

The Crime of Punishment

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American prisons are exactly halfway between Sweden and Argentina. For Jack Henry Abbott, prison was a lot closer to Argentina than most Americans would choose to believe. At thirty-seven, with the exception of a nine-and-a-half-month respite, he has spent his entire life since the age of twelve behind bars. It was during that respite that he took part in a bank robbery— his only serious outside crime. Inside, he stabbed another prisoner. Through the long twenty-five years, he endured strip cells, blackout cells, mind-jelly drugs, beatings, starvation diets, and swing stretching. He was abused, humiliated and tortured in a variety of other ways. But he survived. He endured the pain, the isolation, and that special insanity that comes from dropping any sensitive soul down a bottomless well of irrationality. His is a timely voice. A voice written in blood. A voice meant to shatter complacent glass. A voice that takes you inside your closest prison. (Do you know where your closest prison is tonight?)

Abbott lets you experience the sensations, “the atmospheric pressure, you might say, of what it is to be seriously a long-term prisoner in an American prison.” You will not get this experience reading Solzhenitsyn or Jacobo Timerman. Nor will you from any reporter, because no reporter is going to witness a gang rape or a murder or go bugs locked in a small, dark box, or know the fear of being stalked by an enemy with a blade.

You can get a very intelligent view of the problem by reading Charles Silberman’s *Criminal Violence, Criminal Justice*. However, that is the laboratory of sociology, and Abbott is writing about life as it is lived. It is the best anyone has done since *Soul On Ice*.

What a damn find! Hearing that Norman Mailer was doing a book on Gary Gilmore, Abbott, having been in many of the same prisons, offered his services. They met via letters and those letters, extremely well edited by Erroll McDonald, form the book. But do not turn away if you are not a fan of “letter books,” they are sutured together with the skill of a fine plastic surgeon. No scars. A continuous flow of tough, tight writing.

I can appreciate exceptional prison writing. On several occasions I have spent time in jail. Short bids, in the end, they would total less than twenty months, nothing compared to the likes of Abbott but enough to never forget. This man can write like the devil, and in committing his story to print so well he manages to tell everyone’s story.

He has faults; his rage, though certainly justified, sometimes distracts. He has not managed to capture the enormous boredom that is prison. The numbness of playing the same card game ten thousand times with the same players. Of staring at walls. Of counting time. Though, maybe after twenty- five years boredom becomes something else. At times, he goes beyond what is there, but I think that is part of Abbott’s excruciating ordeal. Like being in the hole, shut off from all light, human contact, on a starvation diet, loaded with tranquilizers and then all of a sudden yanked out and told to write. They do the same with fighting bulls, and as a result they hook blindly until they fix their target. But fix it he does, and consistently there remains good, honest light, a clarity of vision and a righteous disturbing message. Through all the sorrow and the pain Abbott remains the bull who has somehow not fallen. The stubborn survivor. There is also something here that stuns to the point of jealousy, namely, an esthetic continuum called poetry. Prison writing often has its politics; it rarely has its poetry. *In the Belly of the Beast* is a song of prison.

These are things that Abbott claims. “In San Quentin, as well as many other prisons, if a guard on a gun-rail sees you touch another prisoner he will shoot you down with his rifle” and later “if a guard searches your cell and you make a move toward the toilet you will be shot down.” There are more examples like this. Obviously these things have happened in American prisons but not every time. No one could deny that penitentiaries are an experience in abusive authority. Brutality is an institutionalized way of life. Abbott’s book is a catalog of homegrown atrocities. He was shot up with heavy doses of tranquilizers against his will. He has seen electric shock treatment used to punish. He has been deliberately starved to the point where he ate insects. Inmates have been ordered to get him. He has often been beaten unconscious and has incurred permanent internal injuries. Let me add some I have witnessed over the years. A prisoner who “acted up” in his cell was battered unconscious with a high-powered hose sprayed through the bars. A prisoner “sheeted,” that is, suicided on his bars. A gang

urged by guards to attack a troublemaker. They ripped an eye out of his head. A prisoner stripped, laid on the concrete floor, handcuffed and legcuffed to the bars and left to defecate and urinate on himself for eight days. Abbott has seen more. Much more. He shows us just how inventive cruelty can be. But the thing about brutality, be it physical, psychological, or institutional that has always made an impression was that it was, like all punishment, so arbitrary, so random. Remember what Hemingway said about teaching you the rules, then when they caught you off second base they killed you. In prison they don't bother teaching you the rules. There is a famous prison in New York, Dannemora (the very name shivers the spine), and legend has it that the first three prisoners arriving off the bus are clubbed to let everyone know who's who and what's what. But I doubt if it works that way, because the real smart asses would know this and stand in the rear. No, I'm sure they go on the beat up at the gateway to Dannemora, but it's always more random than legend or song can have it.

