Words, Books, Images, and the Long Eighteenth Century

Essays for Allen Reddick

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Illustrating Byron's *Prisoner of Chillon*

Biopolitics and the art of bearing witness

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In his "Essay on Fables" (1759), Gotthold Ephraim Lessing argues that a good fable cannot be illustrated: doing so would necessarily reduce the story's catastrophe to a single event.[1] The German theorist developed his interest in the possibilities and limits of visual versus verbal media in *Laokoön* (1766), where he famously challenges the classical equivalence between poetry and painting. While poetry unfolds through time, painting is spatial and static, obliging the artist to freeze the text's most imaginatively expressive scenes into a comprehensive, singular image. Because he was principally interested in actions and affects that resist visualization, Lessing chose as his central paradigm the statue of Laocoön and his sons, perhaps the most representative icon of human suffering in Western art. Whereas Johann Joachim Winckelmann had described the sculptor's aestheticizing of suffering as the expression of a "noble simplicity and quiet grandeur," Lessing claims that painting is unable to represent extreme pain, an affect incompatible with beauty. To demonstrate his point, he contrasts the statue's self-contained, transcendent representation of pain with Laocoön's hideous cries in book II of Virgil's *Aeneid*, an unrestricted and immanent expression of affect that enables the poet, unlike the artist, to describe and motivate suffering. For Lessing, the ethical function of poetry is superior to that of the visual arts because texts provide more complex, intellectualized explanations of human actions and feelings than do sensuous images.[2]

This essay addresses the rhetoric of suffering, the question of its representability, and its moral function both in Byron's "The Prisoner of Chillon.

1. Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Fables and Epigrams, with Essays on Fable and Epigram* (London: John and H.L. Hunt, 1825), 80–81. Lessing describes the catastrophe as a succession of changes all contributing to the final moral.

2. Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, "*From* Laocoön," in *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, ed. Vincent Leitch (New York: Norton, 2001), 556–560; Tim Mehigan, "Lessing's Laocoön and the Rhetoric of Pain," in "Anatomy & Poetics," special issue, *Double Dialogues* 6 (Winter 2005), http://www.doubledialogues.com/article/lessings-laokoon-and-the-rhetoric-of-pain/.

https://doi.org/10.1075/fillm.16.12vin

A Fable" (1816) and in the poem's nineteenth-century illustrations.[3] The poem's often overlooked subtitle draws attention not only to its didactic content, personification of animals, or numerous embellishments to the story of François Bonivard, the original prisoner of Chillon, but also to what Lessing theorized as the fable's resistance to reproduction in the visual arts. While I have found no direct evidence of Lessing as a source, Byron's poem recalls the Laocoön statue in at least two other ways.[4] First, both Laocoön and Bonivard were clerics punished for warning their compatriots against foreign occupation. Second, Byron attributes to the Genevan patriot two imaginary brothers who suffer on each side of him in the dungeon, a situation that evokes both the passion of Jesus at Calvary, and Laocoön alongside his two dying sons. Placing Bonivard in between two other prisoners enables an act of moral sympathy based on imagination and on sight.[5] As the poem's multiple references to vision indicate, seeing and being seen are crucial to its meaning.[6] The Prisoner's witnessing of his brothers' suffering leads, in canto nine, not just to pity or to mutual sympathy but to a state of death-in-life that I compare to Giorgio Agamben's concept of "bare life." This, the poem's crux, operates as a representational gap, one that challenged illustrators to find alternate ways to express the Prisoner's extreme condition. By focusing on the action of bearing witness, in particular, Ford Madox Brown most successfully captures Byron's unheroic and chillingly prescient moral fable of imprisonment.

Bearing witness in "The Prisoner"

When Byron and Shelley visited Chillon Castle during their week-long sailing tour of Lake Geneva on 15 June 1816, the castle was still relatively unknown, serving as a military arsenal whose claim to fame was a brief mention in Rousseau's

3. "Shackles" as a metaphor for the constraints that Johnson the lexicographer must accept is the theme of Lynda Mugglestone's essay in Part I of this volume.

4. The most complete study of the poem's sources is Eugen Kölbing, *The Prisoner of Chillon by Lord Byron, Kritischer Text mit Einleitung und Anmerkungen* (Weimar: Emil Felber, 1898). To the best of my knowledge, only one critic, Philip Martin, has drawn a connection between "The Prisoner of Chillon" and the *Laocoön*. Philip W. Martin, *Byron: A Poet Before His Public* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 94.

5. Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, ed. D.D. Raphael and A.L. Macfie (Indianapolis, Indiana: Liberty Fund, 1976), 10–11.

6. George Gordon Lord Byron, "The Prisoner of Chillon. A Tale," in Lord Byron: *The Complete Poetical Works*, ed. Jerome J. McGann (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), 4:4–16. There are 18 variations on "see," while there are 13 references to related words such as "sight" and "eye."

