theories and methodologies

Changing Lives through Literature

ROBERT P. WAXLER

THERE IS SOMETHING UGLY ABOUT INCARCERATION. OVER 2.2 MILLION PEOPLE ARE LOCKED IN JAILS AND PRISONS IN THE UNITED States; $60 billion a year is spent to support this effort.[1] But there is also the old comparison of the prison with the monk's cell, a place of contemplation and self-reflection,[2] and Jean Genet's sense of "a close relationship between flowers and convicts" (9).[3] As a probation officer I know likes to remind me, "If you want to find Jesus, just go into the prisons. He is always there." In any discussion of prisons, there are always opposing terms to consider: *incarceration* and *freedom*, *body* and *consciousness*, *the hard core* and *the vulnerable*, *mind-forged manacles* and *visionary imagination*.

Nathaniel Hawthorne had another idea. He offers three terms—*community*, *cemetery*, and *prison*: "The founders of a new colony, whatever Utopia of human virtue and happiness they might originally project, have invariably recognized it among their earliest practical necessities to allot a portion of the virgin soil as a cemetery, and another portion as the site of a prison" (47).[4] We cannot escape the cemetery anymore than we can escape necessity, as Hawthorne well knew. It marks the boundary for us, the radical limitation, the body without voice or movement, the corpse. The prison reminds us of a difference though, the possibility of return to the community, to the voice and movement of lives restored—the call to freedom, to possibility.

"Shades of the prison house" may enclose us, yet we can still glimpse "the visionary gleam," as William Wordsworth intimated (lines 68, 56). Incarceration seems to call out for its contrary, physical or otherwise: a demand for a voice to speak and be heard, the opportunity to move freely and make choices. Yet the rigid gravestones in the cold cemetery also beckon us, whispering about our ultimate vulnerability. We all need to listen to them with special care, sensitive to our mortal responsibilities.

The program Changing Lives through Literature (CLTL) moves along similar lines. We can best judge the vitality of a democratic community, we believe, by how inclusive it is—not by how many

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voices it has excluded but by how many are engaged, not by how many people are incarcerated but by how many can speak out as productive citizens. In the United States today, over 750 out of every 100,000 citizens are locked away, are out of the general community's listening range—a percentage unmatched in any other country in the world (Shea 2).

The cemetery should remind us of our common end and shared contingency, of our responsibilities to the excluded voice that, as Emmanuel Levinas might declare, says, "Thou shalt not kill," the voice that evokes an ethics of vulnerability and compassion: "We are all guilty of all and for all men before all, and I am more than the others," Levinas has said, thinking of Fyodor Dostoevsky (105).[5]

William Blake helps us here: "Prisons are built with stones of Law . . ." (*Marriage*, pl. 8, line 21),[6] a devilish proverb indicating, as does Michel Foucault, that the law is founded on its own transgressions, so we do not need to totally lock ourselves in as docile bodies without resistance—without, we would say, voice or motion.[7] We are not yet the corpse beneath the gravestone. On the contrary, we are bound to travel, bound by a quest to question, which is a central purpose of literature.

CLTL began in 1991 as an experiment to offer criminal offenders an alternative-sentencing program. It was motivated, in part, by a sustained belief that readers can be moved by stories and map their own life narratives onto the stories that they read. And these same readers, often with little voice in the mainstream of the community, also want to talk about the stories with others, explore them, give them further complexity and richness through group discussion, locate themselves through the stories. As Richard Kearney has put it, "The unnarrated life is not worth living" (14).[8]

Thus, in 1991 I suggested to a local judge concerned with "turnstile justice" (as he characterized the problem then) that offenders who were sent behind bars from his bench, eventually released, then returned before his bench again might fare better by reading literature and talking about it around a table on a college campus. And so might the rest of the community as well.

I give the judge, Robert Kane, credit for his courage to try out this idea. Together with a dedicated probation officer, Wayne St. Pierre, and eight men who had 148 convictions before entering the program, we started CLTL on the University of Massachusetts, Dartmouth, campus that autumn under a gray sky.

