

## Prison Poetry as a Means of Self-extension

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### Abstract:

As Shelley described poets as the "unacknowledged legislators of the world", totalitarian authorities and oppressive governments have tended, throughout the centuries, to shut their mouths and put them in jail or sentence them to death due to their steadfast right word which oppose their policies and call for human rights. Most poets, for the most part, have not subdued to tyrants and their writings have been for mankind in general that you, sometimes, might not identify the poet's nationality. The current pages are intended to give examples of imprisoned and unimprisoned poets accompanied by their poems which demonstrate their self-extension in their societies in particular, and other societies in general, and to what extent they achieved their goal in arousing people's feelings to interact with them. In addition, it shows up the results of the interplay towards the poet as an individual of this or that society resulting from innocent voices devoid of disgrace and betrayal. Consequently, what creeps in society are but love, friendship and sympathy as the main consequences of that slumberous tenderness gushing out of the poet's paternal and responsible heart.

**Key words:** (self-extension, legislators, jail, love, friendship, interplay).

### Introduction).

Poetry is the culmination of culture. Culture that is quietly mingled with knowledge on all levels. The kind of tenderness the poet has and the intimate relationship he shares with other individuals regardless of all differences creates, albeit he is in utter solitude in prison, to an arresting degree, a passage dense with throngs of emotions and sensations to people outside incarceration. That invincible and unchangeable effect formulates an indescribable hegemony over both individual and

social levels, inside and outside. However, such a motivation to gratify the poet's personal desire must be analyzed as the manifestation of truth and loyalty of his/ her latent content of boiling passions towards the whole situation.

As other ways do to obtain catharsis and escape, poetry plays a great part in evading critical and suffocating situations especially incarceration and jail. Reading and writing have matchless powers in enabling prisoners to roam in the sky of imagination or, so to speak, to use imagination as a vehicle to wander in the actual world outside the four walls of the jail and the darkness of desperation. The main outstanding feature required into these places to produce effective poetry is a lofty sensibility which does not go in line with the harshness of the domineering atmosphere of the prison. But what helps the two come to terms with each other and eliminate the obstacles and make it possible for a creative environment is the salubrious purpose. So, to write a poem you must have sufficient experience and active mind in order to escape the place or the atmosphere where you are locked up and roam outside into the wide and free world. When a locked poet, in particular, self- expands he is essentially widening the scope of his understanding of who he is, what he is able to do, as well as how he views life irrespective of the reason which pushed him to be in such a place and condition.

Through the specifications of the prison nature as they signify something concerning conditions of living, states of the particular existence, the poet tries his best to dig deep into the reality of others through an "unflinching acquaintance with the harsh facts of most men's situation which still confirms rather than denies its validity" (Buckley, 42). When doing that, the main prospect achieved is the range of frankness, perseverance, human sympathies and sensitivity which create, in himself, a balance to the grim recognition of deprivation, injustice, confusion on moral, religious, social levels. Interest intended to acquire additional ability requires the best knowledge on the part of the owner to do better. Self- extension from behind the bars is achieved when the wounded beings empathize with the detained and understand how to relieve their pains. Such an interplay

accomplishes the goal which springs from empathy and gives weight as well as emotional credibility on both personal and communal levels.

The gravity marked in the speaker's voice describes the good conduct of the give and take experience which is meant to decide the unforeseen energy the poet began with to the proceeding mutual interplay. It comes from the pleasure poetry provides to the audience, a better mood than ever, and the new ideas provoked after reading. Ioan Davies adds to this point that "prison might provide a discipline which is conducive to clear thinking" (Mourad, 44) originating from the way by which the confined poet interprets his personal experience of affliction and injustice . The realm of that goal depends on the verbal context the poet finds out or invents in order to throw two birds with one stone. The way he describes himself is considered the vehicle with which he fuses his sufferings with the others' outside so that they achieve coexistence with each other extrinsically and intrinsically. As a result of this imaginative tactic mixed with the vivid experience of the poet the poem obtains coherence and consciousness through the emotional exploration it registers and the dynamic force of its presence. So, self- extension in the end of the interplay stands for all facets of the poet's creative imagination and its continuity as long as there is interaction between the two physically- separated beings- the audience and the poet.

