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Dickens as Prisoner in American Prisons: The Depiction of Prisons in *American Notes*

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Abstract
When Charles Dickens travelled to the United States in 1842, he did not realize that his privacy and personal space will be intruded upon by the American public. Therefore, upon visiting various prisons while touring the United States, he realized a connection, an unspeakable bond between him and the locked up prisoners. While the prisoners are locked up within their cells, Dickens feels locked up and imprisoned with no sense of individuality and personal space. This study traces the connection between Dickens and the prisoners.

Key words: Charles Dickens; Imprisonment; Prisons; Loss of privacy; Loss of individuality; Personal space

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One common thread that can be traced among the British writers visiting America in the nineteenth century is that they were constantly searching for their personal space among the friendly, and oftentimes too friendly, nature of the American people. For British writers such as Anthony Trollope, Rudyard Kipling, and Charles Dickens, the American friendliness and familiarity did not help making the British writers feel at ease and at home in America, but rather served as a barrier that widened the gap between the two peoples. This idea is mentioned by Anthony Trollope (1862), who satirically comments on the excessive friendliness of the Americans: "At Boston I found friends ready to receive us with open arms, though they were friends we had never known before!" (p.15). Trollope is perplexed at the generous and friendly nature of the American people and seems to be somehow offended by it. Why should people they have never met before be their friends? The commonality of the Americans and their humbleness in their relationship with other people contrasts sharply with the arrogance and haughtiness of the British who prefer to keep aloof and not to be "too" familiar. The concept of crowdedness is another issue that bothered the British writers visiting America at that time. Rudyard Kipling (1930) complains of the crowdedness of the Palace Hotel, "a seven-storied warren of humanity" (p.4). His voice is calling out for individual identity. Where is one's personal space if so many people are around? On first reaching American grounds, Charles Dickens (1874) asked for dinner but "would rather have it in [his] private room" the result of which "the waiter must have gone out of his mind" (p.27). The waiter did not comprehend that Dickens's journey is one intended for him to spend time to think and write, but more importantly did not comprehend that Dickens, more than anything, needed his private space. Among a people who were merely welcoming them to America, these British writers were not able to find their personal space and personal identity, and immediately upon their arrival, American openness contrasts sharply with the British reserve that these writers have been accustomed to.

Dickens's journey to the United States has been regarded as a journey undertaken by a well-known British author who arrived to America in 1842 seeking a utopian life, but having his dreams crushed by realities of American journalism, their system of slavery, and the uncivilized manners of the people. He was very much offended by the American habit of expectorating and the inappropriateness of American curiosity and intrusiveness. A number of recent critics have focused their attention on explaining the reasons why Dickens condemns America harshly. On a personal level, for example, Jerome

Meckier (1984) believes that "The bad manners of many Americans angered the Republican in Dickens because they ran counter to democratic principle . . . vulgar insensitivity also offended against the British taste, a blend of moral restraint, social awareness, and hygienic concern" (p.268). Other critics have gone beyond the autobiographical and looked at the feelings of Dickens towards America from a broader perspective. Juliet John (2007), for example, in her article "'A body without a head': The Idea of Mass Culture in Dickens's *American Notes* (1842)" explains that "What worried Dickens most about America is that it seemed to bring him face to face . . . with a dystopian vision of mass culture" (p.174). From a political standpoint, Amanda Claybaugh (2006) argues that "Dickens's brief engagement with the Anglo American campaigns against slavery and for suffrage reform is merely one episode in a long history of transatlantic collaborations in reform" (p.458).