Over the years, using this basic model—a professor, a judge, a probation officer—as the core group, CLTL has developed throughout Massachusetts and has taken root in several other states (California, Arizona, Kansas, Texas, Indiana, Florida, New York, Rhode Island) and in England—significant testimony, I would argue, to what reading and discussing literature can accomplish. We now have programs for men and women, adults and juveniles, and studies have shown a decline in recidivism rates (up to fifty percent in one study [Jarjoura and Krumholz 127]), a renewed interest in family ties and education, and enhanced self-esteem.[9]

Take Jeff, for example, an eighth-grade dropout, a serious drug dealer at twenty-two, and the son of a father who had spent hard time in Walpole, the toughest prison in the state. Jeff was sharp, possessing something like a photographic memory, and he loved to challenge us with his richly textured interpretations of the stories. "You know," he once said, "I find these discussions around the table as exciting as the rhythm of the streets."[10]

But not just the offenders appear to benefit from CLTL. The judges, who often comment that CLTL is the joy of their careers, also derive sustenance from the literature and become what Martha Nussbaum calls "literary judges" combining empathetic identification and judicial spectatorship. They read, in other words, as we all do, with a doubleness evoked through the pleasure of language shaped into narrative.[11]

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Since 1991 I have always started the first session with an in-class silent reading and discussion of the short story "Greasy Lake," by T. Coraghessan Boyle, which most people around the table claim is their story as well. The group usually meets six times for two hours over a twelve-week period, discussing novels about male identity and friendship, the struggle against authority, and the longing for recognition. We read novels such as *The Old Man and the Sea* (Hemingway), *Of Mice and Men* (Steinbeck), *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest* (Kesey), *Seawolf* (London), and *Affliction* (Banks) and, at times, additional short stories, from writers such as Raymond Carver and James Baldwin.

No doubt the stories read the readers as much as the readers read the stories. I recall, for example, a moment of revelation when one of the men around the table the night we discussed Jack London's novel declared in the midst of an impassioned conversation, "I used to be Wolf Larsen. I thought I could manipulate everyone. I was stupid then"—a critical judgment, I still believe, that expressed not only the surprise of recognition but the opening of future possibilities. He had located himself in the world, no longer lost, no longer imprisoned in an endless present, ready to move forward.

On another evening, one of the participants insisted on telling us about his experience with Santiago, the old man in Ernest Hemingway's story. There he was, he explained, walking down the main street of New Bedford, ready to make a turn back to his old neighborhood after struggling to remain clean from drugs for some time, when he heard the voice of Santiago, reminding him of what the old man had suffered through, what the vulnerable old man had heroically endured. The old man was inspiration for him, a stranger become a friend, speaking to him, encouraging him to walk straight down Main Street, at least for that day, and the offender, call him Ishmael, then was not alone.

It is interesting to witness, through CLTL, court officers (judges, probation officers, lawyers) and criminal offenders sitting around a long wooden table in a seminar room talking together about a story they have read. Customarily the criminal offenders at first see the judges, in this context, as the officials in dark robes who employed the harsh language of judgment to rule over them, and the judges often see the criminal offenders through the other side of that lens, as marginal characters in need of discipline—if not punishment, at least rehabilitation. The offenders agree, recognizing themselves defined in the narrow prison of such perception. But then, at least when it is working right, the story, as Franz Kafka once suggested, serves as "an axe for the frozen sea within us," startling all of us, breaking up the stereotypes, opening that rigidity to the flow of language pulsating with the beat of the human heart (16).

Each reader has read the same story differently. A series of shifting voices emanates from the story and continues around the table, an ongoing and expanding conversation that reveals surprises, opening us to new possibilities just as it resists and conceals the unnamed ghost that we cannot fully grasp but that also calls to us, to our shared vulnerability. We all begin to position ourselves in the world through such multilayered exchange and negotiation, glimpsing, for a moment at least, the rich and strange complexity of other mortal lives as well as our own. Literature offers all of us this—the opportunity to let the rigid roles melt away for a moment, the pleasure of finding another voice, a voice that names us and calls us home.

At their best, I believe, all stories have this kind of ethical standing. They can redeem us, remind us of the fragile boundary between the law and transgression, the self and the other, soothing, at times, the sting of death itself. A shared story serves as a covenant that binds us together, not only freeing us from the prison of our oversimplified judg-

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ments but also demanding our attention and our sense of responsibility as we are thrown bounding into the future.