So, all this randomness, this Catch-23 absurdity; first the carrot, then the stick, then the carrot *and* the stick reduces prisoners to sniveling idiots. Every prison book begins with "I," everyone, even Timerman, is a complaining sniveler. "Then they stuck those electrodes on *my* balls. Ouch! It hurt!" A mass of snivelers, that's guard reality. Who cares, no guard has ever written a prison song.

Mailer complains some that Abbott's guards have no character. Norman is a good man but he has been in prison a total of five days. It does not matter if a guard is okay. So what. They have to conform to a system that if it operated with humanity would not operate at all. The good guards quit. Everyone has met guards who are relatively good guys and more often than not they'll be teamed with a sadist. There is an old yippie proverb: "If you shit in a pitcher of cream, the turds will rise to the top." In other words, evil wins out over good if the container is small and tight. Prison is a very small, tight container.

So that institutional violence, which incidentally pervades all our polite society, gets transferred to the inmates, who are trained to act like gladiators or bulls ready for the arena. Higher-ups in prison relate to violence much the same as National Hockey League officials do—it's part of the game. There is so much killing in prison. It is, after all, a death of numbers. "Six hundred forty weapons uncovered in a quick search of Attica." "Who bought it?" "Nobody in Two H." "What's your number?" "He stuck him *three* times." "What's your fuckin' number, man." It's all numbers and all death. In fact, when you do die, you're "off the count." The count being the most serious moment in any prison. To move or talk means a ticket. The guards rush about counting you. It happens maybe nine times a day. Weighing the meat, chillin' out the jailhouse.

Abbott understands all about numbers dying violent deaths—the cat and mouse survival game behind the walls. He writes one of the most gripping descriptions of murder you will ever read. It is his murder. The one he did as executioner, but also the haunting murder he fears as possible victim. Then he takes us into solitary confinement with him to share the punishment. Abbott has spent fourteen years in solitary. He calls it "the hole." In the East it's called "the box." Both sexist expressions for the vagina. Dry vaginas with concrete teeth.

There is not a lot of remorse in Abbott. Society is very weird about remorse. Prisoners are supposed to feel bad about their crimes, and although there is a long line of repentant sinners outside a thousand parole board meetings, there is not a true ounce of remorse in any American prison. Everyone sees themselves as a victim. Everyone got fucked. And if you listen carefully to the prison jokes you'll see that the protagonist usually ends up the victim. Ironic, since society insists here are the captured predators, the guilty ones. Freud would have had a field day in prison.

So if there's no remorse happening why exactly do these prisons remain?

Well, take my case. The judge said I did not have to be segregated from society, and obviously didn't need to be rehabilitated, but there was some good to be gained by making an example. The deterrent theory of punishment. It was first applied in thirteenth-century Holland when a dog who bit a *Burgermeister* was hanged as a lesson to other dogs. Then followed those wonderfully successful public hangings of pickpockets in London. Occasions that proved easy grabbings for fellow pickpockets who worked the excited crowds. Deterrence is an assumption. The 525,000 inmates in America plus triple that on probation and parole are proof that assumption is questionable. Rehabilitation? There are extremely