This article differs from other readings in that it investigates and focuses only on the effect that the prisons Dickens saw in America had on his personal feelings and attitudes toward America at large. In fact, Dickens's recurring mentioning of American prisons in *American Notes* had a profound resonance on how he felt toward America. Whereas the situation of the prisoners varies from one prison to another, Dickens, nevertheless, felt an understanding, an affiliation, and a bond with each of the different kinds of prisoners. The bond can be explained in the way in which Dickens no longer felt the Dickens of his free, individual self, but rather the Dickens of a public spectacle, i.e., a prisoner of the American public eye. This study pays particular attention to the prisons described by Dickens in *American Notes*, along with his feelings towards the prisons and the prisoners. Prisons appear consistently throughout the text. In Boston, we read about the House of Correction; in New York, we encounter the Tombs; in Philadelphia, there is the Eastern Penitentiary; in Baltimore and Kingston, there are two more prisons. The study will trace Dickens's developing and changing perceptions and observations of these prisons and relate them to his own personal experience while he is in the United States. The main argument is that by describing some of these prisons, Dickens is in fact relating it to his own self and talking about his own personal experience as being suffocated and under constant surveillance while being in the United States. The evidence for this is found in the letters of Charles Dickens to his friends John Forster and Thomas Mitton. The paper, moreover, places these prisons within a historical framework in order to understand more clearly the state of mind under which Dickens was writing and to what extent his descriptions reveal much more than what they hide.

The first prison Dickens encountered was in Boston, the House of Correction for the State, "in which silence is strictly maintained, but where the prisoners have the comfort and mental relief of seeing each other, and of working together" (Dickens, 1874, p.58). The prison he saw was in the beginning of his journey, and his feelings toward this particular prison were as ambivalent as his feelings towards America at large. On the one hand, he seemed to approve of this prison for many reasons. First of all, he seemed to admire the silent system of the prison. Secondly, the prison "is not walled, like other prisons, but is palisaded round about with tall rough stakes" (Dickens, 1874, p.60). He liked the idea of an open space where prisoners did not feel fenced in. Moreover, Dickens "was given to understand that in this prison, no swords or fire-arms, or even cudgels, are kept; nor is it probable that, so long as excellent management continues, any weapon, offensive or defensive, will ever be required within its bounds" (Dickens, 1874, p.61). He was also very fond of the idea of having prisoners work: "America . . . has in all her prisons the one great advantage of being enabled to find useful and profitable work for the inmates" (Dickens, 1874, p.58).

Dickens's preliminary observation and his admiration of this prison reflect much of this introduction to America. Just like his appreciation of the silent and organized aura of the prison, Dickens's journey starts with a captivating sense of comfort and delight. However, this state of affairs did not last for long. It vanished the moment he started to identify himself with the prisoners. In fact, in between the lines and based on the evidence found in his letters, Dickens felt affiliated with the prisoners of this particular prison. Within this particular system, the pervasiveness of surveillance as a foundation for prison discipline was clear. The prisoners in a silent Associated System prison were allowed to work together in common rooms during the day, under strict supervision that prohibited communication among prisoners. When the prisoners were in their cells:

> An officer stationed on the ground, with his back to the wall, has half their number under his eye at once, the remaining half being equally under the observation of another officer on the opposite side; and all in one great apartment (Dickens, 1874, p.61).

Dickens's emphasis on surveillance can be read on a personal level. Just as every action, every glance, and every whisper of the prisoner was watched by the guards, Dickens was also watched himself. This is very evident in his letters to his friends, John Forster and Thomas Mitton. Dickens wrote to his friends about the American intrusiveness upon his privacy and activities. While in Cleveland, on April 26th, he wrote to his friend: "the people poured on board, in crowds, by six on Monday morning, to see me; and a party of 'gentlemen' actually planned themselves before our little cabin, and stared in at the door and windows while I was walking and Kate lay in bed" (House, 1965, p.209). The more Dickens felt scrutinized by the American public gaze, the more he became dismayed and annoyed by the idea of scrutiny. He understood the position the prisoners were in because he

was experiencing the same kind of constant vigilance by the American public:

> I can do nothing that I want to do, go nowhere I want to go, and see nothing that I want to see. . . . I go to church for quiet, and there is a violent rush to the neighborhood of the pew I sit in, and the clergyman preaches at me. I take my seat in a railroad car, and the very conductor won't leave me alone. I get out a station, and can't drink a glass of water, without having a hundred people looking down my throat when I open my mouth to swallow. Conceive what all this is! . . . I have no rest or peace, and am in perpetual worry. (House, 1965, p.87)