Finally, prison poetry is not inclusive to poets behind the bars who sometimes suffer different kinds of restriction on physical, psychological and even intellectual levels. There are poets who surpassed time and place to talk on behalf of other people without referring to them as "he" or "they". They and the prisoners became part and parcel using "I", "we", "me", and "us" when talking about torment and suffering. Poets, unlike other prisoners who sometimes consider themselves a scum of society due to degrading crimes which sent them to confinement and made them detached from the world outside, most of the time take up self- deprecation to stress upon their role in social revivals. They do not consider themselves from a complete observation of their hierarchy in the status of society besides the value that people outside attach to them. They are self- esteemed as

long as they regard prison as a cage for the body rather than the intellect and imagination in addition to the deed at whose backdrop they were sent to prison. Therefore, we can deduce that poets of the kind we are talking about are put in the camp of distinguished men who discern the future and the fate of their people to some extent beforehand depending on the reserve they have in their minds. In such a case, they depend on some bases in the measurement of certain incidents. They start from their awareness of what happens and then decide on the kind of interference mixed with the extent of acceptance and extent of reaction which depends on anticipation. After the poet digests the result to which his project can get he embarks carrying out because he sees the audience relying on his identification with the very minutes of his people's cases. In other words, the poet reconciles between awareness and anticipation to reach the highest point of responsibility to obtain the last point- distinction. Eventually, the poet conceals his name and surname to be the total surrogate and mouthpiece of the character of his poem.

### **Visualized imprisonment**

It can be concluded from all verses of imprisoned poets that cells restrict only bodies rather than minds. Minds remain free wandering and roaming, out of the wretched confinement, different destinations in order to avoid the agonies of the jail and shedding light on the practices done in those forgotten places. From that special place the poet tries his best, goes hammer and tongs, in order to make harmony between inspiration and wording of the poem in a way going in line and in proportion with the environment intended to be dealt with. In other words, what engages the mind of the poet is how to reconcile between the invitation and the inspiration for a better way of expression and "to what extent the will should do the work of the imagination" (O'Driscoll, 466) in order to execute the burden of beginning in delight and ending in self- consciousness. In *The Prison of Chillon*, a poem inspired by the story of a 16<sup>th</sup> century Swiss political prisoner and patriot Francois Bonivard, Lord Byron (January 22, 1788 London- April 19, 1824 Missolongi, Greece) creates a protagonist different from the ones he used to do.

Credibility and maturity he possessed are distinguishable from the preceding ones. From the very beginning of the poem Byron draws a clear picture of the logical premises and consequences of a prisoner's condition. He brings to mind The Day of Resurrection when people are shocked and the impossible and unexpected happens in the blink of an eye. The visualized picture becomes vivid before the spectator's eyes. He creates a special kind of suspension to make the reader bound to the poet's magic of looking forward to knowing the reason behind such a kind of great transformation in age with giving an idiosyncratic feature of himself from other prisoners by declaring that:

My hair is grey, but not with years,  
Nor grew it white  
In a single night,  
As men's have grown from sudden fears.  
My limbs are bowed, though not with toil,  
But rusted with a vile repose  
For they have been a dungeon's spoil. (*Prisoner of Chillon, 10*)

This total identification of the poet with the situation regardless of time and identity of the prisoner makes it impossible for the listener to distinguish between the speaker and the real afflicted person. To feel present at the very situation is to have the full capacity to engage the audience and, to a great extent, make it available to live and feel the particulars of the incident in weal and woe. Experiencing such a kind of immersion has a valid impact on the strength of credibility which plays a great part in attaining the goals of such manipulation. In the above lines of the poem Lord Byron is physically outside the prison, impersonating the prisoner in return for the fading of his personality for greater

effects. Sometimes, it goes further more than engagement for the poet is forced to project himself into the distant and remote world of the person intended to be talked about, not to mention his culture, the way he saw things and the status quo which could be unbearable at that particular time.

