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Captive Meditation

THE PRISON & THE AMERICAN IMAGINATION

Caleb Smith
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NATHAN SCHNEIDER

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Despite the intervening centuries, si-

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more and more the norm, combined with
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He draws on writers more likely to be found
in freshman lit courses than gone up the
river. Emily Dickinson’s penitentiary was
her home—“Since Myself—assault Me—/ How have I peace”—and Herman Melville
traced the failure of the reformists’ good
intentions through Bartleby the scrivener,
who finally dies in The Tombs, a real New
York City prison designed by the same man
who designed Eastern State. Henry David
Thoreau, while spending a night in jail for
refusing to pay taxes, discovered transcen-
dental freedom there. His friend Ralph
Waldo Emerson echoed the reformers’ in-

stincts in his dream of a “protestant monas-
ty,” combining the austerity of medieval
abbeys with the solitude of the American
frontier. Treating prison both as edifice and
metaphor, Smith’s book is much more than
yet another complaint and call for reform.

On the dustjacket, British critic Terry
Eagleton praises its “refusal to rely slavishly
on [Michel] Foucault,” whose Discipline
and Punish (1975) is still the defining text
on incarceration for literary types. Fou-
cault, taking Jeremy Bentham’s Panopticon
for his exemplar, emphasized perpetual ob-
servation as the modern prison’s defining
trait. Across the pond, Smith uses Eastern
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State as his model, revealing instead the

paradoxical logic of American democracy
as “a society of isolated individuals.” In so
doing, though, he affirms Foucault’s key
insight that in the macabre extremes of the
prison can be found a schematic for how

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Solitude can be a vehicle for liberation, or it can tear a person apart. To say
nothing of sagely hermits—the American cult of reclusive individualism
delivers at once intrepid pioneers and desperate housewives, mountaintop transcen-
dentalists and deranged unabombers. As Yale English professor Caleb Smith haunt-
ingly reveals in The Prison & the American Imagination, nowhere is this ambivalence
better and more brutally expressed than in our penal institutions.

At least since the opening of Philadelphia’s Eastern State Penitentiary in 1829,
the corrections business in this country has carried on a love affair with isolation. The
Quaker capital’s flagship “penitentiary” was suffused with the theology of the Inner
Light. Inmates lived in solitary cells lit by a single skylight—the “eye of God”—where
they ate, slept, shat, worked at handicrafts, and waited. In so doing, the intention was,
a man would drift into reveries of meditation, coming face to face with himself and
the obedient divine spark within. The prison, said one of its founding documents, will
“teach him how to think.” Reformist ambitions also took on the transformative lan-
guage of born-again evangelicalism. Benjamin Rush, a signer of the Declaration of
Independence, had imagined that upon an ex-convict’s release people would proclaim,
“This brother was lost, and is found—was dead and is alive.”

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society imagines itself.

The tradition of the prison reformers rests on an intoxication with the power that law invests in the prison, making it the unlimited laboratory of their otherwise untestable ideals: I, a busy homme d’affaires, cannot be bothered to seek enlightenment (or my law-abiding shows that I have done so already), but you, poor ward of our benevolent state, have the opportunity and obligation to do so full-time.

Yet the meaning received is not the meaning of such intentions. Eastern State’s inmates experienced darkness, not Light; in the name of humaneness, they must leave their humanity at the gates. What rebirth they discover, as in the case of Thoreau—or Malcom X—is a soul utterly alien to the system that imprisoned its body.

Smith’s analysis turns to this country’s habitual vices, with the prison as a mirror. Through William Faulkner, he shows us the South’s prison farms, where black inmates found themselves returned to barely disguised slavery. Acoma Pueblo poet Simon Ortiz encounters the echoes of American empire in a Colorado military asylum. In captivity, the prisoner can’t see himself as a person anymore, much less a criminal. He goes in as an offender but becomes a victim.

Buddhism arrived relatively late to the prison business, having been largely absent in the antebellum heyday of the reformers. Lacking Jesus’ reminder to Christians that visiting a prisoner amounts to visiting himself, no such precise injunction directs Buddhists to comfort the incarcerated.

Still—and this is not a topic treated by Smith—American Buddhism has found its way into prisons. In the last several decades, more and more groups have become involved in bringing instruction and support to inmates. Fleet Maull founded the Prison Dharma Network in 1989 while serving fourteen years behind bars himself, during which he depended intensely on meditation. A few years before that, the Mountains and Rivers Order established the National Buddhist Prison Sangha in response to requests they received from inmates in New York.

Those engaged in this work are careful not to romanticize the prison’s potential for spiritual transformation, as Smith’s early reformers did. “There is a big difference between when one voluntarily enters quiet and solitude and when one is forced into it under the threat of violence,” Maull told me. “For most prisoners, it’s a soul-destroying experience.” At the least, he hopes that what he brings to inmates will help them survive their “toxic” environment.

Shugen Sensei [Geoffrey Shugen Arnold, Sensei of the Mountain and Rivers Order], who directs the NBPS, points out that solitary practice was traditionally undertaken only by those who had spent many years with a teacher and a community. “It needs to come from a place of maturity,” he says, “and it needs to be voluntary.”

Still, Maull does believe that a disciplined meditation practice in prison can be, as it was for him, “a source of transformation.” And Noah Levine, a tattoo-covered teacher in Maull’s network who has worked with juvenile and adult prisoners, says, “There are two choices. Prison can be hell, or it can be a monastery.” However soberly, the penitentiary’s founding motifs continue to hold some currency among contemporary Buddhists. It is fitting that they should: however deeply perverted by violence and excess, Caleb Smith reminds us, the prison in America is an institution that rests on the conviction that spiritual insight comes from within.

Before picking it up, be sure not to mistake The Prison and the American Imagination for something it isn’t. It’s not a history, for the sequence is scattershot. Inviting too much of the reader’s patience to be a polemic, neither is it a manual with practicalities on offer. It is a study, a—to use a different meaning of the word—meditation. Indeed, the book’s impracticality is itself a virtue: the problem of American prison reformers has been trying to do too much, when simply imprisoning less may have been in order—thus Smith’s cryptic, concluding prophecy that the prison “must be sacrificed in order to be redeemed.”

During a recent reading in New York City, Smith was accused by an audience member of hiding behind the ivory tower rather than “actually doing something” about prisons. He replied, “I think I’ll just absorb the insult.” But he does much more than that. Imagination, his book proffers, is precisely what we need: not one that conjures yet another grotesque discipline to impose on those at the public’s mercy, but one that can grant even offenders the dignity due to all human beings.

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