationalists, London intellectuals, and internationally-minded humanitarians for a significant change in *fin de siècle* prison conditions.

Wilde sacrificed this contemplative life as a celebrity raconteur and public man of letters when he responded to an insulting note from the Marquess of Queensbury with a libel suit. His complaint initiated a series of three trials and the author’s conviction: the first for “gross indecency” under the 1885 Crimes Act. Sentencing Wilde, a judge who sat on the bench for infernal machinists, rapists and cutthroats publicly regretted the maximum two years of penal servitude allowed by law and called him “the worst [criminal] I have ever tried.”

Nine days after his release from prison, Wilde published a letter to the *Daily Chronicle* that employed the stories of three victims of the prison (a child, a madman and a guard) to open up a broader conversation on prison conditions. Less than two weeks after his release he wrote his literary executor Robbie Ross to tell him about the poem that would become *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*: “I, as you, the poem of my days, are away, am forced to write poetry. I have begun something that I think will be very good” (L 869). Nine months later the first printing of the poem attributed to C.3.3. was released in an inexpensive edition and – after several editions – Wilde

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8 Merlin Holland, *Irish Peacock and Scarlet Marquess: The Real Trials of Oscar Wilde* (London: Fourth Estate, 2003) xii. Unless noted otherwise, biographical information has been drawn from Richard Ellmann’s *Oscar Wilde*. 

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wrote his last published work: the letter “Prison Reform” written by “The Author of The Ballad of Reading Gaol.” From his first post-prison publication, the author established himself as a prominent figure in the social movement that would prompt the Prison Reform Act of 1898.

In this chapter I read Wilde’s first letter alongside the substantial official record of bureaucratic criticism created by the Home Office to rebut it. Next, I examine The Ballad of Reading Gaol as an argument for prison reform. Finally, I analyze the relationship between politics and literature in his last letter to the Daily Chronicle. With what he calls the “denial of my own philosophy,” Wilde transitions his perspective from detached aesthete to overtly political agent and, in so doing, restores a portion of his fragmented subjectivity.

II. “Case of Warder Martin”

Ten days after his release from Reading Gaol The Daily Chronicle printed Wilde’s letter “The Case of Warder Martin, or Some Cruelties of Prison Life.” In another letter, later published as De Profundis, Wilde wrote to Lord Alfred Douglas “The prison system is absolutely and entirely wrong. I would give anything to be able to alter it when I go out. I intend to try.” The telegrammed arguments printed on May 28, 1898 were a worthy attempt: provoking a public debate on prison conditions. Wilde deploys the full extent of his command of rhetoric in the letter: attempting to alter the treatment of select sympathetic prisoners while subtly exposing the absolute wrong of the prison as the subject of the critique is carefully extended to penal

technology itself. "The Case of Warder Martin” pleads mercy for prison staff, children, and the half-witted prisoner “A.2.II” and argues against the solitude and surveillance, and diffused, but absolute, power that define the technology of the penitentiary.

Sir, I learn with great regret through the columns of your paper, that the warder Martin, of Reading Prison, has been dismissed by the Prison Commissioners for having given some sweet biscuits to a little hungry child . . . the cruelty that is practised by day and night on children in English prisons is incredible, except to those that have witnessed it and are aware of the brutality of the system. (L 847-48)

Wilde records their experiences as broad critiques of the "officialism" that condemns humane men -- like Martin and the Prison Governor Major J. O. Nelson -- to enact inhumane policies such as the imprisonment of children and senseless mistreatment of the mentally infirm. The letter sparked a lively print discussion reprinted in newspapers abroad and the Home Secretary ultimately responded to Wilde’s charges in the House of Commons. It generated official denials and

10 The file contains a letter from a Pennsylvania Anglophile who saw Wilde’s charges as an act of international intrigue:

Sir,

I Enclose a cutting from the “Philadelphia Press” a Paper of very wide circulation in this Country and I ask, is it possible that the statement contained in it can be true? My firm impression is that the entire statement is a mass of Lies and falsities got up by a Diabolical conspiracy in the Press of the United States of America, a conspiracy of which the New York “Sun” is the “fous et origo” for the purpose of exciting the people of the Country in hatred of
rebuttals collected by the Home Office in a substantial file. When contrasted with Wilde’s first post-prison writing, the Home Office’s bureaucratic critique indicates the extent to which Wilde substitutes the official moral authority of the state with moral authority of the artist.

Under the direction of Head of the Prisons Evelyn Ruggles-Brise, the Home Office Prison Commission created file “A58947/1,” dated from May 28th 1897, the same day the Daily Chronicle printed Wilde’s letter. The file is labeled:

4. letter to the Daily Chronicle on the prison system w/ regard especially to
(i) juveniles
(ii) insanity in prison
minutes
as to Warder Martin’s case of
xb4479
xb437b
with papers relating to the juvenile offenders sentenced by the writer
K.S.D. May 29 97 (HO 144/271)

England and everything English, and eventually, bringing about a war between the two Nations.

But, at the same time, I venture to ask you to inform me as to the truth or otherwise of the statements contained in the enclosed paper in order that I may give the necessary contradictions to them in the Press of this Country

I have the honour to be,

Your obedient servant

J. Keynes Kane
The file collects paper clippings, medical records, and reports from key prison authorities and each entry begins with a dated, stamped administrative form containing a summary of the contents and remarks by various Home Office employees. No one entry contains a comprehensive response to Wilde’s case for Martin, the imprisoned child, the feeble-minded A.2.II. or the brutality of the prison system. Instead, the collaborative format of the official response divides the responsibility between the Prison Commissioner, Medical Officers, the Governor of Reading Gaol, and various mid- and low-level civil servants who comment, collect and transcribe the correspondence. Although Ruggles-Brise contributes to and ostensibly presides over the collection, responsibility for the accusations is diffused across the many writers’ initialed comments.

In his letter, Wilde differentiates between the commonly held medieval definition of cruelty as sadism and the broader, more modern understanding that “ordinary cruelty is simply stupidity” (SM 159). This new understanding of cruelty, as “the entire want of imagination” inflicted by ignorance and inaction rather than a villain’s agency, defines Wilde’s approach to the institution of the prison. His indictment of the “cruelty of stupidity” (SM 159) is constructed around brief narratives based on events he witnessed. He knew Thomas Martin well, observed the harsh treatment of convict A.2.II. on more than one occasion, and was present at the matriculation of the three small boys into Reading Prison. The letter argues that the prison contaminates children by isolation, presenting the impossible task of replacing the recognized authority of the family at home with the terrifying abstraction of the state in solitude, forcing warders like Martin to make the equally impossible choice
between compassion and duty. The letter also plainly argues that surveillance makes
prisoners insane, recounting the observation and beatings of the convict “A.2.II.” – a
man he carefully describes as “half-witted” – is beaten for infractions such as putting
his head in his hands during chapel. By selecting individuals whose stories would
appeal to the reader’s compassion, Wilde avoids overtly suggesting an attack on
prison authority. Instead he translates his aggression towards the institution into the
plight of vulnerable prisoners and conflicted staff—such as Reading’s Governor, “a
gentle and humane character, greatly liked and respected by all the prisoners . . .
[whose] hands are tied.” (L 854)

J.B. Simpson begins his typed summation of “A59947/1” by recognizing the
distinction between the forms of Wilde’s argument and the Prison Commission
counter-argument: “the literary ability displayed in this letter is likely with many
people to give it more importance than it deserves”(HO 144/271). Despite Simpson’s
positive view of Wilde’s aptitude for prose, the rigid separation of form and content
enables the subsequent official dismissal of his claims. “A59947/1” Intended in part
to serve as research for a public dismissal of Wilde’s charges at a press conference,
the file overwhelms the argument of “The Case of Warder Martin” with memos.
Wilde’s letter (handwritten by a single author, telegraphed from Dieppe to London,
titled, typeset and published in the space of a day or two) is a compositional opposite
to “A59947/1” (a combination of handwritten letters, newspaper clippings, initialed
annotations from more than a half-dozen bureaucrats, and a typed summary compiled
over twenty-eight days in one file). The material contrast extends beyond the
emphasis on quantity over quality in “A59947/1”: Wilde attributes the workings of
the prison to a colossal “failure of imagination,” and this file provides an opportunity to evaluate his claim.

The quotidian cruelty of the prison has a special significance for children who are able to understand the punishment of a parent, but unable to comprehend the punishment of a society. The letter begins with a description of the entry of the three boys accused of stealing rabbits in vivid detail:

I saw the three children myself on the Monday preceding my release. They had just been convicted, and were standing in a row in the central hall in their prison dress, carrying their sheets under their arms previous to their being sent to the cells allotted to them. I happened to be passing along one of the galleries on my way to the reception room, where I was to have an interview with a friend. They were quite small children, the youngest—the one to whom the warder gave the biscuits—being a tiny little chap, for whom they had evidently been unable to find clothes small enough to fit. (SM 160)

The order of the prison has no wider corrective meaning for children: they are “immediate prey to the first and most prominent emotion produced by modern prison life—the emotion of terror”(SM 160). An emotion compounded by the prison’s architecture of isolation: “The terror that seizes and dominates the child, as it seizes the grown man also, is of course intensified beyond power of expression by the solitary cellular system of our prisons. Every child is confined to its cell for twenty-three hours out of the twenty-four” (SM 161). These effects are underlined by Wilde’s contrast of community standards with penitentiary technology:
If an individual, parent or guardian, did this to a child, he would be severely punished. The Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children would take the matter up at once. There would be on all hands the utmost detestation of whomsoever had been guilty of such cruelty. A heavy sentence would, undoubtedly follow conviction. But our own actual society does worse itself, and to the child to be so treated by a strange abstract force, of whose claims it has no cognisance, is much worse than it would be to receive the same treatment from its father or mother. (SM 161)

The vicious cycle of a society permitted to enact punishments collectively in prison that would result in the imprisonment of any individual who did the same thing is underlined by a simple truism which—in this context—defines the radical edge of Wilde’s own political perspective. “The inhuman treatment of a child is always inhuman” (SM 161). There is no space for equivocation or contradiction in Wilde’s argument; the conditions of imprisoned children cannot be summed up by a paradoxical phrase.

The child’s terror leads to the purported reason for the letter—hunger. Many children are unable to eat prison food in these stressful conditions, and Charles Martin went out during his lunch hour to buy ginger cookies hoping to get a young boy to eat something.

It was a beautiful action on his part, and was so recognized by the child, who, utterly unconscious of the regulation of the Prison Board, told one of the
senior warders how kind this junior warder had been to him. The result was, of course, a report and a dismissal. (SM 162)

Martin’s decency, and his termination because of it, form the basis for Wilde’s unconventional take on the effects of the imprisonment of children.

[Children are] utterly contaminated by prison life, but the contaminating influence is not that of the prisoners. It is that of the whole prison system—of the governor, the chaplain, the warders, the lonely cell, the isolation, the revolting food, the rules of the Prison Commissioners, the mode of discipline, as it is termed, of the life” (SM 163).

The terror, hunger and unjust dismissal are all traced to this “mode of discipline of life.”

Recognizing the sensitivity of the issue, the prison administrators offer a comprehensive response to the question of the imprisoned child. Evelyn Ruggles-Brise essentially agrees with Wilde in spirit, and shifts the blame for child inmates entirely onto the magistrates: “it is a rare thing for children of this age (12) to be sentenced to imprisonment, and the sentence is, in our opinion, is foolish as it is inappropriate” (HO 144/277). After diverting blame, Ruggles-Brise carefully expands on the presence of new regulations that allow young prisoners outside of their cells “for employment in workshops, in outdoor work, and for physical drill” in addition to the half-hour exercise period and offers the “intention in the near future to provide all cells where juveniles, convicted or unconvicted, may be detained, with
light iron gates, so as to dispense with the necessity of the cell door being closed during the day.” These changes in regulation (with the included assumption of their execution) are small consolation when set against keeping a twelve-year-old boy who was accused (but not convicted) of snatching rabbits isolated in prison. The other responses to the treatment of children question Wilde’s veracity in less personal, more defensive terms about the content of the rules.

Commissioners satisfied that the rules have already had a very considerable effect, by concentrating the attention of the Prison Authority on these boys, and modifying prison treatment in their favor, to such an extent that children in English Prisons cannot now, without gross exaggeration, be said to suffer the terrors and tortures alleged by O. Wilde. (HO 277/144)

JB Simpson collates the file on Wilde’s critiques into a summary report which relies on the passive voice for its definitive assessment of children in penal servitude:
“much is being done to prevent imprisonment being an unduly oppressive punishment for children, but till some other punishment is substituted for it must be preserved as a punishment (sic)”(HO 277/144). The memo was composed on a typewriter, and the case is made to fit the punishment for these prepubescent rabbit robbers just as the word “punishment” is repeated to suit the clumsy use of the heavy keys. Although there were three boys in Wilde’s account, Simpson responds, “Both were very bad boys: one had been whipped for stealing, another had been sent to a Truant Industrial School.” The bureaucratic logic is simple and ruthless: the boys have been punished, therefore they are wicked, and therefore they must be punished.
The nineteenth-century idea of the criminal was based in part on the scientific theories of physiognomy, evolution, and race, which later evolved into eugenics, and the prison commission’s perspective reflects the common wisdom that the crimes and sentences themselves provide ample evidence for the justifiable imprisonment of unconvicted minors. However, the file rests its case on economic class, closing by dressing down Wilde’s “gross exaggerations“ and disingenuous discussion of children in prison:

It is quite clear that to make a practice of letting off such boys without punishment would not tend to make them good citizens in later life, and the writer of this letter appears to make the very common mistake of judging boys of this kind by boys brought up in more luxurious surroundings

In this case however the mistake can scarcely be a genuine one. (HO 277/144)

The document closes, then, by turning Wilde’s argument for a measure of institutional compassion into a non-existent argument for “letting off” the boys, reversing the deterministic logic of criminality that considers them “very bad boys,” and accusing Wilde of disingenuously ignoring the moral failings coincident with the boys’ poverty. Wilde is certainly not ignorant of the boys’ economic status, but, as “A59947/1” is careful to note in summation, he fails to endorse the state’s recognition that their poverty is a governing principle of their behavior.

As the description of these imprisoned children urgently humanizes the isolation of the prison, Wilde employs the beating of James Edward Prince (known in
Reading as A.2.II.) to describe prison surveillance -- the antithesis (and perhaps apotheosis) of isolation in the discipline of the life. Prince’s story highlights the pervasive surveillance of the penitentiary and the brutal instruction that is its inevitable result. Unlike the uncomplicated appeal for children, Prince’s tale is characterized by the complexities in the inmate unrecognized by the medical officers and prison staff. The letter requests a nuanced reading of Prince’s clear signs of divergence from Victorian normalcy and separates his madness from his half-witted intellectual capabilities.