The poet inside or outside embarks depicting the symbolic character as larger than life in order that the audience or the receiver whom the poet intends to invoke is urged to feel guilt. The incident revolving around the character becomes the light which makes all other incidents, all states of mind meet and make up masses of concentric circles. According to Bernard Richards, the consolation sought tends not to comfort traditional assertions of eternal life. Rather, it aims to make the receiver reconcile with grief not as a habitual action a man used to with the process of time but as a central and powerful source to a better liberated mind (Richards, 154). Even with the absence of the speaker or the camouflaging of his personality it is objectively not important to engage oneself with who the poet is rather than immersing in the very circumstances surrounding the protagonist of the poem. In the meanwhile, the poet does his best in order to produce the kind of poetry which keeps up with the very incident and to feel what has been decreed as well. In such a kind of production the poet casts away fastidious expressions or language and, instead, he seeks a surge of expressions of genuine power.

In addition to it being a means to catharsis and escape from traumatic situations, poetry plays a great part in distilling sets of relationships and transmitting traumas literally from upstream to downstream as fresh and effective as possible. In such a case, the poem creates a real witness or real witnesses for the great interpersonal interaction whose medium is the poem itself which results, at the end, in a net of concern that exceeds the boundaries of time and place of the poem. The poet's ability to vividly imagine situations and deeply interact with them, as well as his judicial assessment of another one's pain and his direct participation in it, then to evaluate and question about its importance is considered powerful enough to know and investigate the particulars of the human facts.

As a trustworthy example, *The Prison of Chillon* gives a vivid impression of Byron's high assimilation of the real prisoner's trauma and the kind of life he led in that place. As a trustworthy example Byron's *The Prisoner of Chillon* shows up how he infuses himself to be insider instead of outsider marginalizing himself not through the language which is fraught with symbols and images that lead to a direct picture of the tormented prisoner. So, he uses the subject pronoun "I" in narrating the events he is encountering in the depths of the dungeon saying: "I was the eldest of three/ And to uphold and cheer the rest" (*The Prisoner of Chillon, 6*). Throughout the lines of the poem the poet is one of the men who face persecution in its finest details. He is always doing his best to inform the would-be witness about this dark place. In another part of the poem he says: "They chained us each to a column stone/ And we were three- yet, each alone" (*The Prisoner of Chillon, 5*) decreeing how his poetry will help save humanity from the meanest elements and lead to truth. That visualized picture portrayed a real one in the reader's mind with its elements part of which are the descriptive words which provide sights, tastes associated with smells and sounds in addition to external and internal feelings.

As far as it is comfortable to an extent in seeking refuge within the lap or the walls of poetry, Horace says that creating a poem means creating a monument which is more established and lasting than a pyramid and its solid structure. So, a scrutinizing look at Shakespeare's sonnet 72 gives us an impression about the poet as he anticipates his would-be prison which is clay mixed with the remains of his dead body eaten by the vilest worms. In this prison the poet will be nothing immediately after death. Instead, he wants to get himself out to the poetic chamber which will immortalize these bones that made the great achievements. He addresses the youth "No longer mourn for me when I am dead" (Shakespeare, 72) because you will hear the gloomy bell inform you about that. Nor he wants them to remember the hand which has written this line and then it might make them feel sad. "But let your love even with my life decay/ Lest the wise world should look into your moan/ And mock you with me after I am gone" (Shakespeare, 72).

On the whole, whether the poet is inside or outside prison, talking on behalf of or talking about himself, direct or indirect, his writing always takes the formal way of the man responsible for bringing about radical change in society on all scales. The poet here is a man whose only authority on the reader is the language with which he writes the poem and the images and symbols that penetrate the lines to highlight the real situation and portray a vivid sensory image that can instigate internal interacting emotion. So, he does his best in order to avoid long- used words worn out like rubbed coins and put before the receiver fresh , pleasant, effective ones supposed to evoke the revolutionary emotions of people.