"Sonny's Blues," a story by Baldwin that we often read and discuss in CLTL, makes a similar point. The unnamed narrator and his younger brother, Sonny, like a judge and a criminal, wrestle together with the penitential pain oozing from the mortal wound that all brothers and sisters share—eventually opening themselves for a moment to each other. It is only a moment, as the older brother makes clear: "And I was aware that this was only a moment, that the world waited outside, as hungry as a tiger, and that trouble stretched above us, longer than the sky." But, like the final image in "Sonny's Blues," a celebratory drink sent by one brother to another, balanced on the piano, "a cup of trembling," it is a moment that moves us, orients us, allows us to glimpse what could be, just as it reminds us of the risk and danger always haunting us at the edge (141).[12]

That is the simple truth of CLTL, just as it is the simple truth of reading and discussing literature in general. Such activity has no instrumental value, only the value of the human heart. And, yes, such activity is extremely dangerous—it can, on occasion, change lives, both inside and out.

Notes

1. See the report by a commission cochaired by Gibbons and Katzenbach. Shea draws on this report to argue that the penal system is no longer simply "a reflection of society but a force that shapes it" (1).

2. As Brombert puts it, "The prisoner's cell and the monastic cell look strangely alike" (3). William Nelles, at the University of Massachusetts, Dartmouth, reminds me that *cell* means "monastery" by the early twelfth century and "room in a nunnery" by the thirteenth. It is not used to mean a room in a prison until the eighteenth century.

3. Carnochan quotes Genet's *Miracle of the Rose* in a similar context: "I think it is the rigors of prison that drive us toward each other in bursts of love without which we could not live" (1).

4. This quotation is from Hawthorne's first chapter, "The Prison Door."

5. Critchley makes a related point about the ethics of Levinas that also seems relevant to CLTL: "It is this formal structure of a thought that thinks more than it can think, that has a surplus within itself, that intrigues Levinas because it sketches the contours of a relation to something that is always in excess of whatever idea I may have of it, that always escapes me" (58). At least in part, this is a useful statement not only about ethical relations, in general, but also about the relation of the CLTL reader to the text and the relation of the CLTL participants to one another.

6. The full proverb, from *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, reads, "Prisons are built with stones of Law, brothels with bricks of religion." This kind of network—prisons, the law, brothels, and religion—seems to form an ongoing pattern for Blake: In "London," for example, we get not only "mind-forg'd manacles" (line 8) but bans and charters as well as a "blackning Church" (10) and "youthful Harlots curse" (14).

7. I am reminded here of Spivak's warning: "Many of us say with a smug surprise: 'the Law is founded on its own transgressions.' This may be a convenient aphorism that carries within it the memory—in most cases a textual memory not necessarily elaborated by the user—of Lacan's explanations of the Law of the Father, or of Derrida's meditations on perjury, or rather, *par-jure* because ultimately Derrida carefully stopped short at the irreducibility of idioms, the limits of the translatability of philosophies" (1608). One might add such names as Georges Bataille or Slavoj Žižek to the list as well. Foucault's work needs to be considered when one thinks about prison, especially *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*.

8. Kearney's notion of story is relevant to our CLTL vision. Too many people these days are walking around without a story, we might say. In this sense, CLTL helps provide all the participants with an opportunity to begin to create a story for themselves. As Kearney also puts it, "Every life is in search of a narrative. We all seek, willy-nilly, to introduce some kind of concord into the everyday discord and dispersal we find about us" (4).

9. See also www.cltl.umassd.edu for a report on other evaluations of the program.

10. See Trounstine and Waxler, especially the chapter on the New Bedford's Men's Program (61–81); Waxler, "Journey" 102–07. For a selection of short stories and excerpts from novels with commentary, the anthology by Waxler and Trounstine might be helpful.