Every prison, of course, has its half-witted clients, who return again and again, and may be said to live in the prison. But this young man struck me as being more than usually half-witted on account of his silly grin and idiotic laughter to himself, and the peculiar restlessness of his eternally twitching hands. (SM 165)

Because these peculiarities are signs of malingering, Prince is “watched night and day by warders” (SM 165), sits chapel with two warders watching him, and takes exercise “in the center ring along with the old men, the beggars, and the lame people.”11 The purpest prose in the letter describes him after a particularly severe beating:

[T]here in the beautiful sunlight walked this poor creature—made once in the image of God—grinning like an ape, and making with his hands the most

11 The choice to use the adjective rather than the noun form of lame provides further evidence of Wilde’s interest in complicating Victorian narratives of disability. For a present day analogue, consider: retarded vs. retarded people, the deaf vs. deaf people, the disabled vs. disabled people, etc.
fantastic gestures . . . All the while these hysterical tears, without which none of us ever saw him, were making soiled runnels on his white swollen face. The hideous and deliberate grace of his gestures made him like an antic. He was a living grotesque. The other prisoners watched him, and not one of them smiled. Everybody knew what had happened to him, and that he was being driven insane—was insane already. (SM 167)

The immediate modification of Prince to “an antic” who was “a living grotesque” suggests the precision of Wilde’s argument against the prison. “Antic” immediately suggests a medical description of the abnormal physical ticks, but its artistic connotations are drawn out by the second, more clearly aesthetic “grotesque.” With the quick succession of words, the “hideous and deliberate grace” of Prince’s movements transforms him from a subject of clinical observation to a horrible living sculpture unnaturally carved by floggings, examinations and surveillance.

All of Prince’s punishments derive from medical evaluations concluding he was faking illness in order to avoid work. The letter describes the grim process of medical analysis in prisons.

Prison doctors have no knowledge of mental disease of any kind. They are as a class ignorant men. The pathology of the mind is unknown to them. When a man grows insane, they treat him as shamming. They have him punished again and again. Naturally the man becomes worse. When ordinary punishments are exhausted, the doctor reports the case to the justices. The result is flogging. Of course the flogging is not done with a cat-of-nine-tails.
It is what is called birching. The instrument is a rod; but the result on the wretched half-witted man may be imagined. (SM 167)

Reading Governor J.O. Nelson’s report on the disciplinary measures applied to A.2.II. is dated the same day the Daily Chronicle published “The Case of Warder Martin.” In his essentially immediate response to Wilde’s exposé, Nelson details the physical restraint and bread and water punishment that were ineffective as remedies to the inmate’s malingering and erratic behavior, and the palliative beating with a birch rod. Since the administration of corporal punishment, Nelson reports, A.2.II. has “behaved himself exceptionally well . . . speaks well, and turns out plenty of good work.” He continues his evaluation of the prisoner in a passage underlined by a prison official: “His attempts at shamming insanity are too ludicrous and palpable, are doubtless acquired when an inmate of Menstone Asylum for recurrent excitement for which he was discharged cured prior to his joining the army” (HO 144/277). Instead of questioning the diagnosis, Nelson relies on the rather fantastic medical solution that A.2.II. entered an asylum and departed both cured of his malady and armed with a detailed study of the habits of madness necessary for his Stanislavski-method performance.

In his response to Wilde’s charges, Reading Medical Officer Oliver Calley Hawkins consistently evaluates Prince as mentally fit and another medical official confirmed this diagnosis on two separate occasions. Hawkins sums up his prognosis as “The prisoner has expressed contrition, is doing his duty well and behaving quite as a sane man” (HO 277/144). As further evidence of the sanity of A.2.II., the doctor writes: “I have just seen him and he expresses himself perfectly well.” (HO
This assessment fails to contradict Wilde’s own report. For practical as well as rhetorical reasons, “The Case of Warder Martin” acknowledges Prince was capable of expressing himself and “will be able to tell his name, the nature of his offence, the day of the month, the date of the beginning and expiration of his sentence and answer any ordinary question” (SM 168). Even in its most passionate prose, the letter carefully depicts Prince as a half-wit; if he was found to be witless (that is, an idiot), English Common Law would place Prince and his property under the care of the Crown for what would likely be a life sentence in an asylum. Prince’s sanity and his ability to express himself are evidence of the prison’s threat to his otherwise reasonable behavior. By insisting on the complications in Prince’s behavior, Wilde hopes to prevent the further destruction of Prince’s sanity—insisting the inmate is a lunatic “being driven insane” by imprisonment instead of an idiot subject to total state control.

“Malingering,” the central charge leveled against Prince, is an example of the extraordinary cognitive distances traveled by the prison’s medical service. Inmates at local prisons (including Reading) were required to perform hard labor for six hours on the treadmill in a staggered twenty minutes on/five minute rest schedule. If they responded to the medically and scientifically determined ascent of 8,640 feet (or six

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12 These were the same two doctors who examined Wilde after he pleaded for clemency on the basis of insanity (L 667), and in this instance as well, both men of healing agreed that despite Wilde’s behavior—he was depressed, despondent and smearing bodily fluids on his cell walls—the inmate communicated his mental problems far too clearly to be truly insane. Both of these diagnoses followed the presumption that the inmates were malingering (the military term for shamming in order to avoid the “duty” of prison labor).

13 For an historical analysis of the creation of new categories of mental disability to catalogue half-wittedness shortly after the letter’s publication see Mark Jackson, The Borderland of Imbecility: Medicine, Society and the Fabrication of the Feeble Mind in Victorian and Edwardian England (New York: St. Martin’s, 2000).
climbs to the top of the Sears Tower every day\(^{14}\) by articulating some kind of physical complaint, this was quite sensible (if lazy) and hence evidence of sanity. If they gave no protest, this too was a sane response, demonstrating they were committed to their rehabilitation. For prison doctors it was as sane for inmates to neglect their grueling, monotonous duty as it was to perform it. Wilde writes with some personal knowledge of the conditions involved that, “prison doctors have no knowledge of mental disease of any kind” (SM 167). In the summation of “A59947/1,” J.B. Simpson condemns the “recklessness” of Wilde’s statement with the indignant rhetorical question: “How can a man profess to be an honest critic of the medical side of prison administration while he ignores the all-important fact of malingering” (HO 144/277), a counter-argument that parallels his disdain for Wilde’s refusal to acknowledge the low economic class of the imprisoned boys.

Although he remained a cause célèbre for far longer than Wilde’s other sympathetic figures, the subject of Thomas Martin receives little space in the Home Office file. In contrast to the long reports from numerous doctors and officials, his dismissal as an “unsatisfactory author” is dealt with in the summary report and rebuttal written by J.B. Simpson: “To permit warders—even from humane motives—to distinguish one prisoner from another by kindly acts would obviously lead to very serious scandals, and Martin had previously been suspected of trafficking with prisoners” (HO 144/277). Judging by the public outcry in the Daily Chronicle and Parliament, Martin’s story was the most sympathetic of Wilde’s prison apologies, but

“A59947/1” makes it abundantly clear that any individual initiative that breaks the “discipline of the life” by distinguishing between prisoners (even those of the hungry, pre-teen variety) endangers a system attempting to establish greater standardization and control. The prospect of “very serious scandals” was obviously the impetus for the entire file on Wilde’s letter, but it is also the most handily dismissed.

Wilde’s appeal on behalf of children, guards and a mentally challenged prisoner is more than a selfless advocacy for others. It also marks the beginning of Wilde’s attempt to write himself past the trauma of the prison by confronting the illogical system with public writing. When “The Case” was republished as a book in February of 1898 the front page read “The Warder referred to in these pages still finds himself without a job, any assistance can be offered to. . . ” Although the letter was certainly published to earn revenue for the unemployed Martin, it also underlined Wilde’s latest publication—the book *The Case of Warder Martin* was printed the same month Wilde (writing as C.3.3.) released his second attempt to recover the sense of self taken away by the prison, *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*.

### III. The Ballad of Reading Gaol

Even by Victorian standards, *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* was a successful poem. Published on February 9, 1898 in a first edition of 500 copies, *The Ballad* sold more than 1800 copies by the end of the month. Six editions of the work were released in 1898 alone. Although he was suspected of writing the poem early on, Wilde demonstrated uncharacteristic restraint in claiming full credit for the work: the poem was not printed under his own name until the seventh printing, in June of 1899, 17 months before his death. Wilde elected to publish the work as “C.3.3.” because, as he
wrote to his publisher Leonard Smithers, “I see that it is my name that terrifies” (L 1011). While this has justifiably been read to reflect Wilde’s concern at scaring away customers, Wilde’s choice of pseudonym insures that the reader is not distracted by the author’s past. Convict C.3.3. writes from the experience of prison, converting the public shame of the convict into an authoritative frame for the critique of the prison system.

This section outlines the fundamental critique of the penitentiary at the core of *The Ballad* and grounds the work in the broad movement for reform of the English prisons in the 1890s. After a brief summary of the poem and discussion of its central argument for social changes, I will discuss Wilde’s choice of the ballad as the poetic form to depict both the harsh prison conditions and the inmates’ desperate attempt to maintain their humanity inside Reading Gaol. *The Ballad* portrays the prisoners’ communal response to the hanging of Charles Wooldridge and, in so doing, reveals the secret collective activity of simple but elegant resistance to the technology of the penitentiary. Wilde’s insistence on integrating propaganda into the work, and his deliberate framing of the work as a crime ballad fit with his wider goal of witnessing the troubling realities of the prison. Finally, I will discuss the historical context necessary to read the poem as a work of resistance and Wilde’s attempt to collaborate with Irish Nationalist MPs in the fight for prison reform.

*The Ballad* tells the story of the execution of Charles Taylor Wooldridge three times from three different perspectives within Reading Gaol. The first tale of the hanging centers on the condemned man himself—detailing both the psychological torture of walking past one’s own coffin to the gallows and the tedium of six weeks of
medical examinations and preposterous nightly suicide watches. After reporting the personal, intimate details of Wooldridge’s death, *The Ballad* re-tells the hanging as a communal experience of the convict population. Wooldridge’s fellow inmates are surprised when he responds to his anticipated demise by looking “wistfully at the day” (l. 12 & l. 130) and his death turns the prison upside down as mourning bonds the ostensible criminals together despite (or, alternatively, to spite) the alienating influence of the penitentiary and its representatives. Finally, Wilde subjects the ultimate exercise of the power of the state to a spiritual analysis: this time the story of Wooldridge’s execution contrasts the authority of the prison with the higher authority of Christian forgiveness Wilde attempted (albeit less-successfully) to impart to Alfred Douglas in the letter published as *De Profundis*. Not surprisingly, this final witness to the execution finds a profound conflict between the purported Christianity of British criminal justice and Christian compassion. Because this chapter reads Wilde’s advocacy of prison reform as an attempt to reclaim the subjectivity erased by his criminalization, my analysis of the poem concentrates on the second telling of Wooldridge’s execution from the perspective of the community of prisoners.

Like the letters he published before and after it, *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* critiques British penal institutions by revealing procedures within the prison that are hidden from polite society. At the same time as this critique serves Wilde’s political agenda of prison reform, it serves a more personal goal as well: bearing public witness to the prison offers Wilde an opportunity to reconstruct the subjectivity shattered by the technology of the penitentiary. Wilde made a studied attempt to regain the agency and identity prison had taken from him through patent polemical
writing. *The Ballad* simultaneously recounts the trauma of incarceration and imagines the possibility of the inmates’ redemption through the common endurance of grief, suggesting the necessity of social and personal emancipation from the practices of the British Prison Commission.

On January 3, 1889 Oscar Wilde had written a review of Wilfrid Scawen Blunt’s *In Vinculis* for the *Pall Mall Gazette* entitled “Poetry and Prison.” Blunt spent two months in prison in Ireland for speaking in favor of land reform at a public meeting in Galway and, while he was incarcerated, wrote poetry in the margins of his government-issued prayer book. Wilde’s review is overwhelmingly positive, and he credits the agitator’s experience with a marked improvement to Blunt’s poetry: “Prison has had an admirable effect on Mr. Wilfrid Blunt as a poet.”15 (*Selected Journalism* 27). Connecting the structural composition of imprisonment with the formal conceits of Blunt’s poetic choices, Wilde comments: “the narrow confines of the prison-cell seem to suit the sonnet’s ‘scanty plot of ground . . . an unjust imprisonment for a noble cause strengthens as well as deepens the nature.” (SJ 29). In Wilde’s reading of Blunt, the experience of the cell is captured by the brevity, verbal economy and tightly-organized rhyme scheme of the sonnet. Why then did he choose the closest form to a poetic opposite of the sonnet for his major work of prison poetry nine years later?

Part of the answer may be found in his reference to Wordsworth’s reflections on the sonnet’s “scanty plot of ground” in “Nuns Fret Not at Their Convent's Narrow

Room.” Wordsworth’s sonnet celebrates the confines of the poetic form with a metaphor which would have had a different meaning for Wilde after his release from Reading Gaol.

In truth the prison, unto which we doom
Ourselves, no prison is: and hence for me,
In sundry moods, 'twas pastime to be bound
Within the Sonnet's scanty plot of ground. (ll. 9-11)

Wordsworth’s lines on the fourteen-line renaissance art form present Wilde with an irresistible opportunity both to be clever in the book review and add substance to Blunt’s collection of poems with an authoritative cultural reference. Part of the motivation for Wilde’s “kind of reversal” from the ideal of crafting lines in rows along the sonnet’s “scanty plot” to belting out a song in the wide open ballad form is supported in the final lines of Wordsworth’s sonnet.

Pleased if some Souls (for such there needs must be)
Who have felt the weight of too much liberty,
Should find brief solace there, as I have found. (ll. 12-14)

For Wordsworth, the sonnet offers a paradoxical poetic freedom to an artist under “the weight of too much liberty,” thus offering a solution to a problem Wilde does not have after his conviction in 1895. While the sonnet provided him with an opportunity for a witticism matching form and function in the review of In Vinculis, Wilde’s choice of the more open format of the Ballad suggests he was grappling with an
artistic challenge diametrically opposed to Wordsworth’s “too much liberty”: finding
a poetic form to depict the bleak realities of conditions in the late Victorian
penitentiary. Instead of pursuing the personal liberation Blunt and Wordsworth find in
the focused sonnet, Oscar Wilde combines a broad, epic depiction of the prison
practices of labor, surveillance, and silence in *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* with the
ambitious agenda of reforming his readers’ perception of prisoners into the familiar,
openly rebellious form of the crime ballad.

Although scholars debate the racialization of crime in late Victorian England,
there can be no doubt that there were a disproportionately large number of Irish
criminals in English cities at the end of the nineteenth century. It is no surprise, then,
that many urban Irish communities identified with criminals more than authorities
and part of the cultural evidence for this resistance to state authority can be found in
the heavy influence of Irish poetic techniques on and warm reception to the ballad.