### **Self- experience**

Many poets have experienced incarceration and suffered the difficulties of prisons and subjected to different kinds of torture as well as psychological harassments and censorship. Therefore, they followed various ways to convey their works to their audiences and did their best to make those works impressive and, to a great extent, universal in order to achieve eternal self- extension through emotional interplay . Poets are supported by imagination which is considered more central than other traits in the human life. It helps shape everything, regardless of its inner and outer complexities, before it is captured in reality. Generally speaking, the architect's visualization of a building starts from imagination and ends on paper. And along the same lines, the military commander does his best by using all available tools in order to settle a battle with the least losses. Men whose vehicle in depicting what happens in their societies, and the way these people are governed are always vulnerable to arrest and their imagination to restriction. The poet, unlike other men, looks at all creatures animate or inanimate, human beings, birds or animals as companions and partners in this universe. He works at a very translucent and limpid level to find in others' histories and struggles what enables him to universalize his issues and make humanity one whole unit. Besides, he

aims to teach others that freedom, which might not be available outside, is more important and has a great value than life itself.

Unlike visualized imprisonment product, self- imprisonment writing subjects to some factors which sometimes urge the poet to restore to a safe resort in broadcasting his reports. Being sometimes under close censorship which in most cases amounts to a total or partial banning, imprisoned, wanted, house arrest poets take risks that end up in self-immolation for the sake of their honorable goals. Others use images that permit two interpretations to keep safe from severe torture or death. Adam Mickiewicz (1798- 1855) was a Polish prolific poet, essayist, dramatist, translator in addition to have been a political activist. He was one of the most outstanding pioneers of the Polish romanticism. In 1823, he was arrested and banished to Russia due to his part in setting up an organization that adopted discussing romanticist ideas opposing what the Russian Empire banned at that time. Mickiewicz's writings were of a great importance due to the intellectual and imaginative garner he had from early childhood to the years he departed forever. His love for the Polish folklore, his matchless passionate connection to the soil of the origin determined the total course of the poet's future life and imbued his poetical inspiration with a special print. The poet, in anticipation for the other life, said: "I live only for the hope that I will not cross my hands upon my bosom in my coffin without having done anything" (, 158). Poetry for him had a very noble mission that was to raise man to the noblest life. In his national epic, Mickiewicz nostalgically started with his life keynote saying: "Lithuania, my country! Thou art like health/ How much to prize thee he only can know who hath lost thee/ Now the whole charm of my beauty/ And I sing, for I pine after thee." (, 158).

Thus, to conclude, it may seem that Mickiewicz's contribution to life in general and literature in particular cannot be underestimated. He, superbly, shaped his people's life and color by using all his energies to extend to the posterity by making his passions and his thoughts as one integral part. "By means of his work he symbolized their land, its

history, its customs, and its characters" (Jan, 1), the basis on which he became a matchless example in literature and history alike. Moreover, he stands for the true father and one of the most famous and influential creators of their history stepping beyond the borders of art and normal life. He achieved that goal by expressing everyday life of his people, structuring their existence, giving voice to visions, prophesies and nightmares. Furthermore, he did not forget about the spiritual forces that were awakened or, so to speak, created by him. Also, he paved the way to the spiritual world for them and, as a result, created a myth for the Polish people surpassed literary influence and expansion to become a great political leader who, in Zygmunt Krasinski's words, the poet who comes after Adam in rank, said after Mickiewickz's death: "We all are of him" (Jan, 2). In "The Prisoner's Return" Mickiewickz, as a poet who apprehended reality thoroughly, surpassed digging deep into the very status quo because he found it full of hypocrisy, meanness, and other faces of falsehood and found the suffering of the honest people opposite to the prosperity of the imposters. So, he addressed himself to the spiritual reality for the sake of immortalizing his issues of rooting patriotism and true citizenship. In this poem he tried his best to ask his friend in prison who is out now some questions about which he did not find any answer. Then, "Next month I called on him, hoping to find/ A man at ease, refreshed, in his right mind" but he could not grab any answer "And silence is the only right reply". The listener stands spell-bound and lifted up with the vigor of the poet's treatment of the situation waiting for another development. At the end of the poem the listener, together with the poet, are given a clear idea that instead of telling about life in the prison, he gives life and motion to immaterial action which transforms the poet and his readers or listeners outside the boundaries of the moment of speaking to a wider world out of the control of man which has the last just decision and judgement . As a result,