The prisoners in the House of Correction were in a constant state of worry, and so was Dickens. The prisoners lost core aspects of humanity, namely communication with fellow humans, as well as being tracked down in every motion they made. Dickens had the privilege to communicate but he had waived that right to gain his peace of mind in order to concentrate on his writing. As a result, he ended up like those prisoners. In a way, he found a reflection of his own state by seeing the prisoners there. The forces of this prison and its constant vigilance upon its prisoners shaped Dickens's description of the rest of the prisons he described. This prison marked the starting point for Dickens in which he became able to not only understand prisoners and how they were feeling, but also the deviating path that his journey took. In other words, Dickens discovered the truth of America through its prisons and prisoners, and it became for him as a rule that governs all dwellers of that society.

As Dickens moved along, he reached the Tombs, the prison at New York. With a sense of immediacy and urgency, Dickens invited us to go, "Shall we go in?" (Dickens, 1874, p.95). This prison, unlike the previous one he had visited, was not a Silent Associated one; rather it was a place of detention for serious offenders until they were sentenced. This can be seen as the second step of Dickens's encounter and identification with prisoners in American prisons. This experience manifests a deeper sense of repugnance not only with prisons but mainly with his privacy suffocated by the public eye. Dickens gave a detailed description of the prison and asked why the place had been so called. Upon learning the reason, the reader is forced to contemplate the psychological effects such a place had on its prisoners. Prisoners knew that their ultimate destiny was being hung, so they would rather hang themselves in advance in a way that made them feel that they were still in control of their lives. The whole issue is about who is in control, the prisoner, or the "man with the keys" (Dickens, 1874, p.95). By emphasizing the idea of suicide, Dickens was indirectly placing emphasis on control, the man really has the keys. I agree with Sean C. Grass (2000) who believes that "the psychological process that leads prisoners down into suicide remains secret and interior" (p.62), yet I also believe that the embedded message of Dickens is to stress the fact that these prisoners were taking away their own lives in order to restrain the upper hand from taking them "into this narrow, grave-like place [where] men are brought out to die" (Dickens, 1874, p.97).

But how is this related to Dickens's own personal experience while being in America and after visiting the prison at Boston? Dickens saw himself as being in a tomb, yet he also believed he could, at this point, have a way out of this place similar to the prisoners' way of escape. The fact that Dickens believed, up until then in his journey, that he did have control should be emphasized. It is necessary to point out that Dickens, though annoyed, did not lose hope and wished to carry out his mission of asking for international copyright. Upon visiting this particular prison, Dickens saw a possibility for his dreams, and thus he suggests, "Let us go forth again into the cheerful streets" (Dickens, 1874, p.98).

In Philadelphia, Dickens visited the Eastern Penitentiary and spent an entire chapter describing "Philadelphia, and its Solitary Prison." Despite the fact that there were many other attractions to describe in Philadelphia than just its prison, Dickens elaborated in his description of the prison mainly because it was here that Dickens delved into the psyche of prisoners and it was here also that he felt completely affiliated with them. As such, this can be said to be the ultimate stage of Dickens's geographical, cultural, and mainly, psychological journey. He began his description as follows: "In the outskirts stands a great prison, called the Eastern Penitentiary, conducted on a plan peculiar to the state of Pennsylvania. The system here is rigid, strict, and hopeless solitary confinement. I believe, in its effect, to be cruel and wrong" (Dickens, 1874, p.114).

The idea of being imprisoned affected Dickens strongly in this particular prison. He gave detailed accounts of the prisoner who "is a man buried alive; to be dug out in the slow round of years, and in the meantime dead to everything but torturing anxieties and horrible despair" (Dickens, 1874, p.116). The solitary prison made Dickens question himself whether continuous surveillance was more or less tolerable than continuous isolation. He placed himself within the prisoners there by moving around: "I went from cell to cell that day; and every face I saw, or word I heard, or incident I noted, is present to my mind in all its painfulness." He looked back and thought about his life and how he had spent his last couple of years "and thought how wide a gap it was, and how long those two years passed in solitary captivity would have been" (Dickens, 1874, p.121). It is here that Dickens learnt the meaning of American dehumanization and realized his position within this context.