Wilde’s depiction of prison life in *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* is neither
gentle nor subtle. Each cell is a “numbered tomb” (l. 246) and a “foul and dark
latrine” (l. 572) and the poem concentrates particular attention on prison labor. *The
Ballad* memorably documents prison labor: the painstaking work of picking oakum:
“we tore the tarry rope to shreds/With blunt and bleeding nails” (ll. 217-18); the daily
janitorial work in the cell: “We rubbed the doors and scrubbed the floors” (l. 219);
stitching mailbags, crushing rocks, turning the crank: “we sewed the sacks, we broke
the stones, we turned the dusty mill” (l. 224). One of the striking elements in Wilde’s
description of the harsh, purposefully pointless work inmates are forced to do is that
each description has as its subject the first person plural: in his account of the
treadmill, it is “we” who “sweated on the mill.” (l. 226) *The Ballad* focuses on the collective experience of prison labor instead of chronicling the labor of the murderous Wooldridge or illustrating the suffering of “C.3.3.” The inmates turn a crank attached to his door for a certain number of revolutions a day—carefully calculated to challenge his strength and health—in order to avoid starvation rations. Solitary and deliberately unproductive and unprofitable, prison work was intended to impress upon the inmate the value of work for its own sake; for the prisoners in *The Ballad* however, the common indignity of prison labor becomes the basis for a rudimentary community of suffering.

Of course, this grim community cannot officially exist in a prison where inmates are denied agency in order to protect them from their own or others pernicious and (according to Victorian penal thought) contaminating influence. Forced labor is only one element of the technology of the penitentiary, and its influence on the mind of the convict is minor compared with Wilde’s description of the system of surveillance. Wooldridge’s death-watch offers one striking example of the prison’s gaze.

He does not sit with silent men
Who watch him night and day
Who watch him when he tries to weep
And when he tries to pray;
Who watch him lest himself should rob
The prison of its prey (ll. 61-66)
Repeating “who watch him” three times in the six lines, Wilde imaginatively juxtaposes the ubiquitous surveillance in the penitentiary with the dull hypocrisy of the warder’s job to make sure a condemned man doesn’t end his own life. The intuitive contradiction in the rules is underlined by the warder’s participation in one of the fundamental elements of the technology of the penitentiary: watching the inmate. The closer he gets to death, the more the condemned man is subject to intense and invasive surveillance. The prison is a predator; the men who work in the institution Wilde calls “humanity’s machine” (l. 576) are not in control: the institution, the technology, and the building itself dispatches individuals under their observant gaze.

The machine is unchecked by individual representations of the state: the prison’s doctor and the warders adhere to the procedures of the institution and thus their witnessing of the dramatic events only makes the experience worse. The medical staff violates the prisoner’s bodily integrity with a search as “some coarse-mouthed Doctor gloats, and notes/ Each new and nerve-twitched pose (ll. 67-8). The warders are unable even to communicate emotion nonverbally to prisoners because

He to whom a watcher’s doom
Is given as his task,
Must set a lock upon his lips
And make his face a mask.
Or else he might be moved, and try
To comfort or console (ll. 201-206)
Like Thomas Martin, the prison authorities who spend the most time in day to day contact with inmates were directed to forbid themselves of even the impulse “to comfort or console.” As a network of directives, the prison is powerful enough to regulate away the most natural human emotions, and the end result threatens the humanity of everyone in the prison, guard and convict.

From the depiction of the “Judas hole” through which warder’s maintained the possibility of constant surveillance (and consequently, according to Benthamite notions of panopticon, the entire function of surveillance) to the dark descriptions of warder’s ghostly walk among the cells on shoes padded with fustian so that the inmates would not hear their approach, *The Ballad* recounts the anxious, almost paranoid realities of imprisonment. The poem also recounts brief moments of defiant humanity among the prison population through the creation of what Wilde calls “the community of suffering.”

Like “The Case of Warder Martin”, *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* does not offer the author’s personal moral condemnation of prison conditions. Instead the poem attempts to present the reader with a radical representation of the prison in which the only humane elements are provided by the criminals themselves. As Wilde writes in his famous letter to Alfred Douglas:

> Suffering and the community of suffering makes people kind, and day after day as I trampled the yard I used to feel with pleasure and comfort what Carlyle calls somewhere ‘the silent rhythmic charm of human companionship’. In this, as in all other things philanthropists and people of
that kind are astray. It is not the prisoners who need reformation. It is the
Prisons.\footnote{Wilde, \textit{The Soul of Man and Prison Writings} 164.}

Formally, the poem mimics the only regular collective activity in Reading Gaol: the
one hour of silent walking in a circle was the only regular sanctioned time prisoners
could leave their cells as a group, other than slopping out or Sunday service. In \textit{Thief of Reason}, Richard Pine argues that through the “insistent rhythm of the poem, which itself re-creates the circularity of the prison yard, the subversion of the prison system takes place” (Pine 299). Pine’s use of the passive voice begs the question: who is subverting the prison system? Wilde is not mimicking the structure of prison
discipline in order to rebel against it. \textit{The Ballad} is dissident in part because it
envisions the prisoners reacting as a community to Wooldridge’s death and this
communal dissent begins with the one daily activity prisoners have in common.
Throughout the poem, the action takes place along the rhythmic cyclical walks of the
prison population.

Like ape or clown, in monstrous garb
With crooked arrows starred,
Silent we went round and round,
The slippery asphalte yard
Silently we went round and round,
And no man spoke a word (ll. 433-38).
Although they are silent, disgraced and marked with the convict’s broad arrow, the poet’s use of the first person plural suggests there is some hope for the inmates in the collective activity of walking the prison yard. It is in the unlikely community that forms while walking “round and round” the yard at Reading Gaol that the prisoners first whisper the fate of Wooldridge to each other: “That fellow’s got to swing” (ll. 24). At the beginning of the poem, the circular prison exercise also allows every prisoner to encounter Wooldridge as he strolls around the circle, looking “wistfully at the day.” There is only one walk in the poem which is not circular or cyclical: Wooldridge’s walk to the hanging shed as he hears his own last rites read by the chaplain “while the terror of his soul/ Tells him he is not dead”, the condemned man must “cross his own coffin, as he moves/ Into the hideous shed” (ll. 85-90). The condemned man’s participation in the cooperative activity at Reading Gaol makes his death meaningful for the entire “community of suffering”, and the poem is careful to note the isolation of the prisoners from “the pleasure and comfort” of each other on the day of his death. On the day of execution, the prisoner must bear silent witness in his cell, and is denied the modest comforts of chapel and exercise.

Wooldridge’s execution shows the twisted, awful side of the prison system—but it presents the convicts’ persistent humanity as well. After silently waiting in their cells for the clock to strike eight at the moment of the execution, the prisoners keen the death of Wooldridge as it appears to them in ghostly visage:

With sudden shock the prison-clock
Smote on the shivering air,
And from all the gaol rose up a wail
Of impotent despair,
Like the sound that frightened marshes hear
From some leper in his lair.
And as one sees most fearful things
In the crystal of a dream,
We saw the greasy hempen rope
Hooked to the blackened beam,
And heard the prayer the hangman’s snare
Strangled into a scream. (ll. 379-390)

The Ballad imagines the entire prison population sharing a collective wail of grief followed by a dark vision of Wooldridge’s death. In a prison in which silence is the discipline held above all others, the prisoners’ transgressive keen invokes a common imaginative recreation of the hanging. As bleak and violent as this image is, it humanizes the inmates. Through their “impotent despair” they bear witness to the execution together, commemorating the secluded event witnessed by only the hangman in the shed with a shared vision of the moment of hanging. In this moment, each inmate finds a human connection beyond his own crime, suffering, and imprisonment. Wilde’s portrayal of this brief moment of redemption is intended to re-humanize the criminal, and in so doing, ask the reader to re-evaluate the human suffering caused by imprisonment. The contrast between the technology of the penitentiary and the “community of suffering” asks the reader to view the prison system as a brutal instrument employed on people instead of an antiseptic apparatus.
for the punishment of criminals. The gloomy carnivale of the execution day ultimately only reinforces the notion that this is a flawed technology.

While Wilde was confident that he would finish *The Ballad* in a matter of weeks, the actual composition took more than seven months. In a letter to Robbie Ross discussing early versions of the work, he describes his political ambitions through potential titles of the work. Wilde sought the role of the protest poet proposing titles such as “Poesie et Propaganda” and “Dichtung unt und Warheit.” He responds to Ross’s critique of the end of the poem with a confession that defies his previous writing style, defined by the verbal economy necessary for stage productions, sonnets and children’s stories: namely, he drags the poem on in order to make his political meaning clear.

With much of your criticism I agree. The poem suffers under the difficulty of a divided aim in style. Some is realistic, some is romantic: some poetry, some propaganda. I feel it keenly, but as a whole I think the production interesting; that it is interesting from more points of view than one is artistically to be regretted. (L 956)

The poem crosses between romance and the real and in doing so shifts away from the coincidences, supernatural themes and mythical tropes that characterized much of Wilde’s previous work. For Wilde and Ross, *The Ballad* fails to achieve an aesthetic of formal unity; instead, the work is of interest for its content. As Wilde remarks when Ross wants him to end the poem after section four, “the propaganda, which I desire to make begins there” (L 968).
The prisoners may not go anywhere in the daily circular walk around debtor’s yard that begins the poem, but they do manage to turn the create moments of collective humanity through brief exchanges of forbidden, sympathetic glances. These moments of personhood for both the condemned Charles Taylor Wooldridge and his fellow inmates trace the limitations of the ostensible absolute discipline of the penitentiary. The solemn trudge and ubiquitous administrative gaze are designed to function in an institutional technology that restricts any common connections between the prisoners. *The Ballad*, however, tells the story of prisoners who refuse to allow their capacity for human feeling to be erased by incarceration. For the speaker, the condemned man, and the prison body as a whole, the enforced silent walk becomes an opportunity to substantiate their humanity against the perverse, distorting mechanisms of the penitentiary; a theme that forms the foundation for the work as a prison reform poem.

Irish Nationalist MP Michael Davitt used “The Case of Warder Martin” to question the Home Secretary about the dismissal of Martin, the treatment of the imprisoned boys and the flogging of Prince. Wilde wrote Davitt from Dieppe to encourage his questions and, apparently, make some kind of contrition for his crimes. In the letter, Wilde views his imprisonment as a result, in part, of his failure to live up to his mother’s nationalism; telling Davitt he was “sentenced for a life of senseless pleasure and hard materialism and a mode of existence unworthy of an artist, and still more unworthy of my mother’s son” (L 870). While one could reasonably suggest Wilde was wrapping himself in the green flag, cynically searching for redemption in the ranks of his Young Irelander mother’s admirers, it would be equally reasonable
to suggest that Wilde was genuine both in his penitence and his nationalism. However one chooses to interpret his begging letter to Davitt, Wilde makes it clear that he begs to encourage the radical MP and activist journalist to pursue the lines of inquiry framed in “The Case of Warder Martin.” Within a few days of this letter to Davitt, Wilde began the last poem he published in his lifetime: *The Ballad of Reading Gaol.*

The connection of *The Ballad* with Irish nationalist politics does not end with the coincidental dates of his letter to Davitt praising the MP for his advocacy on behalf of prisoners and his letter to Ross detailing the beginning of the poem. Regenia Gagnier discusses Wilde’s attempt to publish the poem in *Reynolds* – a tabloid read by poorer residents of London, but Wilde’s ideal publication site for the poem was a platform for *The Ballad* to be read by allies in prison reform efforts: England’s Irish nationalist readers of *The Sunday Sun.* Wilde’s choice of *The Sun* represented another kind of reversal because four years earlier he had very publicly quarreled with the paper and its editor, Nationalist MP T. P. O’Connor, over the publication of a rather dreary Irish poem “The Shamrock.” The intensely nationalist poem was credited to Wilde and in the accompanying remarks *The Sun* claimed the ascendant literary figure was expressing his mother’s radical nationalism. Wilde was incensed at the false attribution and published an intense rejection of the “fifth rate poem” in a letter to the *Pall Mall Gazette* entitled “Journalistic Ethics.”

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17 The letter is undated, but was sent from Wilde’s hotel in Dieppe, where he resided in late May 1897.

making a number of personal attacks on O’Connor as both an editor and literary mind. For Wilde to back pedal from his barbed missives about O’Connor to ask him for assistance with his poem demonstrates his significant tactical interest in the publication of the poem. Wilde sought out a man whose earlier attempt to paint him as a nationalist was obviously interpreted as an insult and threat, as his first choice to support *The Ballad*. This could suggest a stunning naïveté on the part of Wilde. It could also suggest an increased comfort with Irish nationalism in the post-prison Wilde, but it certainly suggests the care Wilde was taking in selecting his audience as he wrote the poem. Wilde’s imagining of a nationalist audience as he composed the work suggests the political import he placed on the work as a means of promoting prison reform, and the allies he hoped to work with along the way.

T.P. O’Connor was also Wilde’s first choice to write the introduction to the six-pence edition of *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*—and he later added Michael Davitt to the list of candidates. Wilde felt that “it should be a prison reform preface” (*L* 1060). His interest in framing the more expensive edition as a prison reform document, and more specifically aligning himself with Irish nationalists in order to do so, suggests an acknowledgement of the Irish frame of the text itself, and Wilde’s understanding of the importance of placing the work in newspapers on his side of the prison reform debate.

**IV. “Prison Reform”**

Once it was apparent that *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* was a commercial success, Oscar Wilde sent the last work he published in his lifetime to *The Daily Chronicle*. Published on March 23, 1898 under the headline “Prison Reform: Don’t
Read this if You Want to Be Happy Today”, the letter is one of the most succinct texts to be found in Wilde’s writings. This brief critical assault on the prison regime calls early versions of the Prison Reform Bill “entirely useless” and suggests three priorities for the reform of the systematic disciplining of inmates:

There are three permanent punishments authorized by law in English prisons:

1. Hunger
2. Insomnia
3. Disease (L 1045)

After a rhetorical appeal to the reader’s sympathy for a few individuals in “The Case of Warder Martin” and the emotional humanization of prisoners in the popular format of *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*, the terse, reasoned arguments in “Prison Reform” represent a significant tactical shift in Wilde’s appeals for social change. Printed under the byline “The Author of *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*” the letter is an attempt to capitalize on the poem’s popularity, but it also tries to alter prison reform legislation: “I hope you will allow me, as one who has had long personal experience of life in an English gaol, to point out what reforms in our present stupid and barbarous system are urgently necessary” (L 1045). Even if the letter does not reveal Wilde as the author of the popular poem, it does confirm that “C.3.3”’s experience of prison was not fancy.

At the time the reform measures were designed to improve the system by adding more surveillance, an approach that misses the point entirely, according to Wilde. More inspectors and official visits only “ensure the enforcement of a foolish
and inhuman code” (L 1045). The changes he sees as most “necessary” are an improvement in the material conditions of prisoners. Wilde argues that prison food is “enough to sustain, not life exactly, but existence,” that the diet of bread made with a mixture of chalk and flour, suet and weak soup ensures the prisoner “is always racked by the pain and sickness of hunger.” (L 1045) Prisoners are given a thin straw mattress over a plank bed whose “object is . . . to produce insomnia” (L 1047). and these two problems lead to the reform Wilde calculated to appeal to the health-conscious Victorian reader in a health-obsessed age: disease. Wilde writes that “the misery and tortures that prisoners go through in consequence of the revolting sanitary arrangements are quite indescribable “, and then scatologically contradicts himself by describing “Diarrhoea that, at first a malady, becomes a permanent disease” (L 1046).