Julie, or the New Heloisa (1761).[7] This belied its dark history, including a massacre of Jews during the Great Plague, witch burnings in the early seventeenth century, and the imprisonment of political prisoners all the way to the French Revolution, when it was sometimes referred to as the "Swiss Bastille."[8] Ignorant of much of this history, Shelley was nevertheless deeply impressed by its dungeon, hanging beam, and postern. With Tacitus and the Bourbon Restoration in mind, he gave Chillon a republican inflexion, writing in his letter-diary that he "never saw a monument more terrible of that inhuman tyranny, which it has been a delight of man to exercise over man."[9] Byron for his part began composing a verse-tale two days later, detained by violent winds and heavy rain in Ouchy, a lakeside port below Lausanne. Like Shelley, Byron depended on the castle's guides for the poem's historical background, explaining why his narrative contains many factual errors and is largely fictional.[10] Narrated by Bonivard, the only surviving prisoner, the poem describes how he must watch the agonizing death of his two brothers in the dungeon with him, the first too strong, the second too sensitive to survive. As a result, the narrator almost dies, then, like Charles Dickens's Doctor Manette, is recalled to life and finally liberated, yet never recovers psychologically from his captivity.[11]

Despite its lack of vivid action or peripeteia, Byron's "The Prisoner of Chillon" captured the nineteenth-century imagination and made the castle famous. The poem was very quickly translated into twenty-two languages; schoolchildren learned its 329 lines by heart; and it gave rise to many illustrations, songs, and other forms of cultural production.[12] Whereas John Ruskin celebrated the "Pris-

7. For a chronological account and bibliography on Byron's stay in Switzerland in 1816, see Patrick Vincent, "'Truth of Soul's Life' or 'Distorted Optics'?: A Historiography of the Genevan Summer of 1816," *The Keats-Shelley Review*, 30, no. 2 (September 2016): 122–141.

8. Patrick Vincent, ed. *Chillon: A Literary* Guide (Veytaux: Fondation du Château de Chillon, 2010), 37.

9. Percy Bysshe Shelley, *The Letters of Percy Bysshe* Shelley, ed. Frederick L. Jones (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1964), 1:485–6. See, also, Michael Rossington, "Rousseau and Tacitus: Republican Inflections in the Shelleys' History of a Six Weeks' Tour," *European Romantic Review*, 19 (2008): 321–33.

10. Byron only discovered the historical details of Bonivard's captivity in early August 1816, inspiring his more factual "Sonnet on Chillon." George Gordon Lord Byron, *Byron's Letters*, ed. Leslie A. Marchand (London: John Murray, 1976), 5:87.

11. Charles Dickens, *The Letters of Charles Dickens*, ed. Kathleen Tillotson, (Oxford, 1977), 4:601. Dickens visited Chillon in 1846, thirteen years before *A Tale of Two Cities*, and was deeply moved by the dungeon.

12. For translations, see Richard Cardwell, ed. *The Reception of Byron in Europe*, 2 volumes (London: Thoemmes, 2004). The numbers of engravings and illustrations of Chillon castle are too numerous to list here. Examples of musical scores include J. Hart Gordon, *The Prisoner of*

oner"'s precise descriptions in order to disprove Reynolds' ideal of the Grand Style,[13] most critics have on the contrary remarked on its power of abstract conceptuality and its mood of sublime obscurity.[14] As in Milton's hell, captivity, solitude, and death are sources of Burkean terror but also of sympathy. Walter Scott understood this better than anyone when he reviewed the poem in October 1816:

> But it has not been the purpose of Lord Byron to paint the peculiar character of Bonnivard [sic].... The object of the poem, like that of Sterne's celebrated sketch of the prisoner, is to consider captivity in the abstract, and to mark its effects in gradually chilling the mental powers as it benumbs and freezes the animal frame, until the unfortunate victim becomes, as it were, a part of his dungeon, and identified with his chains.... It will readily be allowed that this singular poem is more powerful than pleasing. The dungeon of Bonnivard is, like that of Ugolino, a subject too dismal for even the power of the painter or poet to counteract its horrors.... Yet as a picture, however gloomy the colouring, it may rival any which Lord Byron has drawn, nor is it possible to read it without a sinking of the heart, corresponding with that which he describes the victim to have suffered.[15]

Like Yorick's mental image of a captive in his dungeon, the passage relies on painterly terms to emphasize the poem's visual qualities.[16] At the same time, Scott notes the difficulty for either painter or poet to represent extreme suffering by aestheticizing it as noble or grand: the artist can only witness its horror. He nevertheless insists that suffering is still a worthy artistic subject, its principle ethical function being not transcendence, but rather imaginative sympathy with the victim.

Scott's insight rests primarily on canto nine, which directly follows the narrator-hero's helpless witnessing of his two brothers' deaths, and describes his transformation into an "animal frame." Byron's almost scientific account of the

Chillon, Song for a Bass Voice with Pianoforte Accompaniment (NA) and Charles Ancliffe *The Prisoner of Chillon: Tone-Poem* for piano solo (1925), both at the British Library.

13. John Ruskin, *The Works of John Ruskin*, ed. E.T. Cook and A. Wedderburn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 5:24–27.