few prison officials who still cling to the idea that such alchemy occurs. This pretense went out with notions like the “New Frontier” and the “Great Society.” The statistics are extremely tragic. Out of every ten inmates released, seven quickly return to prison. This gloomy reality maintains itself in all systems, regardless of region. It has become an American constant. Furthermore, what that statistic hides is that the other three were probably innocent and that two of the seven who returned do so because they “learned” their next crime in their last prison. In other words, in addition to tough economic conditions, conservative trends, and so on, the prison system actually grows its own population. It will be hard to control this phenomenon. More difficult, perhaps than cancer. It is common for officials to explain this as older inmates teaching younger inmates new tricks. Abbott says that is so much jive-ass. Inmates don’t talk about how you saw up a stolen car and sell it piecemeal to a Bolivian parts dealer. No one talks about outfoxing border patrols in smuggling operations. You can learn more about that watching television. Criminals don’t crack safes anymore, they stick a gun under your nose and steal your money. Unskilled labor. But what you do learn is *capability*. “What is forced down your throat ... is the *will* to commit crime ... no one has ever come out of prison a better man.” A very true, blunt statement, and it will not be very popular outside because society wants desperately to believe something positive happens behind those walls. That men become men. That sin becomes virtue. That when it’s over, ex-convicts get jobs, go to church, and buy a house. Right!

So in the end there is just segregation as a reason. If you lock a “criminal” up, that’s one less animal preying on society. Well, eliminating the obvious fact that there is lots of crime inside prison, doesn’t this assume a finite number of criminals? Doesn’t it stand to reason then that stuffing the prisons will lower the crime rate? That’s not reality though. Economic conditions, not morality, determine crime rate, as they have since time immemorial. We’re in tough times, so people steal. Jean Valjean was only a criminal in the eyes of the Moral Majority, themselves murderers of ideas. Hypocritical sneak thieves.

Our middle-class education about justice for all is rudely jarred by reality. Like holding onto the fairytale about every poor blah-blah being entitled to a fair trial. To our suburban grammar school mind that is truth. In reality, 85 percent (90 percent in NYC) of all defendants are forced to plea-bargain away their freedom. Expedience, not justice, is the rule of contemporary American law. Abbott will explode most of your mythology about crime and punishment. He is not reviewing movies, remember, he is talking about what *is*, not what was promised.

Abbott knows why inmates are locked up. “The purpose of prison is to ruin me, ruin me completely. The purpose is to mark me, to stamp across my face the track of this beast they call prison.”

In short, to bust balls. The guards are there “to bust your balls.” To jam you and save the institution. Their main objective is to “cover their ass.”

To make it look like they are not responsible. *Cover Your Ass*, is the guard’s prison song. People go out worse than they come in. Sixteen-year-old kids get raped, serious medical problems go untreated, people get stabbed, thousands go crazy, and while all this is happening everyone with any authority thinks only one thought: Cover your ass. Isn’t that what Warren Burger is doing—pontificating about prisons being our national disgrace and yet legalizing bad conditions at Manhattan’s Metropolitan Lockup and more than one inmate to a cell? Overcrowding is the main cause of riots and much violence. Warren Burger, our Chief Injustice, the man probably most responsible for making things bad, publicly deplores the situation. He is simply covering his ass before God.

Finally Abbott deals with inmates. And here there is much overglorification. He rebukes Mailer’s attempts to cast him as hero but he turns around and makes all other inmates exactly that. But inmates are not like James Cagney or Paul Newman. They are not even George Jackson. They are no one you’ve seen in movies or on talk shows or read about. Here are a few shameful statistics: 85 percent of U.S. prisoners are nonwhite, 65 percent black, 20 percent mostly Spanish-speaking. The rest are your Paul Newmans, your Tommy Trantinos (a very good writer caged in New Jersey), and your G. Gordon Liddys, although most are poor, scared farm boys. Why a society that is 85 percent white locks up a society that is 85 percent nonwhite is the kind of question not permitted in decent circles. One either

needs a Doctor Shockley-type to explain how blacks are inherently evil, that their long arms encourage them to theft, or one has to accept that we are a racist society.

The other statistic is a sad legacy of that racist neglect: Half the inmates in prison cannot read or write. The world is so restricted. There is no interest in news, in a typical group a third cannot name the president, none the vice-president. A fellow inmate once asked if I had something for him to eat from my commissary. "Salmon," I replied. "Does it have pork in it?" he questioned back. I don't tell this to be funny, I tell it because it's sad. Sad, the way prisoners will plot a year to escape successfully and then be caught in a few days hanging out at their neighborhood poolhall. Abbott and I would have had some good conversations about Afghanistan, movies, Cuba, abortion, revolution; the chances of us having met are exactly 525,000 to 1. More likely than not we'd be talking about jammin' bitches, or snivelin' about our bids, or braggin' about facin' down some dumb-ass hack. Very few people talk in prison, it is the ultimate face-saving event, more rituals than a Japanese tea ceremony. For when prisoners relate to prisoners, they too must "cover their ass."