The letter continues Wilde’s critique of the Hippocratic hypocrisy of the prison doctors who failed to recognize the genuine distress of Convict A.3.III that he had described in the first letter and The Ballad’s “coarse-mouthed Doctor” who ignores the moral complexities of treating Wooldridge before his death: forcing the condemned man to undergo a humiliating examination while he “gloats, and notes/ Each new and nerve-twitched pose” (ll. 75-76). In “Prison Reform”, Wilde does not mince words in his evaluation of the role of the penal institution’s medical corps: Prison doctors are “brutal in manner, coarse in temperament, and utterly indifferent to the health of the prisoners or their comfort.” (L 1048).

For Wilde the slow, constant decay of the body in prison under the unfit institutional gaze of prison doctors has an even more disastrous consequence in the loss of mental faculties. Wilde was transferred to Reading Gaol and prescribed both
his work as a gardener and eventually his access to writing materials and books by 
prison medical doctors to prevent the further decline of his own mental health, so his 
deep contempt for this aspect of penal technology is quite plain.

The present prison system seems almost to have for its aim the wrecking and 
destruction of mental facilities. The production of insanity is, if not its object, 
certainly its result . . deprived of books, of all human intercourse, isolated 
from every humane and humanizing influence, condemned to eternal silence, 
robbed of all intercourse with the eternal world, treated like an unintelligent 
animal, brutalised below the level of any brute creation, the wretched man 
who is confined in English prison can hardly escape becoming insane. (L 1047)

The letter exhaustively describes the conditions which both lead to a decline in 
mental health and are everyday practices in the Victorian prison. As Wilde 
understands it, the intellectual sensitivity of humanity enhances the torture of prison. 
Isolation from intellectual, social, and spiritual stimulation is worse than simple 
physical violence and leaves the prisoner “brutalized below the level of any brute 
creation” (L 1047).

Wilde’s argument for substantial reform allows for a productive rereading of 
his other post-prison works, underlining many of the critiques in the first letter and 
poem. The same concern for hunger in “Prison Reform” is the impetus for “The Case 
of Warder Martin”, as the illicit ginger biscuits were Martin’s response to inadequate 
prison fare. In The Ballad Wilde evokes the situation to begin his indictment of the
institutionalized cruelty of the prison to children, half wits like Prince and the entire prison population.

For they starve the little frightened child
Till it weeps both night and day:
And they scourge the weak, and flog the fool,
And gibe the old and gray,
And some grow mad, and all grow bad,
And none a word may say. (ll. 565-70)

While it may be that in prison “none a word may say”, the narrative of the poem and the specificity of the letter do represent the prisoner speaking back—converting the expertise established in the prison into resistance to its conditions with cogent critique in aesthetic, propagandist and specific political terms, respectively.

In Wilde’s specific political terms, the necessary reforms allow for more interior and social space for the prisoner by limiting surveillance and regulation. He calls for more books, more visits, and more letters sent to and from prisoners without indulging in “the habit of mutilating and expurgating prisoner’s letters” (L 1048). In the letter’s final lines, he emphasizes the modesty of his ideas, suggesting that the radical changes to a system he judged “entirely wrong” are self-edited in the interest of expedience.

I have tried to indicate in my letter a few of the reforms necessary to our English prison system. They are simple, practical and humane. They are, of course, only a beginning. But it is time that a beginning should be made, and
it can only be started by a strong pressure of public opinion formularized in your powerful paper, and fostered by it. (L 1045)

The letter’s role is to present a modest, persuasive beginning, and the most radical critiques of the prison are left squarely in the aesthetic domain of *The Ballad*.

Within the scope of this project, it is difficult to gauge the influence of Wilde’s writing on the June 28, 1898 passage of the Prison Reform Act. Martin Weiner suggests that Wilde had a role in the final form and the passage of the Act.\(^{19}\) There is little evidence that Oscar Wilde single-handedly changed the course of the prison reform legislation, rescuing it from obscurity, promoting it and then revising it when it came up for passage. The convenience alone of Wilde playing such a pivotal role naturally leads to skepticism, as does a common understanding of humanitarian reforms in the late nineteenth-century liberal regimes which suggests change is the result of wider social unrest and cannot be attributed to an individual, however infamous and articulate he may be. However, the language Michael Davitt proposed for his amendment to the reform bill matches the language from Oscar Wilde’s second letter, so there is evidence of the legislations re-structuring along similar lines to the poet’s suggestions.

Wilde himself may have contributed to the optimistic scholarship related to his prison reform agenda. Responding to an admiring letter from a woman of his acquaintance praising his case for reform, Wilde was hopelessly optimistic: “the

system is exposed, and so, doomed” (L 751). While this notion of political change can be fairly characterized as naïve, in this same letter Wilde describes his allies as “Celtic to a man, for all Celts have in-born imagination” (L 751). In Wilde’s own essentialist terms the Celtic imagination was the common element in those attempting to dismantle the prison system. Shortly after his release, Wilde told his Gallic friend, André Gide, a story in which he and another prisoner were caught speaking. When the governor interrogated them separately, they both confessed to instigating the conversation, each attempting to give the other the half punishment reserved for the respondent in talking violations. This threw the warden into fits and, "red-faced", he gave them both the two weeks of solitary intended for the man who spoke first. Laughing about it later with Gide, Wilde attributed the incident to the fact that the governor had “no sort of imagination.”

The lack of imagination in and of the prison system offered Wilde the opportunity to engage an audience with a literary riposte to the institution, from the first letter which they thought was powerful not because it was true, but because it was artfully written, to the refined public imagination evident in *The Ballad* created in part to appeal to Irish nationalist audiences, to the final letter intended to persuade Welsh, Scottish and Irish MPs offering a palliative to a savage prison system to reassess their approach to reform. Wilde diagnosed the crisis of the penitentiary clearly: “ordinary cruelty is simply stupidity. It is the entire want of imagination.” Wilde’s active participation in the prison reform movement spearheaded by Irish

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nationalist MPs does provide a clearly politicized Wilde engaging aggressively with humanity in prison, an issue that had made itself quite urgent to him and that he intended to wrest back. In his first letter, Wilde describes the dehumanizing conflict between humanity and the technology of the penitentiary’s goal of destroying a criminal and rebuilding a citizen. Discussing the circumstances of the mad inmate Prince, he writes “at present it is a horrible duel between himself and the doctor. The doctor is fighting for a theory. The man is fighting for his life. I am anxious that the man should win” (L 850).
CHAPTER 4: CARCERAL PRAXIS IN TOM CLARKE’S *GLIMPSES OF AN IRISH FELON’S PRISON LIFE*

In the National Museum of Ireland, Walter Paget’s *Birth of the Republic* depicts the beginning of the end for the Irish Volunteer’s military micro-campaign (fig. 1). Lit through a gaping hole in the ceiling, the bombarded G.P.O. explodes with activity as barricaded Irish Volunteers make their last stand in the building. Among the various melodramatic scenes collected in the painting the familiar signatories of the Declaration of Independence cluster around the wounded James Connolly. Emphasizing the epic, mythmaking preoccupation of the work, Paget duplicated photographs of the key figures’ faces taken from a popular memorial card and gave the Easter heroes bodies, uniforms and poses overlaid on a painted duplication of a popular picture postcard of the interior of the G.P.O. The painting’s preoccupation with martyrdom is evident in elements such as the compassionate women’s auxiliary, the intent Horace Plunkett, stolid Seán Mac Diarmada and injured, yet fully attentive Connelly. The painting’s dramatic, busy representation adds a layer of courage, sacrifice and resolution to the executions of the fourteen Dublin rebels by imagining

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1 Síghle Bhreathnach-Lynch describes what she calls the conflation of “Heroic sacrifice and stark realism” in the *Birth of the Republic* (86) Find in stacks
the interior of the G.P.O. as the beginning of the martyrdoms realized in Kilmainham Gaol between May 3rd and May 12th.

In the pastiche of photographs on the background of the ruined headquarters of the engagement, Paget positions and prioritizes each leader’s place in the martyred historical narrative of 1916. In this formation of Irish rebellion, Thomas J. Clarke is discreetly situated in semi-darkness behind the striking, heroic pose of Patrick Pearse and the more pedestrian figure of Pearse’s brother Willie. Therefore in this symbolic representation, Clarke, the Fenian ex-prisoner who (as acting head of the IRB Supreme Council) had a direct hand in nearly every element of the Rising is peeking out from behind the shoulder of the President of the Provisional Irish Republic’s little brother (fig 2). In this chapter, I address the complicated relationship between the dominance of the martyr narrative and Clarke’s reduced legacy by offering a literary reading of his *Glimpses of an Irish Felon’s Prison Life*: de-emphasizing self-sacrifice by exploring the penal origins of the critical and pedagogical underpinnings of Irish republican nationalism.

Tom Clarke blended into the shadows behind other leaders of 1916 in *Birth of the Republic* and his subsequent comparative obscurity are perhaps understandable, and certainly not surprising. As a fifteen-year convict and key member of a secret

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2 While the painting reflects the traditional understanding of the Rising put forth by Pearse’s student and historian Desmond Ryan, a fellow IRB member disagrees with this trajectory: “Although Patrick Pearse and I were intimates, it is my view that writers and historians in subsequent years have, perhaps unconsciously, given Pearse a position of prominence in the movement which rightly belongs to Clarke. His quiet and somewhat shy unobtrusiveness would seem to have robbed even history of her due. In my frank and honest opinion, insofar as it was in the power of one man to bring an Irish insurrection into forthright activity, the credit for that achievement must go to Thomas J. Clarke” (W.J. Brennan-Whitmore, *Dublin Burning* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1996) 41.
society, Tom Clarke did not leave a substantial record of his life behind.\(^3\) Although many notable Free State intellectuals dutifully make passing mention of him in their histories and memoirs and although Clarke is mentioned *en passant* in dozens of books, the only intense scholarly scrutiny of the Fenian in the eighty-eight years since his death\(^4\) is an admiring biography by Louis Le Roux.\(^5\) This near-elision is the result of several related factors: many scholars struggle with the apparent simplicity of “heroic” or “martyred” figures, both criticism and praise come too easily in a simple narrative, and this ambivalence is further amplified by the contentious critical debate over the Easter 1916 campaign.\(^6\) Clarke was canonized by nationalists almost at the instant of his death, and -- deciding between ignoring and debunking the manufacture of his larger-than-life persona—most scholars have chosen the former, more historically lethal approach. Crucially, the *Glimpses* (the only printed works directly attributable to Clarke) consist of a series of erratically published fragments which shift spatial and temporal interpretations of the prison and prisoner frequently enough to confound even the most dedicated reader. However, the absence of critical history and frustrating form also present an opportunity for literary studies in the exploration

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\(^3\) Although the Special Branch files of the other key leaders of the 1916 Rising (not to mention Michael Collins and Eamonn De Valera) were prematurely de-classified, Clarke’s record remains absent and apparently sealed for reasons unknown.

\(^4\) Indeed, even his wife Kathleen’s *Revolutionary Woman* (Dublin: O’Brien 1991) makes only passing reference to either Clarke or their eighteen-year marriage.

\(^5\) *Tom Clarke and the Irish Freedom Movement* (Dublin: Tallbot, 1936). Which although hopelessly single-minded in its promotional agenda and notable as a rebuttal to the author’s own, earlier biography *Padraic Pearse*, has provided the biographical details contained herein, unless otherwise specified.

\(^6\) Cf. Máirín Ní Dhonnchadha and Theo Dorgan (Editors), *Revising the Rising* (Derry: Field Day, 1991)
of the prison. This chapter is a critical reading of the *Glimpses* that begins to reposition Clarke historically by focusing on the content and context of this architect of nationalism who preferred to remain behind the scenes.

Instead of “correcting” the Nietzschean monumental history exemplified in Paget’s painting by replicating mythical heroism onto Tom Clarke’s life, this chapter presents a critical approach to his writing: reading *Glimpses of an Irish Felon’s Prison Life* -- his account of fifteen years in prison – as an investigation of prison technology in content and nationalist subjectivity in application. Beginning with the assumption that the fractured composition of the texts is a fundamental element of a work originating within the penal mechanism, this chapter investigates Clarke’s attempts to form a critical subjectivity both inside the prison and through the publication of the work itself. Evaluating the difference between these subjectivities, it becomes clear that as he establishes distance from the prison by writing about it, his critical subjectivity is realized as the fragmented memories, stories, and lessons are arranged into a pedagogical tool that could have been provocatively subtitled “The Boy’s Life Manual of How to Go to Prison.” This chapter traces four manifestations of Clarke’s pursuit of subjectivity through a series of relationships defined in of and by the prison I call carceral praxis. Understanding Clarke’s writing as praxis nuances common notions of autophagous nationalism in the martyr tropes of prison narratives (propagated in *Birth of the Republic* above and numerous other versions of Irish

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7 “the great moments in the struggle of individuals form a chain, that in them the highest points of humanity are linked throughout the millennia, that what is highest in such a moment of the distant past be for me still alive, bright and great”(15) “If the man who wants to achieve something great needs the past at all he will master it through monumental history” Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History* (18).
history) and lead towards an understanding of more circumspect and strategic elements of Irish nationalism.

This chapter moves through four iterations of the structure of relationships I define as carceral praxis. The first is the personal phase, captured in a single, fractured passage and then progressively widening to incorporate (in order) the text of the *Glimpses*, its readership, and the works’ critical context. The relationship between theory/knowledge, practice and each component’s synthesis into carceral praxis is replicated in each of these four sections. After a brief biographical sketch, I foreground the ‘problem’ of the form of the work, using the key passage “The Golden Rules of Life for a Long Sentence Prisoner” to discuss the conflicts suspended in his fragmentary discourse, and argue for a reading of the texts that resists the potential smoothing effect of redacted narratives and instead preserves the jagged, unresolved form and content that penal discipline invokes. I will then read fragments of the text as representations of the penal mechanism he witnesses and the ways his knowledge of the mechanism finds fissures in the penitentiary, politicizing these ultra-narrow margins of control. Next, I will present a context-based analysis of which politicization, examining the ways in which his knowledge and the strategies he builds to employ it enable the completion of his own critical subjectivity through the act of writing what amounts to a prisoner’s manual (chiefly intended for young men). The *Glimpses* reveal a certain amount of pedagogical sophistication when read as fragments in context of both the prison itself, the political climate of Ireland circa 1912-13, and his likely audience. Using this contextual, didactic reading of the *Glimpses*, I critique the martyr narratives created by both Free State intellectuals and
myth-makers (here typified by P.S. O’Hegarty’s treatment of Clarke’s text) and revisionist scholars (centering on Patrick Brannigan’s treatment of the *Glimpses* as a canonical prison narrative). Finally I provide the most concrete evidence of Clarke’s praxis in a brief discussion of Brendan Behan’s *Borstal Boy*. The chapter concludes with a brief précis including implications for further study and analysis of Tom Clarke, and further complication of notions of Irish nationalism, the prison narrative and the colonial subject in prison as discrete rather than interconnected concepts.