14. See, for example, Gerald Wood, "Nature and Narrative in Byron's 'The Prisoner of Chillon,'" *Keats-Shelley Journal*, 24 (1975): 108–117; William Ulmer, "The Dantean Politics of 'The Prisoner of Chillon,'" *Keats-Shelley Journal*, 35 (1986): 23–29; and Ian Dennis, "'Making Death a Victory': Victimhood and Power in Byron's 'Prometheus' and 'The Prisoner of Chillon,'" *Keats-Shelley Journal*, 50 (2001): 144–161.

15. Walter Scott, "Review of Byron, *Childe Harold* Canto III and *The Prisoner of* Chillon," *The Quarterly Review*, xxxi (October 1816): 172–208.

16. On the influence of Sterne and images of Sterne's captive, see Martin, *Byron*, 91–93.

psychological effects of captivity could draw on a number of sources: Dante's lines on Ugolino in the *Inferno*;[17] Tasso's incarceration at St. Anna; philanthropic treatises published in the previous century, notably by Cesare Beccaria and John Howard; memoirs and treatises on the Bastille;[18] gothic fiction and drama; and perhaps even a play by Chilean revolutionary Bernardo O'Higgins on the oppression of Ireland that Byron read at Drury Lane in 1815.[19] Prisons in the eighteenth and early-nineteenth century symbolized political oppression and arbitrary rule, and, inversely, the extinction of republican hope.[20] But they also stood for modern life in general, as we can see in the motifs of the happy prisoner and of the world as a prison.[21] As such, Byron's chilling account of Bonivard's loss of humanity and identification with his cell also accords with the recent concept of biopolitics, and in particular Giorgio Agamben's notion of "bare life" (*nuda vita*), defined as "an inhuman kind of life that exists at the limit of ethical and political categories."[22] Bare life is not just a form of moral death: the last century's totalitarian experiments encouraged states of exception, or situations justifying the sovereign to operate outside the rule of law, that relied on bare life to put morality itself into question. According to Agamben, the camp rather than the prison is the paradigmatic political space of modernity because it normalizes the state of exception and deliberately produces bare life.[23]

In a passage sometimes compared to Coleridge's "Rime of the Ancient Mariner," Byron imagines the State or biopower's capacity to produce bare life by stripping the prisoner of all rights, reducing him to a death-in-life state:

> What next befell me then and there
> I know not well—I never knew—

17. Martin also discusses the possible impact of representations of Ugolino by Reynolds and Fuseli. Martin, Byron, 93–94.

18. Cf. Honoré Riquetti, Comte de Mirabeau, *Des lettres de cachet et des prisons d'état, ouvrage posthume* (Hamburg, 1782); François Charpentier, *La Bastille dévoilée, ou recueil de pièces authentiques pour servir à son histoire* (Paris, 1789).

19. Byron, *Letters and Journals*, IV, 323.

20. For a discussion of Thomas Hollis's understanding of republican liberty, see Antoinina Bevan Zlatar's essay in Part II of this volume.

21. See Victor Brombert, "Esquisse de la prison heureuse," *Revue d'Histoire littéraire* de la France, no. 2 (Mar. - Apr., 1971), 247–261 and Stephan Oettermann, *The Panorama: History of a Mass Medium* (New York: Zone Books, 1997), 20–21.

22. Alex Murray and Jessica Whyte, eds. *The Agamben Dictionary* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), 30.

23. Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998).

First came the loss of light, and air,
And then of darkness too:
I had no thought, no feeling—none—
Among the stones I stood a stone....
For all was blank, and bleak, and grey;
It was not night, it was not day....
But vacancy absorbing space,
And fixedness without a place;
There were no stars, no earth, no time,
No check, no change, no good, no crime,
But silence, and a stirless breath
Which neither was of life nor death;
A sea of stagnant idleness,
Blind, boundless, mute, and motionless![24]

Rhymed couplets, parallelisms, repetition, alliteration, negation, caesuras, and dashes all contribute to a strong impression of inanition. The action here is all internal to the mind and hence invisible, a condition of suspended ontology that defies Enlightenment definitions of human subjectivity grounded in reason ("vacancy absorbing space /... no time"), morality ("no good, no crime"), or even language ("silence, and a stirless breath"). The Prisoner ceases to be fully human yet is not yet inhuman, an aporia that may be compared to the gap created by bare life between legal and biological definitions of selfhood, or between language and non-language.[25] This liminal state necessarily challenged illustrators, none of whom chose to represent this canto. If, according to Lessing as interpreted by W.J.T. Mitchell, poetry is meant to be the "art of time, motion, and action," and painting "the art of space, stasis, and arrested action,"[26] then how might an artist illustrate a poem that itself describes a psychological state outside of time, motion, and action?

In the poem's final canto, we discover that sovereignty's power of de-subjectivization has permanently crippled the Prisoner, so accustomed has he become to his own imprisonment:

We were all inmates of one place,
And I, the monarch of each race,

24. Byron, *Poetical Works*, 4:11–12

25. Nicholas Chare, "The Gap in Context: Giorgio Agamben's Remnants of Auschwitz," *Cultural Critique*, 64 (2006): 40–68.