In describing this prison, Dickens is criticized for being more subjective than objective, more fictional that factual despite the fact that he was writing travel notes. Laurie Carlson (1996) comments on his description of prisons: "We sometimes cannot help doubting whether his judging faculty is strongly developed, and whether

he sometimes mistakes pictures in his mind for facts in nature. He is evidently proud of his powers of intuition—of his faculty of inferring a whole history from a passing expression" (p.29). Dickens is indeed being subjective here mainly because he felt with the prisoners. He began as a prisoner under constant surveillance and later was imagining himself as one in a solitary cell. This reflects his sense of oneness with American prisoners. He was one among many. He was a prisoner locked up in a foreign land, suffocated by being watched, and even more suffocated by being alone. He was able to describe the mental and psychological state of the prisoners as Jeremy Tambling (2001) suggests "this writing puts Dickens into the position of the prisoner" (p.40).

Grass (2000) further emphasizes the idea that Dickens was touched by the situation of the prisoners there and how much it was related to himself: "His fictional account of the Eastern Penitentiary contains a strange hybridity, in which the psychology of the solitary prisoner becomes a psychology of the incessantly watched prisoner, haunted by shadows, lurking presences, and peering eyes" (p.58). In his Letters, Dickens discussed the dreadful supernatural possibilities that lurk within these prisons:

> A horrible thought occurred to me when I was recalling all I had seen, that night. What if ghosts be one of the terrors of these jails? I have pondered it often, since then. . . . Imagine a prisoner covering up his head in the bedclothes and looking out from time to time, with a ghastly dread of some inexplicable silent figure that always sits upon his bed, or stands (if a thing can be said to stand, that never walks as men do) in the same corner of his cell. The more I think of it, the more certain I feel that not a few of these men (during a portion of their imprisonment at least) are nightly visited by specters. (House, 1965, p.181)

This is precisely where Dickens stands. He was penetrating the prisoners' psychological state of mind because it was similar to his own. As a prisoner in America, Dickens explained to his friends in one of his letters: "I am so exhausted with the life I am obliged to lead here. . . . If I go out in a carriage, the crowd surround it and escort me home. If I go to the Theatre, the whole house (crowded to the roof) rises as one man, and the timbers ring again. You cannot imagine what it is" (House, 1965, p.43). Dickens was haunted by all the Americans around him. He was the other among them, and therefore, even if he was not actually being watched, he was always alert to the possibility of being followed around.

The long and detailed description of the prison here is one of Dickens's most profound moments in the book. In it, he seems to amalgamate the Boston House of Correction and the Eastern Penitentiary into one place that "tampers with the mysteries of the brain" to produce prisoners who are afraid of their own shadows (Dickens, 1874, p.115). Dickens was very sympathetic toward the prisoners to the extent that he admitted: "I went from cell to cell that day; and every face I saw, or word I heard, or incident I noted, is present to my mind in all its painfulness" (Dickens, 1874, p.121). The coffin metaphor he used for the prison is a very effective one, placing his emphasis on the idea of men being buried alive.

Historically, it is important to note that there was not one typical jail in the United States during the nineteenth century. According to Moynahan and Stewart (1980), prisons were quite diverse in size, condition, population, structure, and management (p.46). This is evident in Dickens's description of each individual prison and how he felt about them. However, both the House of Correction at Boston and the Solitary Prison in Philadelphia adopted the ideas of Jeremy Bentham, an Englishman whose goal in life was to describe the law as it ought to be. As Semple (1993) explains, Bentham dedicated his life to thinking and writing about man and his tendency to misbehave. According to Bentham, "Man was essentially a selfish creature avoiding pain and seeking pleasure and who, from the very constitution of his nature, prefers his own happiness to that of all sensitive beings put together." He was very much concerned with the idea of punishment and hence his interest in prisons. He, therefore, came up with his own scheme and design of a panopticon prison (Bentham, 1830, p.22).