Tom Clarke is best known as the first man to sign the Irish Declaration of Independence on Easter Monday, 1916 and this final chapter of his life (perhaps understandably) completely dominates what little critical and historical information exists about the elusive Fenian. Born on the Isle of Wight in 1858 to James Clarke, a Leitrim-born Protestant noncommissioned officer in the British Army, and Mary Palmer Clarke, a Catholic from Tipperary, Clarke spent the first ten years of his life in South Africa and the remainder of his youth in Dungannon, County Tyrone – a hotbed of Irish nationalist activity. Rebelling against his father’s attempts to recruit him into the British Army, Tom Clarke was already a member of the Irish Republican Brotherhood – popularly known as the Fenians – when he escaped Ireland for the United States after firing a shotgun at the Royal Irish Constabulary in the “Buckshot Riots” of 1880. He continued his political activities in New York, and after less than three years he accepted a dynamiting mission in London from Jeremiah O’Donovan-Rossa, head of the Irish-American Fenian group Clan-na-Gael. Using the alias “Henry Hammond Wilson,” Clarke was apprehended with a pair of fisherman’s wading trousers filled with nitroglycerine within days of his arrival in England and
sentenced to life in prison on June 13th, 1883. After a prolonged campaign by the Irish National Amnesty Association, Clarke was released on September 25th, 1898, the last of the prisoners from the Fenian Dynamite Campaign. Almost a decade after moving to the United States, the death of IRB President John O’Leary opened up the opportunity for a new, more decisive leadership, and Clarke quickly moved into the vacuum created by the elder Fenian’s passing. He sold his Long Island farm and moved his family to Dublin; quietly positioning himself as a key resource for radical elements in the rapidly changing nationalist political scene. As a member of the IRB Supreme Council, Clarke oversaw the planning and implementation of the short-lived 1916 Easter Rising, and was executed by the British Military on May 3rd.

Originally published in the nationalist newspaper *The Irish Freedom* from 1912-13 and collected, edited, and republished (save the final entry detailing his release) as a single volume by P.S. O’Hegarty in 1922, the fourteen entries that comprise *Glimpses of an Irish Felon’s Prison Life* are rich in small biographical details, but make no attempt to organize a narrative of Clarke’s life or even his time in prison. (syntax) Instead of a unifying national story, the accounts reflect the author’s broad understanding of the Victorian technology of punishment, and the futility of attempting to impose a coherent structure on to it. Ranging from three to twelve pages in length, the texts repeat and fold back on themselves with the only chronological organization found in his decision to begin with his trial and imprisonment and end with his release some 5600 days later. As Clarke himself says: “In jotting down these recollections I have taken hold of the facts at random, without any attempt to line them up in order of time” (96). The failure of the texts to achieve
a systematic whole (and the subsequent efforts of influential readers to frame the work as a single, cohesive narrative) could be read simply as a literary disappointment and embarrassment for Clarke. However, the jagged, inconsistent literary form of Glimpses produces a range of productively unsatisfactory readings reflective of the fragmentary nature of the subject in and out of prison.

The texts reconstruct memories between fifteen and thirty years old with the aid of an assortment of letters, contraband notes, and official government reports, and lack a core of organized notes or journals that many prison narratives rely on. Hence any notion of the “failure” of the text to achieve a meaningful whole originates in the suspect assumption that one could derive a set of meanings from fifteen years of the crushing boredom of silent confinement. Describing his approach to the works, Clarke himself explains the erratic character of his recollections:

Proceeding to carry out this idea I was surprised to find that when dealing with some of the more vivid memories of those times, there was brought back to my mind a number of minor memories that had lain sleeping for many a day—some of them, indeed, had been forgotten for years. (96)

Guided by these unpredictable memories, Clarke frequently shifts from one prison to another in individual entries with no regard for the chronological structure of his incarceration. The Glimpses make no attempt to coherently narrate Clarke’s encounter with the prison as martyr, metaphor or otherwise: read together, however,

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8 Prisoners were allowed to write two to three letters a year and given no paper otherwise.
his disjointed memories written into disjointed entries recollect a subject investigating
the limits of the discursive power of the penitentiary and detailing practical means of
confronting the institution as an inmate.

Writing to his brother Arthur from Portland Island Prison, Dorsetshire, Tom
Clarke demonstrates that the representational necessity of fragments is also a
rhetorical tool. Clarke describes the powerful influence of an interiority that is
necessarily fragmented by the potential for both self-destruction and survival:
wandering deep enough into one’s thoughts and solitude to be aware of the situation,
but not far enough to have difficulty getting out. He outlines the ways in which the
little subjectivity that is to be found in prison is defined by the ability to move beyond
the self-reflexive and self-reflective traps of imprisonment and focus the mind on the
outside world—even when the outside world is the prison itself.

When a mortal man feels in all its bitterness what it is to have the delicate
curves and tender angles of his human nature rubbed up and currycombed
against the grain, then is not the time to ‘rub salt in’ from within by interior
nig-nag and self-inflicted worry . . . No. Clinch your teeth hard and never say
die.

“ Keep your thoughts off yourself all you can.

“ No mooning or brown studies.

“ Guard your self-respect (if you lost that you’d lose the backbone of your
manhood).

“ Keep your eyes wide open and don’t bang your head against the wall.
These and a few others which the deferential regard my prison pen has for
The Rules prevent me from mentioning here, are ‘The Golden Rules of Life for
a Long Sentence Prisoner,’ that might be found hung up in my cell had I any
say in the furnishing of it. (66)

The possibility for contradiction in these lessons is immediately apparent. Both the
first and fourth Golden Rule (“Clinch your teeth hard” and “Guard your self-
respect”) require a keen sense of self-determination (and, hence, knowledge of the
boundaries between the self an the institution), but the second and third rule (“Keep
your thoughts off yourself” and “No mooning”) warn against the dangers of turning
inward once these boundaries are established. The final rule he communicates
(“Keep your eyes wide open”) thus becomes a crucial mediator between the defensive
capabilities of self-awareness and the institutional momentum towards self-obsession.

As a “total institution,”9 the penitentiary punishes by simultaneously managing the
complete collapse of any boundaries of the self (constant surveillance, routinized
bodily functions and externally structured time) and the complete alienation of the
self (silence and isolation from the larger world, the prison itself, other prisoners, and
conduits of sensory input such as light, sound, books, and writing materials). In this
sealed environment the slightest alteration in any condition takes on exponential
importance offering the potential for deeper harm and the possibility of points of
resistance. Consequently, the degree to which any subject can define his/her own

9 The term Erving Goffman coins for spaces in which, on every level, the isolated inmate’s
life “is penetrated by constant sanctioning interaction from above.” Asylums: Essays on the Social
Situation of Mental Patients and Other Inmates (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1961) 38.
experience in prison becomes a function of the ability to “*Keep your eyes wide open and don’t bang your head against the wall.*”

The impossible covalence of defining and forgetting the compromised but isolated self extends beyond Clarke’s prison experience and into the authorship of the text itself. Even in these few lines, coercive palimpsests within the fragment “*The Golden Rules*” hint at the flaw of attempting to organize *The Glimpses* into a cohesive narrative: the passage in which this letter appears was written fourteen years after Clarke was released from Portland Prison, and consists of a transcription of the letter Clarke self-censored in order to avoid giving away his secrets, presumably by describing violations of both his own, unspoken rules and the prison’s rules. Instead of filling in the excised guidelines, Clarke deliberately preserves the authoritative structure of the prison — preserving a chilling sense of penal discipline by failing to fill in the missing items for his reader. His lesson would collapse if it were completed: re-working or supplementing the passage to complete *The Golden Rules* would bring a coherence to the text that would ultimately obscure the sense of fragmentation he communicates to his reader. The fractured text is more than a reflection of the impossibility of life in prison; it is also the best means by which to communicate that impossibility to the reader and potential prisoner.

Carceral praxis is Clarke’s suspension of the conflicts between these oppositional impossibilities of the self in prison in order to better prepare and inform the reader (and potential prisoner). Examining the text in relation to itself, its readers and critical context that follow, I argue the identification of this network reads *Glimpses of an Irish Felon’s Prison Life* as a formation that incorporates rather than
resolves the conflicts of the prison experience. Each of these three readings moves through the texts’ establishment of a body of knowledge, the practical application of that knowledge, and the synchronization of the theory with the practice I call carceral praxis: providing a structure for the reader/potential convict’s own resistance to the prison. Continuing where *The Golden Rules* leave off, the first reading of the texts focuses on the realities of prison life for the felon in general and the Irish political prisoner in particular and outlines Clarke’s individual practices for coming to terms with imprisonment.

Clarke hinges his description of the realities of incarceration on the prisoner’s vulnerability to one of the most basic disciplinary practices of Victorian penal discipline: the rule “Strict Silence must at all times be observed; under no circumstances must one prisoner speak to another”(3). While Clarke’s entire project is calculated to present the reader with the loose bricks of the prison building and rough edges of the prison mechanism, he makes a brief and rare concession to the absolute authority of the penal system when he discusses the consequences of the prevention of unofficial speech.

My purpose in dealing with the silent system now is to show that no matter who the man may be—educated or illiterate—no matter how hopeful his disposition or physically fit he be—no matter what strength of will power he may possess or what determination of character may be his to “see things through” in man’s fashion, it will avail him nothing—he will inevitably be driven insane if only kept long enough under that silent system. It will gradually wear him down and shatter his nervous system. (92)
Once acknowledged, Clarke concentrates his criticism on the ostensibly absolute authority that inflicts this system by focusing on the logical flaws and injustices of the “rational” mechanisms of state justice. After witnessing a guard amusing himself by beating George Barton, a feeble-minded inmate, Clarke describes the events in a letter that was immediately suppressed. The incident is replete with the vile impossibilities of prison technology: a convict who can’t understand his punishment is given work he can’t do, “afford[ing] great amusement to the officers,” forbidden from uttering any kind of verbal protest or frustration and, when he does finally speak, is so sadistically beaten he dies of his injuries shortly afterwards. The incident also reveals the role of prison censors in maintaining the illusion of reason and control by preventing public disclosure of the events. To emphasize the vicious circle of imprisonment, Clarke frequently repeats the dyad of the paired words “silence” and “suppressed” in the texts: the former succinctly sets out the violence of the debilitating isolation within the prison, and the latter the prison’s isolation from the public or any representatives of the state it enacts. But the brutal contradictions also reveal the vulnerabilities in the system: because the prison sustains itself as an entirely self-contained unit, the primary means with which to survive it are found within the structure itself.

As in the case of George Barton, Clarke frequently addresses the overall brutality of the prison mechanism, communicating the arbitrary, habitual violence and de-humanizing practices deployed to maintain the structure. Concentrating on his more focused agenda in reconstructing events, however, he pays particular attention to the ways in which his role in the Fenian urban terror campaign leads to
individualized punishment with suggestive political and social implications for the function of ‘rational’ prison technology. The Glimpses recount the atmosphere in which he and his fellow Fenians were held in isolation from the rest of the prison population: “at the time of our conviction England was panic-stricken. The English imagination got rattled and started to work overtime at high-pressure speed. There was blood on the moon and a skirmisher or Irish Fenian to be seen at every turn” (51). Fenian convicts were held as “Special Men,”\(^\text{10}\) distinctly different from “Irish political prisoners” (including Land League activists and Irish Parliamentary Party MPs), who enjoyed relative flexibility during their prison stays.\(^\text{11}\) In confining the urban dynamite campaigners, prison authorities developed a scientific system of perpetual and persistent harassing . . . Harassing morning, noon, and night, and on through the night, harassing always and at all times, harassing with bread and water punishments and other punishments, with “no sleep” torture and other tortures. (8)

While the theory of the penitentiary forcefully asserts the sameness of both offense and punishment, the “Special Men” were separated within the prison as virulent contaminants quarantined within an institution of the contaminated. This segregation was taken to such an extreme length that Clarke was confined to a cell in a wing all his own for most of the two years following the release of the other dynamitards.

\(^{10}\) It is worthwhile to note the inversion of special status a hundred years later during the Troubles, when it conferred additional rights and privileges.

\(^{11}\) Charles Stewart Parnell was given the governor’s office as his private quarters while he was held in Kilmainham Gaol.
As this regressive formulation of prison technology evolves from segregation into systematic torture in his accounts, the special treatment weighs on the mental and physical health of inmates, leading to madness, violence and relentless degradation. Able to sleep for no more than an hour at a time and kept in a state of semi-starvation, the psychological weight of imprisonment permanently damaged the health of Clarke and his fellow prisoners. Clarke describes the descent into madness of two of his fellow conspirators, Dr. John Gallagher and Dr. Charles Whitehead. The men displayed symptoms of insanity soon after their imprisonment but (with the express consent of prison officials and the Home Office) were kept in the convict prison for seven years after mental illness\textsuperscript{12} manifested itself. Although both men were confined to sanatoria for the rest of their lives after release, they consistently passed mental fitness exams administered by the prison doctor and were routinely punished for “shamming insanity.” Citing a government Blue Book report on the incidents, Clarke illustrates the complete abnegation of responsibility by the very people who were in complete control of the inmates, adding emphasis to the passage recounting that after years of madness Gallagher “\textit{managed to reduce himself to a very low state}” (19). Clarke’s uses the government’s own words to recount the Home Office’s shift of responsibility on to Dr. Gallagher and – when quoted in the text of the \textit{Glimpses} -- the authorities functionally indict themselves.

Many elements of the \textit{Glimpses} may be vulnerable to the charge of verbal exaggeration in service of a point. In this particular case, however, Clarke’s account

\textsuperscript{12} Evidenced in Gallagher’s case by the compulsive consumption of ground glass to the refrain “A pound of it will do no harm.” (19)
of the mental illness of Gallagher and Whitehead can be characterized as somewhat restrained. Observers less inclined towards sympathy with the Fenians made more sweeping and dramatic assertions. Upon Gallagher’s release, *The New York Times* ran a long piece on the doctor’s return to New York after Grover Cleveland (both the first and third president to advocate for his release) secured amnesty for the “raving maniac” convict. Not generally known for its pro-nationalist bias,¹³ the *Times*’ account depicts the harsh treatment indented on the body of the broken lunatic “practically battered into insanity” who returned thirteen years later on a berth paid for by the United States Embassy: “Three of his ribs were broken, and then carelessly set . . . There is a large indentation on the chest, and I should say that that was caused either by somebody stamping on him or by somebody striking him with a heavy, blunt instrument . . . all over his body are scars that indicate frightful treatment.”¹⁴ The *Times* followed up with a full-page expose of the treatment of Fenians in Portland Prison.¹⁵ Within the Home Office itself, a 1931 prison commission charged with evaluating the mental health of inmates in British prisons drew the rather obvious conclusion that “Fenians in penal servitude had deteriorated mentally to the point of insanity” and without publicity or fanfare urged the Home Secretary to take this into account when asking “the department to consider the advisability of having

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¹³ The original article describing the arrest of Gallagher, Clarke, Whitehead et al. Asserted “Irish conspirators, the *Times* says, must be considered criminals and not belligerents” (*New York Times*, April 20, 1883).