26. W.J.T. Mitchell, *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 48.

Had power to kill—yet, strange to tell!
In quiet we had learn'd to dwell,
Nor slew I of my subjects one,
What Sovereign hath so little done?
My very chains and I grew friends,
So much a long communion tends
To make us what we are:—even I
Regain'd my freedom with a sigh.[27]

The above passage rewrites both Christian ontology ("a long communion tends /... what we are") and Enlightenment concepts of selfhood based on the free, rational subject by associating existence with servitude. It reminds us how politically subversive Byron's poem was at the time of the Restoration, but also how extraordinarily contemporary its message remains today. Byron's publisher, John Murray, was keenly aware of this when he allowed his editor William Gifford to bowdlerize the two lines underlined above without the poet's authorization. While one critic has compared the Prisoner here to a "sort of pathetic third-rate St. Francis,"[28] one may also read the ending as describing a state of ontological openness between man and animal, a more ecologically hopeful interpretation of biopolitical theory and bare life.[29]

Finding redemption in such a post-modern form of intersubjectivity would be anachronistic, however. If Byron's Prisoner is born too late to be a religious martyr, he is also born too soon to be a proto-ecologist.[30] One best understands Chillon's destruction of moral goods such as sacrifice, self-respect, and dignity when reading the poem within its historical context. The Holy Alliance, as Byron acutely understood, was setting out to cynically and brutally repress all expressions of liberty.[31] The poem's moral or redemptive power lies not in a final epiphany, but in the fact that the Prisoner survives at the end of the poem. He resembles the camp survivor who, like Primo Levi, continues living for the sole purpose of being able to bear witness, yet always with the shame of having sur-

27. Byron, *Poetical Works*, 4:16.

28. Dennis, "Victimhood and Power," 154.

29. See Giorgio Agamben, *The Open: Man and Animal*, trans. Kevin Attell (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2002).

30. Several nineteenth-century artists sought to represent the historical figure of Bonivard as a dignified monk in medieval garb, ignoring Byron's secular representation of his hero. These include Jean-Léonard Lugardon's "La Délivrance de Bonivard" (1824), at the Musée d'art et d'histoire in Geneva, and Joseph Hornung's "Episode de la captivité de François Bonivard à Chillon" (1845), at Chillon.

31. See, for example, Byron, *Byron's Letters and Journals*, iv: 302.

vived and the embarrassment of having witnessed something beyond comprehension or communication. That something to which one cannot bear witness, as Agamben has argued in *Remnants of Auschwitz*, is the *Muselmann*, a label attributed by camp prisoners to those among them who were at a point of no return and existed in a state of limbo between life and death.

Another female survivor, Feliksa Piekarska, describes the condition of being a *Muselmann* in words that echo those of Byron's Prisoner:

> I personally was a Muselmann for a short while. I remember that after the move to the barrack, I completely collapsed as far as my psychological life was concerned. The collapse took the following form: I was overcome by a general apathy; nothing interested me; I no longer reacted to either external or internal stimuli; I stopped washing, even when there was water; I no longer even felt hungry.[32]

According to camp superstition, the *Muselmann* had gorgon-like powers, its gaze causing death. Agamben cites Aldo Carpi, professor of painting at the Academy of Brera and another camp survivor, who writes that "No one wants camp scenes and figures, no one wants to see the *Muselmann*."[33] Bearing witness to the unwitnessable, as Levi, Pierkarska, Capri and other camp survivors have eloquently attested, was therefore not simply an act of courage, but also a daily struggle and a moral imperative, a way for the ethical and political subject to resist biopower by preserving the *Muselmann*'s humanity while also acknowledging his or her desubjectivization.

This ethical action of bearing witness, I would argue, constitutes the central drama of the "The Prisoner," one that only a few illustrators have been able to successfully capture. It relies on the narrator's ability to express his growing sense of alienation, while at the same time striving to remain emotionally attached to his two dying brothers:

> And we were three—yet, each alone,
> We could not move a single pace,
> We could not see each other's face,
> But with that pale and livid light
> That made us strangers in our sight;
> And thus together—yet apart,
> Fettered in hand, but pined in heart.[34]

32. Cited in Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2002), 165.

33. Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz*, 50.

34. Byron, *Poetical Works*, 4:10.

Their becoming "strangers in our sight" is a result of the inmates' conviction of their developing inhumanity, which makes them no longer able, or willing, to look at one another face to face, embarrassed as they are by what they witness. Like the dash that separates but also connects two distinct terms, however, the three brothers remain bound together at the same time that they grow apart. Nicholas Chare, writing about Agamben's theory of bearing witness, argues that in the dialectic between human and inhuman, the ethical subject must resist the sublation of one or the other term, focusing instead on the relation between the two: "The witness does not decide between the two terms but rather resides between them."[35] This is what the narrator successfully does in "The Prisoner," forcing himself to witness again and again the prison's "horrors,"[36] producing a testimony that preserves the relation not only between human and inhuman, but also between life and death, political and natural man, and the animate and inanimate worlds. As I show below, those artists who were best able to reproduce this suspended dialectic, notably by working with the triangular configuration of the three imprisoned brothers and the directionality of their gaze, were most successful at illustrating Byron's fable.[37]

Illustrating "The Prisoner"