He said he had forgotten. And, with dismay,

I listened to his silence. His memory was

Written upon, and deeply, but, because

It had long rotted in the dark, my friend

Could not read what was written: "We'd better send

For God. He will remember and tell us all." (The Prisoner's Return)

Not cowed by the hugeness of pressurization and vague destination as well as cruel life made for the deviant until they respond like automatons to the strictest and harshest orders, Richard Lovelace in his poem "To Althea, From Prison", written in 1642 while actually imprisoned, challenged the authorities at that time defending and supporting King Charles I. The third stanza is considered the acme of the poem and the frankest loyal and political reference of the poet. He forgot about every persecution to announce that he should sing with a shrill throat "The sweetness, Mercy, Majesty,/ And glories of my king (Lines, 19- 20). As a result of that singing he gave his final impression which indicates his deep belief in his principles as a fervent loyal royalist who did not care about the narrowness of the jail in comparison to the loftiness of the goal. In the following lines he says that instead of being racked with guilt and pain as a prisoner, he is quiet and free. The catharsis and purge he gets is only through the loud voice of his allegiance supported by some features of the man he defends and loves. He assures that

When I shall voice aloud how good

He is, how Great should be,

Enlarged winds, that curl the flood,

Know no such liberty. (Lines, 21- 24)

In the above lines Lovelace, as a poet, confirms that the role of the poem is to invoke and instigates one's courage to achieve the main goal in life. He insists that if mind subjects to the requirements of the body we are no longer human beings. Besides, the individual is a social being who must respond to the effects of the environment which sometimes cost him his life. The last line of each stanza demonstrates the claim and tells that the body must respond to the requirements of the mind so that it can be always in a state of balance and relaxation.

Being isolated, and to some degree vulnerable, the poet does his best to rearrange his reality to his taste in order to overcome the stifling atmosphere of the cell. He does not easily surrender to the suffocating prison conditions that sometimes lead some detainees to commit suicide. On the contrary, whatever the reason for imprisonment , poets are considered "people of sound mind who do not commit suicide because they have conjured an afterlife of irresistible allure" (Tuan, 73). Their social and moral status due to the role they play as the mouthpiece of people concerning social, political or economic conditions grant them higher position that makes them forget about themselves and even their life. In addition, the case they defend means to them the cord which connects them to people and through which they achieve self- extension. On the grounds of these data the poet sets himself free and soars in the world of freedom as much as the flame of enthusiasm ignites within him and is embodied in the form of words and poems. Accordingly, in the poem, Lovelace confirms that the mind, on the contrary of the body, cannot be incarcerated and restricted. That depiction is set next to the divine authority in the sense of ability and capability. "Angels alone that soar above,/ Enjoy such liberty" (Lines, 31-32) and no one else according to the metaphysical power imagination imparts. The poet wants to obtain eternal reality through this poetic power. In addition, in order to achieve the requirements of being a hero in spite of the restrictions of the prison, he sums up the faculty reflection that "Stone walls do not a prison make,/ Nor iron bars a cage" (Lines, 25- 26) because, according to him, "If I have freedom in my love,/ And in

my soul am free" (Lines, 29– 30). Having got rid of selfishness and artificiality and consolidated the attitude with truthfulness, these two lines have been taken as axioms throughout history being impressive, moving and universal.

Actual events in the world forced poets to say their word and take up a courageous attitude against their governments. Robert Lowell (1917– 1977), the American reputable poet, provided a worthwhile material about imprisonment which showed the attitudes that impelled him to oppose the draft and conscientiously object the Second World War– an attitude as a result of which he was imprisoned. Robert Lowell's life was a bundle of problems. He suffered from manic depression for which he was again and again hospitalized. In "West Street and Lepke" he talks about his past experience as a professor at Boston University and the future of his young daughter. He refuses to wade in a bout of sentimental self– pity. In addition, the poem shows up that his catastrophes are the reflection and result of his times. His prolific heritage clashes with past protests and present predicaments. The poem starts bringing to surface the conflicting reality of the poet's outer world with the inner psyche as he tries to make a comparison between the opposing forces of his mind. But he does not overwhelm himself in overemotional self– pity. In the second stanza he speaks candidly about the reason of incarceration. His telling off the president and the government made him "sat waiting sentence in the bull pen/ beside a Negro boy with curlicues/ of marijuana in his hair" (Memories, Lines 19–21).