Where Abbott sees revolution pounding in every prisoner's breast, I see a craving to watch more television cartoons. When Abbott explains he came in looking for individual justice but should have expected social justice (he says this to excuse black "oppression" of whites in prison), he forgets the absence of communal justice. For every prisoner that will cover a brother's back, there are ten who will not. Whoever said there is honor among thieves had to have been a thief. Maybe years ago, the sixties were very much a phenomenon inside the prison walls. But the Me generation has replaced that and there is very little revolutionary consciousness left. There are few insurrections, many riots. There are not even that many Muslims left, for that movement seems to be dying also. A typical prison conversation is not about revolution. Here is a typical conversation:

A: What do you want, S?

S: I want money, lots of money.

A: What for?

S: I will buy a city.

A: Why?

S: So everyone will work for me.

Today, for the most part, the authorities seem to have broken any collective will. Everybody hates the system all right but hardly anyone carries the vision of the united proletariat. S. doesn't want any fuckin' revolution, he just wants to be king, like the other asshole kings out there.

Abbott is very good on understanding the "reverse racism" in prison. To his credit, he doesn't get distracted by the nuisances of being dominated by a different culture. He gets along with blacks. They don't beat up on him. In fact, most prison violence is not interracial. Black on black, white on white, or brown on brown. Just like outside. However, also like outside, when it does become interracial, an incident can lead to tribal warfare. Warfare enclosed by forty-foot-high walls. The authorities use this reverse racism as an excuse. "We don't have good prisons like the Scandinavians do because of the blacks." You will hear that every time from experts. What a copout. There is always conflict in prison. Age conflict. Religion. Citycountry. Politics. Straight-gay. To say nothing of the bug cases. We don't have prisons like the Scandinavians do because on all the basic issues of life they encourage collectivity and we do not. They try to institute community. They don't push men to rat on each other, to ass-kiss in competition for favors, to eat their self-esteem like a hamburger. They don't divide in order to conquer. If they do, then their prisons stink too.

The whites, of course, reinforce racism. They want you in their "culture" and that culture is racist. So white guards will instruct you about the behavior of "jungle bunnies" and the excuses you have to make for "spies" who, after all, still have one foot on the banana boat. White inmates pull "integrationists" back into their camp "for your own good." There are some Caucasians like Abbott, but this is still the rule. The turds rising to the top of the cream pitcher, again. It is hard to emerge from prison not a racist. Just as it is almost impossible to emerge with no burning thoughts of revenge. This is what Abbott means about prisons teaching you the capability for murder.

So I start out reviewing Jack Abbott's prison experience and end up telling my own thoughts. Every American prisoner does that. We are conditioned to make prison an individual experience. Compare. Why did he get two milks and I only one? Are you medium or max? How come I got ten years and he only five *for the same thing*? Is he a squealer? Can I take him? Prison is a sniveler's supermarket. A place you learn jealousy, suspicion, and hatred. It originates with how people get to be prisoners in the first place. With the arbitrary definition of crime and the *not* so arbitrary selection of who gets to define that definition. One class is, after all, judging another. There are not "all kinds" here as the tour guide claims. Sure, one of one kind, a thousand of the other. It is here that Abbott's courage ventures the furthest. He declares himself in the end to be a Communist. He risks thousands of well-meaning people closing ranks with him. Of being judged before his day in the arena of ideas.

A Communist!?! At one moment of poetic provocation, he declares only Communists help prisoners. Which is sad because given our "democracy" we are free to choose everything but that! For all intents and purposes there are *no* American Communists. Hence no one helping. Perhaps Abbott means that. This declaration, this fixation with "American injustice" as opposed to "human nature" as cause of crime, turns the passive reader into an active prison guard. Abbott waves the red flag, his turn at matador. He corners you against the wall, you must think and act too quickly to survive. With his description of prison life, he shoves in the sword, with his blunt politics he yanks it straight up to your skull.