Perhaps the earliest of all the poem's illustrations appears in *The Royal Engagement Pocket Atlas* for 1818.[38] Among the thirty illustrative copper-engraved vignettes, all taken from Byron's poetry and drawn by the British painter and illustrator Thomas Stothard, one finds the image of a young, beardless prisoner in breeches, sitting hands tied behind his back against a column, the silhouette of his two brothers against parallel columns behind him (Figure 1). The image adorns the month of December, its legend indicating that it is meant to illustrate the above passage from the third canto, in which the narrator laments that "we were three—yet, each alone." The massive columns, which match the Roman block numerals and type, capture Chillon's inhuman monumentality, while the chiaroscuro lighting dramatizes the Prisoner's solitude. What is missing, however,

35. Chare, "The Gap in Context," 47.

36. Byron, "The Prisoner," 10.

37. For a very different type of triangular configuration and the dynamic of the gaze, see Simone Höhn's discussion of Richardson's use of the sentimental tableau in *Sir Charles Grandison* above.

38. William Angus, after Thomas Stothard, "The Prisoner of Chillon, canto 3," *Royal Engagement Pocket Atlas* (London: W. March and Southampton: T. Baker, 1818).

is the second, humanizing half of the dialectic. The columns are too large to enable the prisoners to see one another. Stothard's image highlighting the Prisoner's solitude resembles two later illustrations, the first an 1862 painting by the working-class Liverpudlian artist William Daniels, the second an engraving for an anthology entitled *Pen and Pencil Pictures from the Poets* (1866) by the Scottish illustrator John Pettie.[39] Daniels represents a shaggy, white-haired man in rags looking upward, chained by the foot to the column, an earthen jar of water by his side, a composition that resembles Joseph Wright's *The Captive* (c. 1775–7) based on Sterne. Pettie's Prisoner sits on the ground chained to a giant column, his head in his hand. Like the rhyme between "alone" and "stone," the alignment of the Prisoner with the column in all three pictures is effective in underlining his stone-like apathy, yet by occluding the other prisoners, they deny the all-important moral action of witnessing.

A second set of illustrations consists of four outline drawings by the popular Victorian sculptor Frederick Thrupp.[40] Published along with nine other images illustrating Byron's *Manfred* as lithographic plates in 1837, when Thrupp was studying in Rome, the illustrations are also indexed in French and Italian, indicating that the publisher, Ackermann, was aiming his book at a Continental market. Clearly modeled on John Flaxman, but no doubt also influenced by Moritz Retzsch's popular illustrations of Shakespeare and of Goethe's *Faust*,[41] Thrupp's drawings represent clusters of people, often organized in a triangle. In the first of these, meant like Stothard's image to illustrate canto three, the three brothers sit in clear sight of one another but are too ashamed to look, simplifying the poem by showing only their condition as strangers (Figure 2). In a second engraving, the narrator, sitting in a corner, looks at his brother's nude corpse, as it is lowered by two Phrygian-capped guards into the grave, illustrating canto seven. Both images strongly suggest that Thrupp directly modeled himself on the Laocoön statue at the Vatican. The third shows the narrator, having burst his chain, lying in grief over his other brother's prostate body, a scene from the end of canto eight. The last scene illustrates the final canto where he is released and walks out, his eyes lowered, his crippled condition giving concern to his jailers. While all four images

39. William Daniels, *The Prisoner of Chillon* (1862), oil on canvas, Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool; J. Pettie, Illustration to "The Prisoner of Chillon," in *Pen and Pencil Pictures from the Poets* (London: William Nimmo, 1866). See, also, Julien Valoue de Villeneuve after William Lock III, *Illustration to Byron's "Prisoner of Chillon"* (ca. 1824–30), Lithograph on chine collé, printed by Villain, British Museum.

40. Frederick Thrupp, *Compositions in Outline from Lord Byron's "Manfred" and "Prisoner of Chillon"* (London: Ackermann, 1837).