11. As Nussbaum puts it, explaining her position on the importance of literary works as "crucial elements in a norm of public rationality," "Sympathetic emotion that is tethered to the evidence, institutionally constrained in appropriate ways, and free from reference to one's own situation appears to be not only acceptable but actually

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essential to public judgment. But it is this sort of emotion, the emotion of the judicious spectator, that literary works construct in their readers, who learn what it is to have emotion, not for a 'faceless undifferentiated mass,' but for the 'uniquely individual human being'" (78). Nussbaum's position, however, needs to be put into dialogue with the concern of someone like Esmeir: "I am concerned with law's ambition to transform humanity into a juridical status, which precedes, rather than follows and describes, all humans. I call the conflation of the human and its assigned legal status an instance of juridicalization and the resulting humanity a 'juridical humanity.' . . . I conclude by suggesting that the task is not to recognize the other's humanity, for, like dehumanization, that task risks repeating colonial juridical logics. What is needed is the forging of concrete alliances with human beings who await not our recognition but our participation in their struggles" (1544–45).

12. For an expanded discussion of "Sonny's Blues" in this context see my essay "In Honor of Rassias: What Literature and Language Means to Me." Also see the discussion of a CLTL session in Basbanes 306–12.

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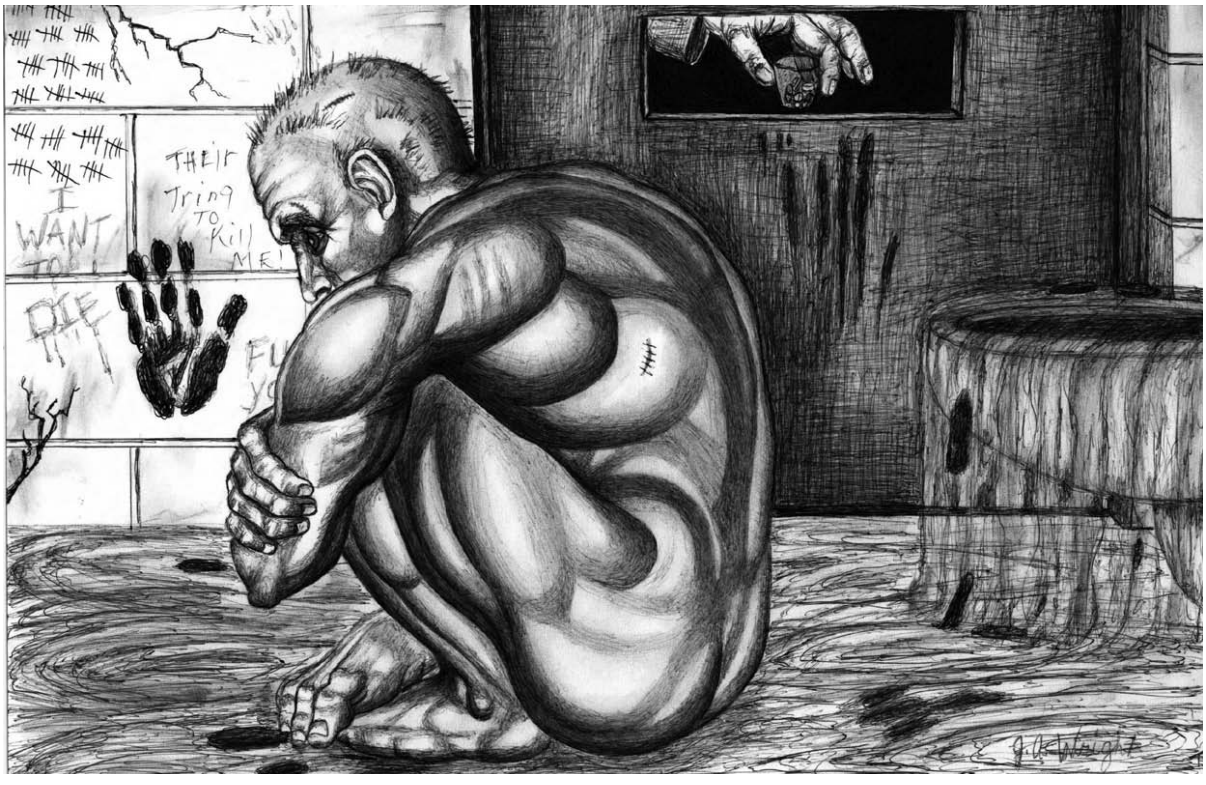
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