This song sayer is not filled with self-pity. He is not crying for mercy. He is toughing it out, laying all his cards on the table, the way Gary Gilmore did at the end. They are very close in spirit. . . . When a fighting bull kills the matador, usually another toreador will finish him off, but if he has fought exceptionally well, as say the bull who put an end to the great Manolete, they will turn him loose to pasture. Jack Henry Abbott is out among you now. Do not welcome him back. He has not been there before. Yet hear this man's song. You will know nothing of prison until you do.

—JUNE 1981

Following Jack Henry Abbott's involvement in a despicable and heinous murder last summer, he jumped parole and fled to Mexico, then to the oil fields of Louisiana, where he was apprehended after two months as a fugitive. He has since been returned to Manhattan and faces a murder trial as well as a serious parole violation. Even if acquitted on the murder charge, he is certain to be returned to prison to finish out his life sentence. No event in memory has so jolted the New York literary community. When *In the Belly of the Beast* was first published in June, it earned universal praise from critics, and Abbott was hailed as a brilliant literary discovery. He was dubbed Norman Mailer's protege, for it was mainly through Mailer's efforts that the convict's writing came to print. A circle of admirers, centered around the *New York Review of Books*, joined Mailer in petitioning for Abbott's early release on parole.

After the brutal murder and flight from justice, the literary community did a complete double take. The book was shown to have several misstatements of fact, it was immediately removed from the "Editor's Choice" section of the *New York Times Book Review*, and at least a dozen investigative reporters sifted through Abbott's prison career and his brief one-month tour of the literary jet set. Almost universal scorn was heaped on Mailer and friends, culminating in a vicious swipe on the first *Saturday Night Live* show of the season.

Many of the reports point to the complete disorientation of Abbott in moving from twenty-five years of incarceration to the glamour world of bigcity life in the fast lane. He did not know how to open a bank account, where one bought toothpaste, or how to order from a menu. From two telephone conversations I had with him, it was obvious he has talked just a few times on the phone. In trying to arrange a meeting, he insisted I meet him at a restaurant on Third Street. "Third Street and what?" I inquired. He did not understand the question. His interview on *Good Morning America* was extremely disassociative, with several of his answers drifting off into space. An interview with *Rolling Stone* was so disjointed it could not be published. No critics blamed the prison system for failing to equip released inmates with even the barest coping mechanisms to make it on the outside. In fact, the prison system remained remarkably outside the scope of criticism as angry fingers were pointed at Mailer and friends as naive do-gooders, if not willing accomplices to murder.

In all, a complete lack of understanding of how the prison system works has been evidenced. Abbott was due for parole just two months after his release from prison. Prison authorities—and no one else—hold and decide who can use the keys of freedom. What was apparent from subsequent disclosures of Abbott's records was that outside support for his literary talent was of little consideration to the parole board. Of far greater concern was Abbott's apparent willingness to serve as an informer inside the prison during his last year of confinement. His record shows he gave authorities information they wanted on several prison organizers. In addition, supporters of Abbott received letters from convicts who claimed he had also squealed on a group of young lawyers, falsely accusing them of smuggling drugs into the prison. Prison officials consider informers prime candidates for early parole, not just for the services performed, but for their safety as well.

Whether one blames the prison system, Abbott, or a combination thereof, it's difficult to see how scorn can be laid on those who recognized and spoke up for talent. The United States has a per capita prison population topped only by South Africa. The only social program pictured favorably by the Reagan administration is a call for \$2 billion more in prison construction funds. Reagan himself chides theorists for blaming crime on factors like poverty and racism. Across the land, politicians scream for stiffer penalties and longer sentences. Little attention is paid to the lack of rehabilitation and resocialization programs. The demand is for increasing the *quantity* of life behind bars, not the *quality*.

The tragedy of the Abbott affair is not just that one victim lay dead on a New York sidewalk, though that, of course, is tragic. The greater tragedy is that too many prisoners who deserve a break will be denied, and too many people who care about reform will turn their backs. Hope has received a shattering blow.

—POSTSCRIPT *October 1981 Edgecombe Correctional Facility, Manhattan (minimum security—work-release program)*



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Square Dancing in the Ice Age

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