Bentham's book, *The Rationale of Punishment*, was published in 1830. The book is an analysis of different forms of punishment, and it reaches the conclusion that of all punishments, the most acceptable is the active and laborious imprisonment. In his panopticon, Bentham would make extreme efforts to devise schemes that would ensure that the prisoners would be inspired by the promise of reward (Semple, 1993, p.25).

Bentham's principles of prison management are simple. The foremost ends of imprisonment, deterrence, and reformation must be served; but the security of the inmates from violence, ill treatment, and negligence must also be ensured. To achieve these ends, he devised three fundamentals: lenity, severity, and economy. The building of the prison must be circular or polygonal in shape with the cells around the circumference. At the core would be a central inspection area of galleries and lodge, disjoined from the main building, and linked to the outer perimeter only by stairways, none of the floors or ceilings coinciding. From this lodge, authority could exercise a constant surveillance. For Bentham, "this structure was a living entity, an artificial body, the inspection lodge its heart, its passageways, its nerves and arteries" (Semple, 1993, p.115-116). The inmate would be placed in the constantly lit cell where he would stay immured, very safe and very quiet; where he would sleep, work, and play. Work was to be the great engine of reformation as well as a source of profit to the governor; idleness was the cause of crime and work was a cure for idleness. Work should reform men, inure them to habits of industry, and transform them into honest citizens (Semple, 1993, p.156).

Laying these foundations for strengthening and expanding existing penological plans in order to prevent

criminal acts, Bentham's panoptican was never built, but his ideas have been adopted both in Britain and later in America. The idea of surveillance is seen very clearly in the Silent Associated System at the House of Correction at Boston, and the idea for separate cells is clearly manifested in the prison in Philadelphia.

The idea of being a prisoner under the yoke of perpetual surveillance is related to the concept of personal space and individuality. Within the walls of these prisons, prisoners are alone but not alone at the same time. The same can be said of Dickens, who felt he has lost his individuality and he was just like any other prisoner who was locked up within a cell. Moreover, once individuality was lost, the idea of familiarity takes place. This was not what Dickens and other British writers of travel notes ask for their in relationships with the Americans. Dickens's journey to America was intended to be a one in which he spent time alone in order to think and write. Being a public spectacle in America, Dickens came to the realization that in America, as Ackroyd (1990) observes, "everything [is] public and nothing private" (p.354)—a publicity that chains and locks individuality. His privacy and peace of mind were intruded upon constantly.

Acroyd (1990) sums up Dickens's first journey to America: "In America he had found the loss of privacy to be deeply unsettling: he had told Macready that he could never live in America, but probably this is because he realized he could never write in it" (p.370). Dickens needed his peace of mind, stability, individual space, and freedom. He found none of these factors that contribute to his creativity. He was encapsulated, and, like the prisoners, felt he was buried alive. Ironically, Dickens did travel again to America more than twenty years later, only to regret his decision again and find out, once more, that the American people "have not in the least changed during the last five and twenty years—they are doing now exactly what they were doing then" (Ackroyd, 1990, p.1011). His health deteriorated during his second visit because of both the flu and the public appearances he had to attend to, and therefore, he still had the problem of the public gaze to tackle with (Ackroyd, 1990, p.1012).

As Meckier has suggested, Dickens toured various institutions, businesses, schools, hospitals, and prisons while in America. The first impression the reader gets is that Dickens was impressed with these institutions "as models of enlightened reform." But Dickens soon began to wonder who was observing whom. Did he come to see America or did America come to see him? Dickens "had traveled across the Atlantic to be a spectator and an honored guest, not the spectacle he immediately became" (Meckier, 1984, p.266). Unfortunately, Dickens wrote in one of his letters, "This is not the Republic I came to see. This is not the Republic of my imagination" (House, 1965, p.156). Dickens intuitively felt what he had portrayed in his depiction of prisons in America: that the human self cannot escape the perpetual yoke of a surveillance that threatens to expose and represent the depths of that self. The prisons he visited marked Dickens, as much as it scarred the prisoners it confined. Dickens, like Trollope and Kipling, needed to sense his individuality to have his own private space, and feel unique among the American public. None of these writers found what they were searching for in the American soil.

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