¹⁵ “Closing the Chapter” on dynamiters in prison, even as Clarke had two years left to serve (*New York Times, September xx, 1896.*
special medical reports at intervals on convicts under going say 10 years or more Penal Servitude (women) or 12 years or more (men).”16

In Millbank the Fenians found a prison authority designed to kill more openly. Two less-than-elegant attempts were made on the life of Clarke’s best friend John Daly. After poisoning him with belladonna failed to achieve its intended results, the Irish Amnesty Association and Irish MPs convinced the Home Secretary that losing one dose of the lethal alkaloid in his food was a tragedy, but losing two looked like carelessness and Daly was released.

While these assaults on the body and mind are clearly represented as strategies Clarke comprehends and expects even as he condemns them, he reserves his most vituperative language for the regular, humiliating invasion of the integrity of his body through “special searches.” As violent as these episodes seem, Clarke classifies the former methods as evidence of “the crude brutality of our jailers” and distinguishes these practices from “another and more refined kind that seemed inspired by a spirit of devilry and aimed at galling the finer feelings of a man’s nature and was calculated to blur and deaden the moral sense.” The prime example of this class of punishment is a bi-weekly strip search of the convict conducted “to such a disgustingly indecent extent that I must not here do more than imply the nature of it” (64). While Clarke’s indignant response makes his own opinion clear, Allen Feldman’s anthropological study of late twentieth-century Irish prisoners Formations of Violence: the Narrative

of the Body and Political Terror in Northern Ireland provides a theoretical analysis of the invasive body search.\textsuperscript{17}

The rectal mirror examination was a ceremony of defilement and the highest expression of the prison regime’s optical colon-ization of the captive body. Ostensibly the mirror examination was intended to find contraband messages, tobacco, cigarette papers, and writing implements that were being smuggled in and out of the prison, but it was, in effect the reorganizing ritual upon which new strategies of compulsory visibility and hierarchical observation revolved.

(174-75)

Acting through prison technology, the State broadened the aims of penal surveillance from isolation to invasion as the guards collapsed the integrity of the prisoner’s body extending the disciplinary boundaries of the prison and isolating him further from a sense of self separate from social authority. The “compulsory visibility” and “hierarchical observation” enacted in these “special searches” typifies the refined technology of incarceration at work, revealing the crude implements required to realize it.

The treatment of the “Special Men” was so far outside of the boundaries of the standardized, institutional, and modern façade of penal discipline that Clarke’s official response was to request routine treatment. In his report to the prison commission, Clarke argues, ”the treason-felony men were in fact put at a

\textsuperscript{17} Along with what must be one of the most profoundly disturbing puns in recent social theory.
disadvantage compared with other prisoners on account of the political nature of their offences.  

His decision to simply request standard convict treatment collapses of the supposedly mechanical, regulated precision of penal discipline into a vindictive instrument of Empire and illustrates the defiant gesture of simply enduring such conditions: “I asked no favours, I got none, and am proud of it” (102). Penal policy moved on a constant trajectory of uniformity in the administration of all prisoners and convict prisons throughout the nineteenth- and early twentieth-centuries and Clarke’s written testimonies and the failures of his “official” protests revealed the core hypocrisy in the philosophical vacuum that guided the treatment of Fenian inmates in a system designed to mete out equal punishment. Therefore, it is Clarke’s “unofficial” responses, and their intended and unintended effects that will be discussed more fully in the remainder of this chapter.

Each Glimpse into the deployment of penal discipline does not simply register the brutality of the English authorities or the forbearance of the Irish inmate; it clearly outlines the irrationality fundamental to the system itself and provides the means (however primitive) to begin to take it apart. Clarke uses time, the primary preoccupation of every prisoner, to manufacture more inconsistencies in the discursive discipline of the prison. As part of the rigorous, methodical schedule, the prisoner was left in a deliberately blank space for much of his sentence, so prison time becomes an action (as in the more recent colloquial expression “doing time”). Inverting penal technology and the supposedly scientific principles it is built on,

18 “Report of the Visitors to her Majesty’s Convict Prison at Chatham as to the Treatment of Certain Prisoners Convicted of Treason-Felony” 1890 parl papers, qtd. in McConville
Clarke uses simple but intellectually rigorous mathematics to imaginatively deconstruct the penitentiary.

Not only have I counted every brick in my cell [I have] worked out the number of bricks used in building the entire prison and figured out the total weight. Yes, many an hour have I spent turning that prison inside out and upside down, re-arranging the bricks of it into a pyramid one time or into a square, and so on, and calculating dimensions . . . placing the bricks end to end with a view to finding out what distance they would extend; that done place them side by side to see how far they would stretch by that arrangement, and after that build them up one on top of another to find out how high they would reach. (69)

Without escaping the reality of his cell, Clarke is able to shuffle and redefine his experience of the prison. Confronting the illogical, unreasonable reality of the prison with the elegant logic of arithmetic and geometry functions as more than an almost playful method of passing the time, it also reminds him that the entire technology consists of flawed men and stacked brick—fixing himself within the discourse of prison technology as well as beneath it and providing the means for more engaged resistance by replacing unproductive fancies of freedom with the grim, but negotiable reality of his own intellectual integrity in the prison.

This newfound integrity, tentative as it is, becomes the means by which Clarke reverses the polarity of penal discipline, refining a practical awareness of the
fissures in penal discipline. Allowing the convict to turn every element constructed to control, punish and humiliate against itself as a means of survival.

Experience taught us that while in our cells we never could be certain when the officer’s eye was looking in at us through the “Judas Hole” the shape and the colouring of this aperture, together with the glass on the spy hole made it impossible to tell whether or not the officer’s eye was at the hole. While patrolling the corridors the officers wore fustian shoes and moved about so stealthily that no sound betrayed him to the prisoner inside. . . however, the smell of a convict prison has an unmistakable individuality. An officer might slip along to the cell door as noiselessly as he wished, but some foreign smell from him, such as hair-oil, tobacco, blacking from his accoutrements, beer etc. would be wafted into the cell to give warning to the prisoner inside of danger.

(74-75)

Once the cell and the prison have been imaginatively dismantled and reconfigured, all of the elements of his imprisonment become potential sources of resistance, and consequently of survival. The institutional, standardized and ascetic maintenance of the penal mechanism become a way to defy the “Judas Hole” and the panoptic awareness of constant surveillance. Because the guards are unable to adapt as fully to the antiseptic environment and contaminate the air itself with odors from the outside world, they can be observed. In some ways more devious and ingenious than the structure it apes, this counter-surveillance pries open the opportunity to break the insistent bleakness of the “silent system.”
Almost immediately upon reaching his cell, Clarke devised systems of communication between the Fenian prisoners in their isolated wing of the prison -- devising an ornate system for mail and telegraph and even founding a single-issue newspaper. As the Fenians “were determined at all costs to be able to send messages,” the segregation of the dynamiters from the general population became another means for resistance provided by the prison authority. Using an ingenious arsenal of tricks and improvised tools that Clarke describes in obsessive detail, the prisoners created a sophisticated network of communication between cells and the narratives are dominated by this preoccupation. Almost immediately upon arrival in his cell, Clarke used the sewing scissors intended to produce mail bags to pry out a chunk of the lead housing of the door hinge and fashion a pencil out of it: digging for in order to dig with his pen. Using necessary paper, he exchanged his methods and began a correspondence with the other inmates that continued as long as there were Fenians housed together. Notes were “shot into the neighbouring cell, under the very nose of the officer, shot in as you would shoot a marble, without any movement of arm or body” (4). When transferred to Chatham prison, a facility with more carefully constructed doors and sealed cells, Clarke developed his own system of Morse code relying only on the memory that the system involved a series of dots and dashes. Distinguishing between the sound of a finger thump and scrape of scissors on the prison walls and pipes, he punched the alphabet onto a sheet of paper with a sewing needle, memorized it and had it passed from prisoner to prisoner “till we were able to send telegrams along through six or seven cells” (12).
When written communication was possible, this clandestine network was
depended over by ‘Postmaster General’ James Egan and adapted formal, if unrefined
conventions of publication. Adopting the editorial “we,” Egan decorated his bulletins
with amusing sketches and the prisoners collaborated to interpret their incarceration
with dark comedies at Christmas-time. In addition to pageants depicting the prison
governor as Pontius Pilate, Clarke circulated “‘Verses More Treasonable Perhaps
Than Poetic’ written to show the spirit in which we were facing the Chatham [Prison]
music,” modeling the startling adaptation of humor as a means of survival for the
long sentence prisoner.

Clarke resists the anti-intellectual prison mechanism by using his job in the
printer’s shop to gradually set and publish The Irish Felon. Under the watchful eye
not only of warders in the shop, but also his fellow inmates, who “would have been
only too glad to give me away to curry favor,” (39) Clarke spends nine days
clandestinely setting poetry, stock woodprints with wickedly funny captions, an
editorial section and ‘news’ articles into this broad sheet, prints the paper on tissue for
easy concealment in his shoes and on his person during the daily searches and
distributed the single edition, with the subheading “Printed & Published at Her
Majesty’s Convict Prison, Chatham, by Henry Hammond Wilson,” among his fellow
Fenian inmates. He smugly describes the muffled laughter that rang through the cells
after the paper circulated, boasting that “Pontius Pilate [the warden] little suspected
that while he and his assistants were striving with might and main to destroy us, body
and mind, we were indulging in such amusements and having such gibes at him” (41).
Humor became perhaps the most subversive form of resistance among Clarke and his
fellow prisoners, as they maintained the ability to laugh, mock and ridicule after years of systematic torture.

In a prison environment in which all use of language is -- when not completely forbidden -- heavily regulated, language itself is transformed into a secretive, intimate counter-discourse Clarke calls “a kind of prisonese”(47). Opportunities for verbal communication outside of the previously mentioned rule of silence were infrequent and unsatisfactory. Each of the prisoner’s two or three letters was carefully scrutinized by the prison censor, scissors in hand -- moreover most of these opportunities were taken up by correspondence with solicitors. The twice-yearly visits were conducted in a room in which the convict sat in a wire cage and warders paid careful attention to conversation, immediately stopping the meeting if any talk referred to prison affairs in an unflattering light. In reaction to this hostile environment, Clarke and his fellow “Special Men” developed prisonese as a purposefully obscure, obtuse, and illogical system of communication that afforded partial insulation for their sensitive speech, which in the rare instances it wasn’t seditious, was punishable by bread and water and/or solitary confinement. Clarke provides an instructive example of these linguistic contortions in a letter smuggled out to an unsuspecting navvy who unloaded the crates Clarke built and packed with tin wares and, in an act of sympathy, repacked the empty crates with current newspapers:

Dear Jim, I got a taste of the gold fish you presented to Jerry; ‘twas delicious.

X also got a taste and pronounced it good. He is well, and has gone in for
acrobatics over Wee’s good luck. Please attend to request in above first note.

Regards from X and DI.

The language of the letter simultaneously accomplishes several aims that would be impossible in any other syntax. Written in a code only fully understood by three people (Clarke, Daly and Egan), Clarke uses the “language” to negotiate a number of potential obstacles. He and his fellow inmate John Daly are concealed as X and DI, respectively, to avoid potential recriminations from within the penitentiary. The code assures Egan on the outside that it is a legitimate communication and not part of an elaborate, incriminating plan. Finally, the language is carefully constructed with harmless words and semi-familiar expressions so as not to alert the unknowing laborer that his regular kindness is actually seditious.

Modeling these systems for the reader, the complimentary strategies of communication and private, coded language combat what he calls the “machinery of prison:” first, the improvised mail, telegrams and newspapers gave the prisoners a small, slow means of creating a community and defying the “maddening silence” of the prison; second, and equally important, the secret, encoded language, strict rules to avoid the scrutiny of surveillance, and the ritual of secret exchange enabled the “special men” to use this community to thwart the penal system and the hostile state behind it. Clarke describes the vital role these various communiqués play in maintaining the convicts’ sanity: “Day after day all alike, no change, maddening silence, sitting hopeless, friendless, and alone, with nothing in this world to look forward to but that occasional note coming from some one or other of my comrades.” Intended as a maneuver to localize punishment and concentrate torture, the
segregation of the Fenians consequently became a means of creating a network of inmates who used their isolation to localize resistance as a means of surviving the torture. Clarke insists that all communication in a system of silence is, by definition, a discourse that should not be, and is consequently in active opposition to and within the prison.

The *Glimpses* are a collection of documents that realize these strategies only by informing others of them. In the small spaces free from the control of the penal mechanism, the tentative subjectivity within the prison (asserted by learning ways to resist and communicate) is reified as critical subjectivity by providing the tools of survival and resistance to readers. Identifying these lessons as carceral praxis—and the distance from the experience this perspective afforded Clarke—depends on some consideration of the audience of the work: namely, young nationalists who --Clarke presciently anticipates-- will be forced to confront the prison themselves.

Although redacted in later readings of the texts, the context of the initial publication of the *Glimpses* in *Irish Freedom* orients this pedagogical reading. Erratically printed between early 1912 and the summer of 1913, Clarke’s lessons for using knowledge of the prison to resist penal discipline were written during one of the most dynamic decades in Irish history. Although Clarke is careful to mention Irish Parliamentary Party leader John Redmond in a favorable light within the texts of the *Glimpses*, returned to Ireland for the third time and established the *Irish Freedom* specifically to create a bold and direct challenge to Redmonite nationalism. As World War I began to look like an inevitability, the *Irish Freedom* challenged the MP’s conciliatory nationalism and accused him of acting first in the interests of the British
Empire, rather than working for an alternative to rule from Westminster: “Mr. John Redmond’s campaign to convert England to Home Rule has become an orgy of Imperialism” (4). Clarke draws out this the contrast between parliamentary politics and republican politics when, in “XII,” he insists that his fellow prisoners were “Irish Nationalists (Imperial Nationalists were unknown in those days)” (88). For the Irish Freedom, Irish complicity with the Imperial project was even more disturbing given the gradually building (and ultimately devastating) war:

Selfishness and greed are growing rapidly under modern European civilization – men are engaged in a mad rush for power and wealth and everything that was to their fathers a sacred duty is daily thrown overboard in pursuit of what they imagine to be their interests. The recognition of a duty to the communities in which they live is in the Imperial races rapidly becoming obsolete. (88)

Republican resistance to this “mad rush for power and wealth” was found in an attempt to position Ireland in “A coalition with people like her own, India, Egypt, Poland, Persia” (5) presenting a multilateral effort with India as an alternative to the House of Commons: “There are other ways of obtaining freedom, and one of them is by joining hands with our Indian brothers, so that both they and we may be stronger to fight against English tyranny” (3). This international, coalition-based response to Empire sharply contrasted with Redmond and the IPP and would have meant treason to most moderate nationalists. Consequently, the Irish Freedom consistently sought out a younger, more radical audience that would be more receptive to the
multicultural republican approach, and was likely to end up in prison as a result of the consequent tactics.