41. I am grateful to Professor Evanghelia Stead, Université de Versailles Saint-Quentin, for this information.

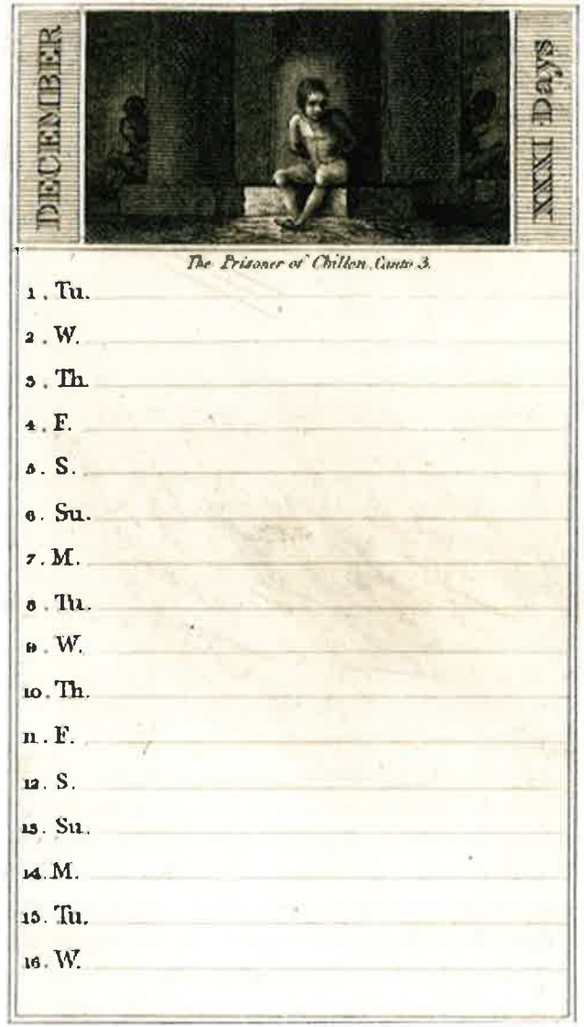

Figure 1. William Angus, after Thomas Stothard, "The Prisoner of Chillon. Canto 3," *Royal Engagement Pocket Atlas* (London: W. March & Son, and Southampton: T. Baker, 1818), British Museum.

dramatize the poem's pathos, their figures come across as too dignified, even the jailers. Although Thrupp entered the Royal Academy too late to study under Flaxman, his time in Rome and friendship with Danish sculptor Bertel Thorvaldsen likely taught him the classical imperative of transforming extreme horror into

something tasteful. As a reviewer in *The Literary Gazette* remarked approvingly, the artist "has retained enough of the natural to render them interesting to human beings generally, and has introduced enough of the ideal to redeem them from the slightest meanness or vulgarity."[42]

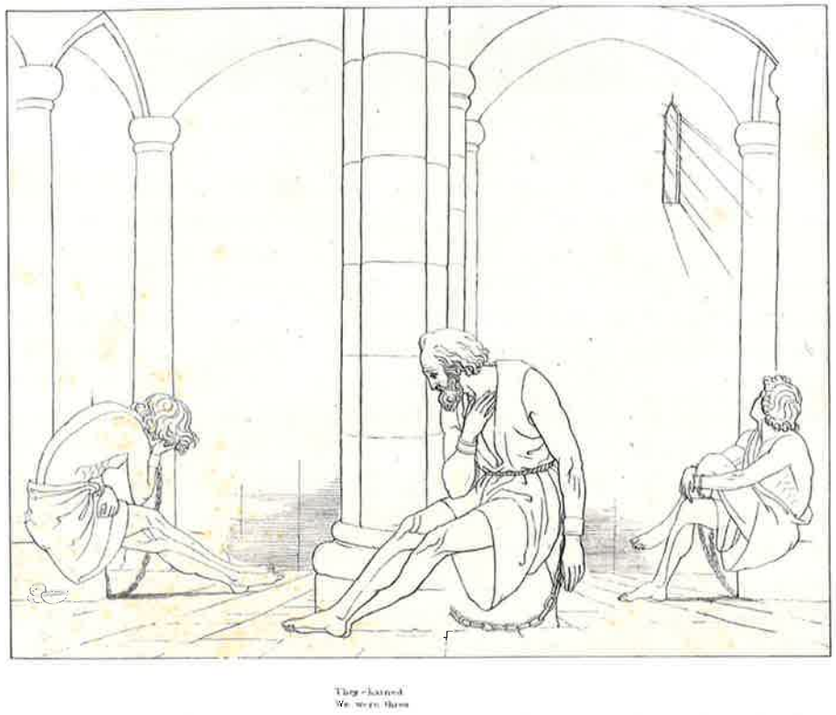

Figure 2. Frederick Thrupp, "They chained us each to a column stone, / We were three," *Compositions in Outline from Lord Byron's "Manfred" and "Prisoner of Chillon"* (London: Ackermann, 1837), lithography on india paper, private collection.

The two best known illustrations, Eugène Delacroix's "Le Prisonnier de Chillon" (1834) and Ford Madox Brown's "The Prisoner of Chillon" (1843), are fully realized works in oil. Painted shortly after the loss of his nephew and exhibited at the salon of 1835, Delacroix's "Prisonnier" represents the Prisoner desperately reaching toward his dead elder brother to his left but being retained by his chain, a scene succinctly described in one line from canto seven: "though hard

42. Review of *Compositions in Outline from Lord Byron's 'Manfred' and 'Prisoner of Chillon'* by Frederick Thrupp, *The Literary Gazette*, 27 May 1837: 341.

I strove, but strove in vain." In the background to his right, one guesses the outline of his younger brother. The hero's beard, muscular arms, and gesture of revolt remind us once more of Laocoön. Unlike Delacroix's later "Tasso in the Madhouse" (1839), however, also inspired by a Byron poem, the main subject's lack of facial expression, and the fact that the brother looks calmly asleep, make us forget that he is witnessing a process of dehumanization. It is quite likely that Madox Brown saw Delacroix's work when in Paris in 1843, in turn painting his own oil painting of the same scene.[43] Unlike Delacroix's sleeping elder brother, Brown's figure, bare-chested, large footed, and obviously strong, struggles Prometheus-like against his fate, giving the impression of great suffering (Figure 3). The narrator to his right looks across at him, clearly bearing witness in a pose also similar to Laocoön's. Yet the center of the composition is dominated by the effeminate and inexplicably sexualized younger brother of canto eight. He wears Renaissance-style blue striped trousers, a cod piece and a red bonnet that draw the viewer away from the dying elder brother, who in fact points toward his younger sibling, as if to protect him from his own terrifying fate. This action of deflecting attention away from suffering, and focusing instead on filial love, arguably maintains the complex relation between human and inhuman that is so essential to the act of testimony. On the other hand, the younger brother's provocative pose, perhaps meant to suggest a link between violence and eroticism, is nowhere to be found in Byron's poem.