Lowell's obliqueness of depicting reality is a way to immortalize the issue and its effect in a community whose individuals suffered from the aftermath of the war, rejecting all strictures of his previous beliefs before conversion. The depth and inherent potential of Lowell's poetry, stemming from candidness and sincerity, enabled him to penetrate the interior of the American and western communities participating in the change of attention and sensibility. As poetry represents all qualities that lofty writing should offer, it demands to create words which creep on the page or move toward the listener's sensational air

smoothly and effectively. His surroundings in the jail consist of gritty objects. He refers to the soccer field aiming at the central purpose behind such a comparison which is to seek detachment and impersonality, a tendency through which he gives an idea of the locked

enclosure like my school soccer court,  
and saw the Hudson River once a day  
through sooty clothesline entanglements  
and bleaching khaki tenements. (S. P. 78)

Lowell surpassed the limits of confessional poetry to talk about other people's experiences digging deep into the inner psyche of the persona. In "A Mad Negro Soldier Confined at Munich", Lowell might have swerved from the course he followed, as many thought, to talk on behalf of others' experiences. In such a poem he achieved much grace and intelligence in depicting the trajectory of a mentally- ill African American military man incarcerated in a Munich jail for the US Army. A figure, supposedly, representative of many Lowell might have met throughout his detentions. The poem is "experiencing consciousness that Lowell explores variationally so that he may pilot a coast shaped by the world this consciousness represents" (Prunty, 50). It also shows the multiple reflexivity with which Robert Lowell perceived the world and his abandonment of the manic concentration of his earlier poetry. As a protest to the ambivalence taken up by the government at that time, the Negro soldier says:

We're all Americans except the Doc,  
a Kraut DP, who kneels and bathes my eye.  
The boys who floored me, two black maniacs, try  
to pat my hands. Round, round why punch the clock? (1-4)

It is the loud cry of a patriot talking to the Americans in particular and to all people in general from behind his persona revealing the devastating result of war and the violation of the values of heaven as far as the black are concerned. The poet has abolished the demarcating line between the black and the white to say that people are all from one origin and they must be treated equally. The poem gives an impression of the isolation the Negro soldiers suffered. Although they served for the sake of the nation, they have been vulnerable to apprehension and confinement. So, due to the dehumanization and ingratitude they went mad and thought of the condition equal to animals. That negligence and inequality surged into the poet and surfaced in a poem to defend their rights as human beings and native citizens as equal as the whites. The poet goes on from behind his surrogate describing the place where the Negro was confined. It is

In Munich the zoo's rubble fumes with cats;  
hoydens with air guns prowl the Koenigsplatz,  
and pink the pigeons on the mustard spire  
Who but any girl friend set the town on fire? (5-8)

To conclude, patriotism and humanism are considered part and parcel by which many poets could achieve self-extension within and outside their communities. Prison poetry proved to be the most effective, despite the many strictures imprisoned poets were vulnerable to, to surpass the boundaries of the four walls of the cells and detentions to attract attention and gain sympathy on a large scale. Throughout history, poets have delved into the heart of suffering and explored the psyche of the oppressed and the destitute challenging risks and catastrophes and even personal annihilation. The poets under discussion, according to the poems included, are part of a large number of poets who experienced imprisonment and did their best to support due to the deep study they had of social and political issues. Their poetry made use of different kinds of symbols and images which could add poetic beauty and used those words as weapons against exploiters. So, their poems remained beacons for those who call for freedom and equality

throughout the ages that you sometimes do not distinguish between the poet's words and the Bible's.

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