While the *Irish Freedom* maintained a direct and deliberate appeal to children from its first issue, it was as part of an inter-generational approach to nationalist publishing. “Neara” presided over the children’s corner “*Grianna na Og*” awarding regular prizes for essays on great men who died for Ireland, and publishing children’s poetic reinterpretations of nineteenth-century nationalist poets such as James Clarence Mangan, Eva, and Speranza. The overall attention of the paper shifted towards young men with the development of the Liam Mellowes and Countess Markeivicz’s Fianna Eireann in 1912. Beginning with a large entry on semaphore in January, the paper regularly devoted a section to training materials for the Irish Boy Scouts. Clarke’s first entry of the *Glimpses* was positioned on the facing page of an instructive piece on resuscitation, representing one uniformed scout reviving another and displaying clear instructions for how to save a drowning man. The parallels between these pieces on coded signals (which could be used to signal ships) and reviving a dying person and Clarke’s own observations and memories indicate the degree to which his work was framed by the larger project of republican nationalism in the paper. Whether Clarke—who ensured the periodical was well funded by Irish-American organizations—shifted the paper towards younger readers or his works simply developed in parallel to the growing focus on practical instruction and revitalization (and I think it is likely not one or the other but both), the *Glimpses* are surrounded by advertisements for scout uniforms, additional instructional pieces and

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19 “Dawn of youth.”
a clear editorial appeal to young men and, whether through colored flags or prison toilet paper, coded communication is a key strategy for reviving the Irish Nation.

In the only moment in any of the texts in which he explains his approach to the writing of the prison accounts, Clarke is careful to identify his principle audience: “In commencing my story my intention was to select such incidents of prison experience as would be likely to interest readers of Irish Freedom especially those of the younger generation” (96). Four months after the completion of the Glimpses, Clarke describes the Rotunda mass meeting in Dublin at which the Irish Volunteers were formed: “it is worth living in Ireland these times—there is an awakening—the slow, silent plodding, and the open preaching is at last showing results, things are in full swing on the upgrade. . . the volunteer movement caught on in great style here in Dublin. Such an outpouring of young fellows I have never seen,”

Shadowed by his role in the Rising, Clarke tends to be understood as at worst a sort of mascot and most charitably a transitional figure in Irish nationalism: providing continuity between the Irish Free State and the Fenian movements of the century before. Hagiographical representations such as Louis Le Roux’s unapologetically nationalist biography of Clarke frame his endurance of prison as a prologue for the Rising and Irish journalist M.J. Mac Manus calls the book “One of the immortal pieces of Irish revolutionary literature” (157). Referring to the Fenian as “an epic unto himself,” emphasizing his long, arduous prison sentence and his prominent signature on the Irish Declaration of Independence, Free State nationalists

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21 Piaras Beaslai qtd in Le Roux (title page).
shamelessly promoted Clarke as the godfather of modern Irish nationalism and
installed *Glimpses of an Irish Felon’s Prison Life* into the register of Irish prison
narratives. P.S. O’Hegarty, the editor of *Glimpses*, deploys some of his purplest prose
to describe the physically frail IRB leader in his introduction to the book: “we all
knew that we were in the presence of one who stood as the embodiment of Fenianism,
an impregnable rock” (xiii). The constructed genealogy and corrupted etymology
linking Clarke to Ireland’s mythic past as “the embodiment of Fenianism,”
effectively replace the textual representation of Clarke’s convict body with an heroic
martyr who – through suffering in English prisons – represents Ireland itself.
Contained (and disembodied) within this nationalist metaphor, *Glimpses of an Irish
Felon’s Prison Life* is generally read as a chronicle of historical documents bearing
witness to English brutality rather than literary artifacts detailing strategies for
interpreting and confronting imprisonment.

O’Hegarty’s earnest editorial hand perpetuates this collection as a blend of
monumental self-sacrifice and crude brutality. In January, 1912, the first narrative of
*Glimpses of an Irish Felon’s Prison Life* was published as Clarke’s initial open
contribution to *Irish Freedom*, the radical nationalist newspaper he helped found with
disciple Seán Mac Diarmada two years earlier. The fourteen installments were
published on an erratic schedule and the final *Glimpse* was printed in July of 1913
and nationalist historian and one-time staff writer for *Irish Freedom* P.S. O’Hegarty

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22 The word “Fenian” is a phonetic adaptation of “Fianna Fail,” elite warriors of Ireland’s
pre-Christian past and the name was intended to establish a continuity of Gaelic guardians beginning in
a mythic (if not entirely fictional) free ancient Ireland and continuing on into nineteenth-century
American nationalism.
edited and reprinted the original collection of *Glimpses* in 1922. The book was re-issued by the National Publications Committee with the assistance of Tom’s wife Kathleen Clarke in 1970, and reprinted yet again in 1982. Based entirely on O’Hegarty’s work, these three significant collected publications of *Glimpses* all end with “Minor Memories,” Clarke’s rambling exposition on wildly disparate realities of prison life. Each of these books -- published during the Irish Civil War, the violent turn in response to the Irish Civil Rights Movement and the aftermath of the Hunger Strikes, respectively – leave Clarke perpetually imprisoned, bearing witness to and suffering from the cruelty of the British penal system.

O’Hegarty’s omission of the final episode from his collected manuscript further complicates the works (and makes my cumbersome use of the plural more necessary than pretentious). The editor’s framing of this omission further obscures Clarke’s pedagogical tendencies; in the bibliographical note the editor states Clarke’s political engagement is the reason the remembrance is incomplete:

> These chapters appeared in *Irish Freedom* in 1912-13. In the ordinary course they would have been revised and enlarged for book production—it was Tom’s intention to revise them and make a book of them—but events prevented that, as they prevented the completion of the Recollections. They are printed now exactly as they were written—mostly at slack moments in his shop at Great Britain Street (as it then was). (xix)

In fact, in July of 1913 *Irish Freedom* published the final installment of *Glimpses*, ending with Clarke triumphantly smoking a cigar in the company of two of his fellow
ex-convicts: “On we went to a friend’s house, and that night there were at least three happy Irishmen in London” (5). The editorial error could be reasonably attributed to the newspaper: both the fourth and fifth passages were mistakenly numbered “IV” in Irish Freedom (the error was later corrected in the seventh entry by skipping from “V” to “VII”); the thirteenth submission was similarly mislabeled as a second “XII;” and the fourteenth “XIII.” O’Hegarty could very well have simply corrected the numerical errors when he compiled the book and stopped when he reached the thirteenth Glimpse. However, it is difficult to understand how an employee of the monthly paper and unapologetic devotee of the venerable Fenian could forget the details of the prisoner Clarke’s release from Millbank, vividly described by the author Clarke. Although there is a five-month gap between the January 1913 “XII” and the June, 1913 repetition of the title “XII,” the final (missing) chapter entitled “XIII” is in the very next issue of Irish Freedom, dated July 1913. Whoever “prevented the completion of the Recollections,” Glimpses remains incomplete in later republications.  

23 Even as he left the work unfinished, O’Hegarty also took a decisive editorial hand in manufacturing the narratives as a coherent whole. He refers to the passages as ‘chapters’ and organizes their individual content by imposing a title on each submission, originally simply published under the heading “Glimpses of an Irish Felon’s Prison Life” followed by a Roman numeral. Titles like “Early Prison Thoughts” and “A Medley” testify to the Sisyphean task of attempting to render the fragments into a whole. O’Hegarty denies both his obvious and subtle tinkering with

23 Possibly widening the scope of the investigation to include his octogenarian wife former Lord Mayor of Dublin Kathleen Clarke, drifting the conspiracy theorist of minutiae following this line of inquiry dangerously close to absurdity.
source text in the bibliographic note, insisting the narratives “are printed now exactly as they were written.” Hence, despite his addition of questionable summarizing titles and elimination of the final section, the source text and -- eventually -- the broader nationalist narratives that envelope it are perpetuated in subsequent republications.

While one can only speculate as to how and/or why O’Hegarty left the book without an ending,\textsuperscript{24} the implications for interpretations of the text are significant. Left in prison, Clarke is more easily integrated into the story line of martyrdom and self-sacrifice that dominates Irish cultural nationalism. The continuity between Clarke’s punishment in prison and his execution at Kilmainham Gaol in 1916 leaves his martyrdom unpunctuated by his eighteen years outside of the penitentiary. In each publication, this version of Clarke’s personal history combines more readily with a larger twentieth-century nationalist apprehension of Irish history as ‘unfinished business’ – with the definition of both the business and the terms of its completion left open to interpretation. The depiction of the felon Clarke “bird alone” in prison after all of his fellow dynamiters are freed allows the work greater political flexibility than the newly liberated Clarke lighting a match on his shoe and contentedly puffing away on a cigar. The unconcluded work also demands less of the author: in the bibliographic note, O’Hegarty emphasizes the indeterminate urgency of the book through the passive voice—“events prevented” an ending. Unconcluded, the work is less easily read as a theoretical framework and strategic survival handbook for

\textsuperscript{24} As a public intellectual, O’Hegarty assumed an ambivalent, but ultimately (by virtue of his loyalty to Michael Collins) pro-treaty position during the bloody and ambiguous Civil War. Whether manifesting this ambivalence, committing an editorial error, or managing the public’s memory of the Fenian prisoner by heading off anti-treaty perspectives of Clarke (such as the feminist-nationalist Kathleen Clarke),\textsuperscript{24}
nationalism: instead it remains an incomplete story, fragmented by the mythic-heroic
destiny Clarke realizes in the Rising. When the incomplete 1912-13 essays are
presciently conflated with the horizon of Easter Monday, 1916, the pedagogical
elements of Clarke’s literary efforts are folded into sacrificial, simplistic metaphors.

Emphasizing Clarke’s self-effacing demeanor, O’Hegarty also lowers
expectations for the ex-convict as an author: framing Glimpses as a scholarly work of
lasting literary significance, he makes the backhanded observation that Clarke “never
looked upon himself as an intellectual.” Instead, he regarded himself as “a soldier of
the Irish republic, to whom prison and suffering were the day’s work: he nerved
himself against prison and bore it, largely because of his proud consciousness of the
cause he stood for” (xiv-xv). While certain readings of the text certainly bear this
interpretation, O’Hegarty’s posthumous ventriloquization of Clarke (who both began
and guided three substantial nationalist newspapers) refusing to identify himself as an
intellectual shrinks expectations for the critical content of the works. Furthermore,
his assertion that “prison and suffering were the days work” emphasizes the martyred
Clarke above the more self-aware theoretically critical author of the Glimpses who, it
should be remembered, was very much alive when he actually wrote the recollections.
At best, O’Hegarty refuses the distinction between republican soldier and intellectual;
at worst, he sells the writer short in his own essays, favoring of a more pliant,
militarized character. Whatever the editorial frame suggests, the strategies in both the
content and composition of the text itself detail the development of a nationalist
subjectivity in prison as an entirely intellectual enterprise.
Manipulating the ending and repositioning the author outside of the original context of the writing itself, P. S. O’Hegarty’s editorial management of the bound volume of Glimpses is indicative of an early twentieth-century nationalist scholarship in which the prison technology’s isolation of the inmate is subsumed into a broad, metaphorical narrative that side steps one of the fundamental questions Glimpses attempts to answer for readers: namely, how does one confront the power of the state as manifested in the penitentiary?

While productive, well-developed critiques of this ‘official’ nationalist teleology have emerged from many perspectives in academic discourse, the frequent references and sporadic critical readings leave the narrative core of propagandized martyrdom intact. Although no longer prophetic and triumphalist, the nationalist metaphor of the suffering, isolated prisoner remains alive -- albeit on life support -- due in no small part to the efforts of revisionist focus on the prison narrative’s role as propaganda. While these revisionist readings create an effective body of evidence for critiques of nationalism, they sidestep the complexities of the works themselves.

Patrick Brannigan discusses Glimpses as part of a canon of prison narratives in which “suffering and death are symbolic rituals through which the national cause will be served and won . . . endurance and martyrdom are as essential to revolution as arms and men.”25 Brannigan’s specifically revisionist perspective adapts and compounds heroic-nationalist readings of the text into decontextualized propaganda, maintaining the historical orthodoxy of sacrificial nationalism as leverage for an ideologically

inflected reading of nationalism. By retaining an unproblematic understanding of prison narratives as ineffectual propaganda for sacrifice, Brannigan ventriloquizes the very nationalist writers he seeks to critique: counting Clarke’s *Glimpses* among nationalist texts in which

Literary prisons, whether the subject of fictional, poetic or autobiographical writings, function largely in metaphorical economies in which confinement and punishment inevitably have corporeal manifestations but have more pertinent symbolic ends. (206)

While Clarke’s work has been absorbed into this literary metanarrative of martyrdom and mortifying, redemptive spiritual testing, when situated in respect to his actual prison experiences and the context in which they are realized, the texts of *Glimpses* themselves clearly reject such notions in both form and content. The “metaphorical” economics of suffering undoubtedly frame the ways in which the bound volume was and is read, the works are a deliberate instruction manual for how to avoid suffering in prison. Even as the text clearly sets the Irish prisoner apart in the British prison, the penal technology Clarke dissected and resists is not a means to “more pertinent symbolic ends.” His discussion of the penitentiary serves as both the means by which this taciturn and withdrawn man was able to reify fifteen years of imprisonment and the ends themselves, as his articulation self-consciously instructs the reader on how to survive and avoid martyrdom. The literal prison manufactured Clarke’s ‘corporeal’ reality for more than fifteen years, and he negotiates this experience by crafting strategies for the nationalist in prison, not by emphasizing his own suffering in prison.
and certainly not by projecting his experiences as a metaphor for Ireland brutalized and tortured by the British Empire.

Brannigan fits Clarke’s *Glimpses* into a pantheon of prison propaganda writing including John Mitchel, John Devoy, Jeremiah O’Donovan-Rossa, Michael Davitt and (resurrected circa 1898) Wolfe Tone — a coterie of nationalist authors who, in this selective reading framed perhaps by more recent events, emphasize forbearance as a means of justifying violence:

Failure and indeed the endurance of deprivation and confinement was, by the late nineteenth century, a necessary component in the construction of a sacred myth of heroic struggle, which required its register of executions, deportations, penal colonists and prisoners in order to sanction the violence of the present. (207)

As all of these texts are autobiographical accounts, it seems somewhat brash to privilege a reading of these narratives as “sacred myths” solely based on “requirements” and “components” rather than understanding these conventions of genre as one of many possible elements of first person accounts of prison experiences. Instead of reflecting on the subtleties of prison literature as a genre, Brannigan’s fixation on suffering promotes these geographically, politically and historically diverse texts as a totalized canon of prison literature united by a common agenda manufactured after-the-fact.