Brown was more successful at representing the moral action of bearing witness in a wood-cut illustration for a popular poetry anthology, Robert Wilmott's *Poets of the Nineteenth Century* (1857).[44] The Dalziel brothers commissioned the artist in 1856 to produce a single design to illustrate Byron's poem. Even though wood engraving had become the main form of book illustration by the mid-Victorian period, and George and Edward Dalziel were the best known of the so-called woodpeckers, Brown had never worked in that medium or for the Dalziels. He was offered eight pounds for the commission, a very generous amount for such a small image. As he was a perfectionist, the picture took him approximately fourteen days, a task carefully recorded in the painter's journal. Brown chose to represent a passage in canto seven that immediately follows the action in his 1843 painting: the Prisoner begs the guards to bury his dead elder brother outside, where the sun might shine, a request that is answered with cold laughter.

The picture is the most crowded of all those we have seen, representing the three prisoners and three guards, yet each has a clear function in the overall com-

43. Julian Treuherz, *Ford Madox Brown: Pre-Raphaelite Pioneer* (Manchester: Philip Wilson, 2011), 25.

44. Ford Madox Brown, The Prisoner of Chillon, ed. R. Willmott, (London: Routledge, 1857).

Figure 3. Ford Madox Brown, *The Prisoner of Chillon* (1843), oil on canvas, Manchester Art Gallery.

position (Figure 4). In the background, a guard in a medieval outfit smokes nonchalantly by a window, while in the foreground another detaches the corpse as he looks quizzically toward the Prisoner, and a third, alternatively named in his diary the "jeering grave digger" and "old grinning grave digger," excavates a shallow hole.[45] The latter guard, while he does not in fact jeer, shows none of the humanizing humor commonly associated with the grave-digging scene in *Hamlet*. On the contrary, his expressionless face is chilling, as is his strong grip on the corpse's hair. All these looks and gestures remind us that normality is the true horror of the camp. In contrast, chained to the column to the left is the younger brother who observes the scene with imploring eyes. He has an effeminate, typically pre-Raphaelite face and long hair, but none of the eroticism of Brown's earlier painting. The focus is on the skeletal corpse in the foreground, which is aligned with his kneeling brother at the base of a column in the middle ground. The viewer is drawn into the action by the latter's arm movement, which points toward a light beam coming from a casement to his right, hinting that we too run the risk of being transformed into stone when looking into the Gorgon-like eyes of the cadaver. The Prisoner's look and gesture are not heroic: rather, they express the agony and shame felt when faced with what Agamben calls "the shipwreck of dignity."[46] Tellingly, unlike in other illustrations, the shaft of light does not fall on him or on his dead brother, but in between, as if to emphasize the relation between the two.