Limited by the tropes of blood-sacrifice and futility, the wide variety of diverse and divergent nationalist movements that make up nineteenth- and early
twentieth-century Irish nationalism are relegated to the ahistorical, abstract aestheticism R.F. Foster calls “literary Fenianism.” There is no doubt that nineteenth- and early twentieth-century nationalists largely understood the prisoner as a martyr transformed into what Patrick Pearse called “burning symbols” for national unity. From the revisionist perspective, the cultural use of sacrifice and endurance provides evidence of a few minor political radicals, isolated from the progressive vectors of history, repeating instead a narrative of senseless tribal violence and inevitable failure. Unmooring these texts from their particularities, contradictions and—most importantly—cultural contexts (i.e. the prison itself, first and foremost) and re-casting them as lock-step nationalist propaganda sanctioning violence leaves little room for the implications of the more complex and politicized literary elements of the works. If textual authority is located solely in a one-hundred-year-old nationalist master narrative, contemporary readers are stuck in the same endless loop as Clarke in O’Hegarty’s Glimpses: rehearsing the same readings over and over again without an ending. The works of Clarke, Mitchel and Davitt become bland franchises of propaganda, shopping a monotone experience of incarceration as centering the inquiry on the imagined rather than the intended audience side steps the complicated and problematic implications of the technology of the penitentiary.

In form and content, Clarke’s Glimpses are an educational manual, preparing the reader to make his way in the prison by modeling the knowledge and practices required to survive the penal mechanism. Perhaps the best-known student of

Glimpses of an Irish Felon’s Prison Life in this capacity is Brendan Behan, who marks each initiation into the experience of the Irish republican prisoner in Borstal Boy with references to Clarke. Borstal Boy explicitly traces Behan’s own account through his memories of Clarke’s experience, and implicitly interprets his own defiant stance as a continuation of Clarke’s accounts. Behan’s thoughts turn to Clarke as he is charged in the dock and the Glimpses are never far from his mind thereafter. Clarke’s texts reinforce Behan’s insistence on defining his imprisonment as political and forearm the young Behan to exert some measure of control over elements of his imprisonment. Describing his first body search, Behan establishes distance from the violation by invoking the reference in Glimpses:

I had heard of this personal search in Fenian times, in a book by Tom Clarke, when he got fifteen years for the bombing campaign of the eighties, but I did not know before what it meant. It was a normal part of prison routine and the screw did it with the usual appearance of British official detachment. (48)

Clarke’s record of the experience becomes both a means of processing the experience as “normal” and apprehending the hypocrisy of the intimate violation, perpetrated with the “appearance of British official detachment.” Using Clarke’s own account of the unhelpful prison priest as a guide, Behan deals with the prison chaplain by reminding himself of the despondence of Clarke’s priest when he reported the suicidal insanity of his fellow Fenians during confession: “I wasn’t surprised. Tom Clarke saw Dr. Gallagher in Portland with his lips a mess of raw meat, streaming blood where he had gone mad and started to chew glass. He told the priest and the
priest told him to mind his own business” (68-9). Interrogated by his own version of Clarke’s indifferent priest, Behan recalls Clarke again: “Grip tight and hold on, said Tom Clarke. I’d do my best. Clarke held on for fifteen years, and lived to fight the bastards on more equal terms in Easter Week” (69). Paraphrasing the Golden Rule “Clinch your teeth hard and never say die,” Behan’s invocation of Clarke presents clear evidence for the pedagogical structure of the Glimpses -- while he does not have rote memory of the text, the jagged fragment of the rule has lodged in his mind and is ready for use as the sixteen-year-old Borstal inmate encounters English penal discipline for the first time. Clarke’s animated presence in Borstal Boy provides evidence that contradicts the martyr narrative: Behan uses the Clarke’s interpretive glimpses to provide context, structure and hope within the textual interpretation of his own imprisonment.

The importance of Clarke’s role in the Rising is a matter for prolonged critical debate, but I think as a prime mover in the Irish Republican Brotherhood, and the executive offering most of the orders from the G.P.O. in April of 1916, the clear desire for a coherent, multivalent nationalist movement Clarke returns to again and again in Glimpses is created--arguably for the first time. Concluding Discipline & Punish: The Birth of the Prison Michel Foucault discussed the way in which the carceral moves out from the various apparati for punishment in a society and becomes a defining factor in the society itself; Clarke’s work provides a useful supplement to Foucault as the convict shifts his own resistant subjectivity out into the public to countermand the carceral. In the model established by Glimpses the penitentiary becomes a site of resistance not just to authoritarian surveillance, but also to the
imperial society using these technologies to sustain itself. Shifting Foucault’s power/subject relationship, Clarke refuses the role of ‘patient’ or ‘convict’—and the martyr’s role inherent in such positions—and instead develops a sophisticated model for subjectivity within the penitentiary—ultimately applies this model to political movements outside of the convict prison.
Walter Paget’s *Birth of the Republic* National Museum of Ireland, Dublin

(Fig. 1)

From Left to Right: Patrick Pearse, Tom Clarke and Willie Pearse (fig. 2)
CHAPTER 5:
CONCLUSION

This study sets up a contrast between Irish prisoners and the penitentiary, an expansive social technology that attempted to standardize human experience. It suggests that, upon release, the anomalies of each writer’s prison time viewed against an ostensibly uniform system become focal points for an attempt to establish the identity removed by this technology.

There are several possible next steps for further literary critiques of Irish prison writing. The critical formula of examining prison texts as a means of reconstructing subjectivity offers many possibilities for further study, including a great many additional theoretical perspectives that could productively complicate the readings offered here. A wider application of critical perspectives would bolster the argument that the penitentiary was a solid and convincing step for modernity, reflecting the idealism, confidence, obstinacy, and calculated ignorance of a technology committed to the recreation of a person through surveillance and control. With many inherent similarities to the social policy and cultural aspects of British imperialism, the political system was able to generate enough evidence and treasure to support the radically new notion that a human’s role in society could be shattered and recast in prison.

Postcolonial interpretations of Irish prison writing afford an opportunity to
analyze these two major elements of the Victorian world — modernity and the penitentiary— side by side. Penal mechanisms additionally suggest an important role for the discussion of a more comprehensive philosophical notion of subjectivity incorporating the de-centered subject in postmodern criticism. Gender studies discourse also offers significant critical opportunities. Because they are segregated by sex, the technologies of imprisonment offer a wealth of options for the study of masculinity and femininity in artificially segregated environments. Finally, the class-based elements of prison life and prison writing are only roughly sketched in this project and will offer a great deal to future critiques of the three texts discussed here and prison writing in general.

Expanding the number of texts is perhaps the most urgent task. Each of the criteria that narrowed the scope of this dissertation could be discarded to increase the number of available texts, but there are several texts that beg inclusion with the slight adjustment of incorporating prison experiences in Ireland to the imprisonments in England described here. The most famous of these would include: Wilfrid Scawen Blunt’s The Land War in Ireland: Being a Personal Narrative of Events (1912); John Devoy’s Recollections of an Irish Rebel (1929); John O’Leary’s Recollections of Fenians and Fenianism (1896); Jeremiah O’Donovan Rossa’s Six Years in English Prisons (1874) and Rossa’s Recollections, 1838–1898 (1898).

Other texts worthy of consideration include published responses to pre-standardized jails, prison hulks and transportation. Critical readings are urgently necessary for Young Irelanders’ writing such as: The Memoirs of General Thomas Francis Meagher (1892); Charles Gavan Duffy’s Young Ireland: a Fragment of Irish
History, 1840–1845, (1896); William Smith O’Brien’s Principles of Government; or, Meditations in Exile (1856); and – what is widely considered the most famous nineteenth-century work of Irish prison literature of all – John Mitchel’s Jail Journal (1854).

A historicized reading of Jail Journal could pair Mitchel's indeterminate nationalism with the inarticulate messages inscribed on the Young Irelander by a wide range of carceral technologies. Under the guidance of Carlyle’s philosophy, the Journal prophesizes a classical republic based on classical concepts of race and class. One could argue that the fragmented depiction of republican nationalism in the form and content of the narrative is directly connected to the inconsistent and illogical treatment Mitchel while serving his sentence. It is also well-worth developing a reading of the Jail Journal as a failure to assert a productive model for resistance to the range of penal institutions that held the author: including prison, the hulk system, and transportation.

Emphasizing the importance of publication as a means of reasserting one’s sense of self in a public context, this project is limited to works written for publication and successfully published. There are, however, numerous possibilities in the private letters, memoirs and journals of former felons. Letters about prison offer intimate details and give examples of the effects of censorship and observation. Developing criticism in this direction would add important works such as the correspondence of Daniel O'Connell¹ and – what is actually the most famous work of


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nineteenth-century Irish prison literature of all – Oscar Wilde’s “De Profundis.”

Ex-prisoner Charles Kickham’s *Knocknagow, or the Homes of Tipperary* (1879) also merits substantial critical study. Along with James A. Murphy’s *Convict No. 25* (1883), this massively popular novel further complicates my critical assessment, adding the possibility of reestablishing subjectivity through fictional responses to incarceration. Even the necessity of an actual prison experience upon which the author can base his/her text should be thoroughly tested by incorporating texts that explore the prison, but are not rooted in the prison experience. Reading such works in their political context could help redefine the notion of literary Fenianism, a term that is often used as a device for understanding nineteenth-century nationalism and frequently qualified in revisionist texts by the adjectives ‘just’ or ‘mere.’ The use of ‘literary’ as a modification suggests a number of assumptions, first among them that the production of cultural material mitigates the politics of nineteenth-century Irish republicanism while suggesting that the literature is facile propaganda. Read through and extended beyond the experience of the prison, the popular nationalist novels of the late nineteenth century offer interpretations which extend the definition of the term and highlight the cultural dimension of late-nineteenth-century nationalism and republicanism.

These texts exist in tandem with contemporary British literary references to Fenians. The Irish terrorist features in the work of several influential authors: in addition to the more submerged references in *Jekyll and Hyde*, Robert Louis Stevenson collaborated with his wife on *More New Arabian Nights: The Dynamiter*, a
collection of stories loosely woven together by a Fenian dynamite campaign. The Fenian threat also lurks in James Conrad’s *The Secret Agent*, Anthony Trollope’s *The Landleaguers* and Arthur Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes mysteries “The Valley of Fear” and “His Last Bow.” A study of the literary representations of Irish nationalism connected to literary representations by Irish nationalists would offer useful readings of both.

The Victorian era was the age of the prison. The British Empire made huge expenditures on penitentiaries at home and abroad and the wall-to-wall management of the experience within the cell offers a commentary on the technology, religion and politics of the era. Every macro element of late nineteenth-century British social thought contributed to the rapid growth of confinement as a punishment and the construction of the convict prison as the means of delivering it. However, there are only a few major unofficial records available beyond Henry Mayhew’s *The Criminal Prisons of London, and Scenes of Prison Life* and a few memoirs of police officers. Because they could get their work into print (mostly by virtue of their nationalism), Irish prison literature provides an important counter-narrative to the history of the British prison. As liminal prisoners who insist they are not criminals but are treated as such, these authors were confined according to one set of rules but attempted to live according to another. Descriptions of the careful and, more often than not, unsuccessful negotiation between the two give a sense of both the authority of the prison and the institution’s limits. This expanded definition of Irish prison literature presents the opportunity for a deeper historical understanding of the neglected cultural aspects and individual experience of the British prison.
A coherent genre of Irish prison literature begins in the nineteenth century, but many successful examples of this work can also be found in the next century. The stage directions at the beginning of Brendan Behan’s *The Quare Fellow* read “Above the stage in large Victorian letters is the word SILENCE” and his garrulous body of work can be understood as a defiant gesture against this prison admonition. Each of the tremendous changes in twentieth-century Ireland brings with it a contribution to the body of prison writing. The Easter Rising gives rise to the prison camp at Frongoch, institutions which as what Michael Collins called “a university for republicans” produced works by Darrell Figgis and W. J. Brennan-Whitmore. Prisoners such as Terence MacSwiney and Thomas Ashe came to prominence during and after the Irish War of Independence and Ernie O’Malley, Frank O’Connor and Peadar O’Donnell emerged after the Civil War. There is also a significant opportunity to expand my research into Irish language sources, for example in Máirtín Ó Cathain’s stories composed after his internment in republican prison camps during World War Two. More recently, Gerry Adams, Bobby Sands, and Danny Morrison all wrote from and about prison after the reemergence of the troubles fifty years later.

One of the most important tasks remaining is incorporating the texts of women who were imprisoned. Several prominent figures come to mind immediately: Kathleen Clarke, Maud Gonne, Con. Marciewicz, the republican prisoners of Armagh, and Bernadette Devlin. In addition to the theoretical reframing necessary to include gender in the study of prison writing, there is a significant amount of research to be done. For most of this period, formerly incarcerated women’s assumption of
primary public leadership roles is rare and their writing is consequently more difficult to find.

Finally, the British education policy has allowed for the creation of doctoral dissertations by republican prisoners, an iteration of prison writing that challenges the boundaries of academic production. Patrick Magee produced *Gangsters or Guerillas? Representations of Irish Republicans in” Troubles Fiction”* (2001) and Laurence McKeown published *Out of Time* (2001), a book based on his doctoral dissertation *Unrepentant Fenian Bastards*. As the most recent examples of Irish republican prison writings, these works beg a number of questions on the nature of intellectual production. Is there a meaningful distinction between academic writing and scholarly propaganda? Given the close association between the experiences of the writers and the content of their work, should the texts be read as autobiography rather than or in addition to vetted or ‘official’ research? If one assumes that all scholarly writing and all prison writing is ideological to some degree, is it useful to distinguish some writing as more ideological than others?

This project offers an opportunity to investigate the complicated category of the “political prisoner” through literary, ethical, political and historical frameworks. What makes a political prisoner? What kind of treatment follows this designation? How has the definition changed over time? How has it been applied to Irish prisoners since its inception? Could the term reasonably incorporate a prisoner such as Oscar Wilde, who was unjustly prosecuted for fulfilling his erotic desire for men, but also guilty of vile acts of pederasty?
There is also the possibility of extending the study into the designations known in republican circles as “O.D.C’s” (Ordinary Decent Criminals). Criminals without explicitly political motives bring a great deal to the examination of the technology of the penitentiary, and the archival work required to research these texts would likely recover many previously neglected texts. Regrettably, the combination of a population made up of 10-14% “New Irish” people and a coming economic downturn opens up possibilities for a new form of Irish prison writing.


-- v. 1. Pamphlets, Speeches and Articles, 1868-1888.

-- v. 2. Pamphlets, Speeches and Articles, 1889-1906.

-- v. 3. Leaves from a Prison Diary, or, Lectures to a 'Solitary' Audience.


-- v. 5. Life and Progress in Australasia.

-- v. 6. The Boer Fight for Freedom.

-- v. 7. Within the Pale: the True Story of Anti-Semitic Persecutions in Russia.

-- v. 8. The Fall of Feudalism in Ireland, or, the Story of the Land League Revolution.