45. Ford Madox Brown, *The Diary*, ed. Virginia Surtees (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981), 167.

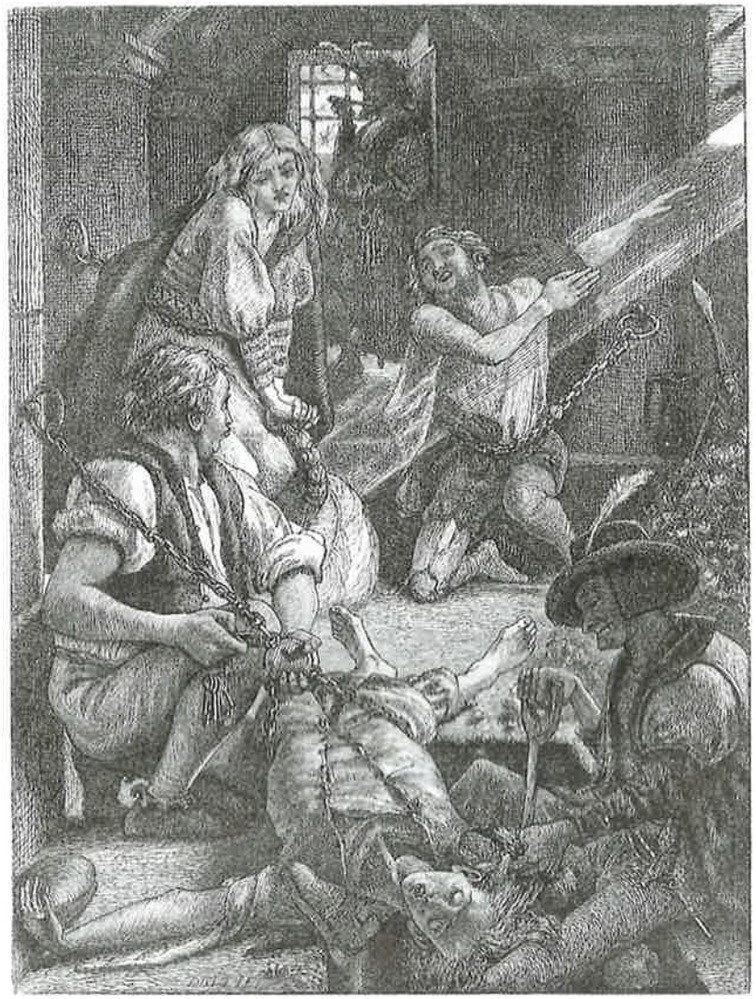

Figure 4. Ford Madox Brown, *The Prisoner of Chillon* (1856), Wood engraving by the Dalziel brothers, published in *Poets of the Nineteenth Century*, ed. Rev. R. Willmott, (London: Routledge, 1857), private collection.

46. Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz*, 62.

Three surviving sketches, together with Brown's detailed diary account reveal how he composed the drawing. After first outlining the whole, he gradually sketched his figures, no doubt with Christ's descent from the cross in mind.[47] He filled in the details of each based on his own portrait with the aid of a mirror, on a "lean" model recommended by his friend Dante Gabriel Rossetti, and most sensationally, on a cadaver studied during two days in the basement of London's University College Hospital:

> 13th Out shopping, then to University hospital to ask John Marshall about a dead body. He got the one that will just do....When I first saw it, what with the dim light, the brown & parchment like appearance of it & the shaven head, I took it for a wooden simulation of the thing. Often as I have seen horrors I really did not remember how hideous the shell of a poor creature may remain when the substance contained is fled. Yet we both in our joy at the obtainment of what we sought declared it to be lovely & a splendid corps... [48]

The gallows humor of the diary entry reminds us of the horror, but also shame experienced when faced with our biological condition, made even more tangible by the brown skin color that evokes the artist's name. His sketch of the skeletal cadaver (Figure 5) dramatizes those feelings, and comes closest to the figure of bare life in canto nine of "The Prisoner." The abject body, literally suspended in place by a chain, seems to have been transformed into a stone, his marble-like eyes closed to suggest blindness. Placed within the triangular composition of Brown's wood-cut illustration, this figure elicits the same mixed feelings in the Prisoner who forces himself to bear witness to what cannot be witnessed. The horror arises from his viewing of the dead brother's extreme suffering as well as the realization of his own de-subjectivization, the cadaver mirroring his own suspended state between human and inhuman.

Figure 5. Ford Madox Brown, Study for *The Prisoner of Chillon* (1856), Birmingham Museums and Art Gallery

47. Ford Madox Brown, two studies for the *The Prisoner of Chillon* (1856), Birmingham Museums and Art Gallery, and study for the *The Prisoner of Chillon* (1856), British Museum.

48. Brown, *Diary*, 166–168.

Conclusion

Like the Holocaust, which created a world "in which one could not bear witness to oneself," Ford Madox Brown's Chillon places viewers face to face with their dehumanized condition, introducing a new type of ethical imperative in art.[49] His study of the cadaver of course uncannily resembles the horrific images from the opening of the camps, notably of the cadaverous-looking survivor known as the *Muselmann*. Primo Levi describes them in the following way: "If I could enclose all the evil of our time in one image, I would choose this image which is familiar to me: an emaciated man, with head dropped and shoulders curved, on whose face and in whose eyes not a trace of thought is to be seen."[50] One of the few artists to paint this evil figuratively, the Slovenian painter and Holocaust survivor Zoran Mušič used sketches taken in 1945 for a series of works entitled "We are not the Last Ones, bodies of the Musulmanner" that he began in 1970, a quarter of a century after leaving Dachau. His title is based on a passage in Levi's account, which describes the execution of a companion right before the liberation, and who cries out "Comrades, I am the last!" Mušič's title can be interpreted in at least two ways. Like Byron's prisoner, it suggests that he never really escaped the camp, and that even the survivors died there: "One remains among the cadavers all one's life."[51] More generally, it indicates that the sovereign power and mechanism of abstraction and dehumanization that operated at Dachau is still operational across the world today, where the state of exception is regularly invoked to justify what Hannah Arendt has called the "mass production of corpses."[52] By representing what cannot be represented, Mušič's series of paintings bear witness to this horror with-

49. Chare, "The Gap in Context," 82.

50. Primo Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz and the Reawakening: Two Memoirs*, trans. Stuart Woolf (New York: Summit Books, 1986): 90, quoted in Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz*, 49.

51. Zoran Mušič, *Hommage à Zoran Mušič* (Paris: Ditesheim &Maffi, 2017).

52. Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt, 1976), 441.

out, however, elevating suffering or death into something noble. Reflecting his own art school lessons in anatomy, his cadavers are at the same time precise and vague, tangible and ephemeral, real and abstract (Figure 6). They have been compared to Goya's work, but also point back to Ford Madox Brown's illustration of "The Prisoner." All of these artists remind us, contra Lessing, that images can, indeed should represent extreme suffering, and that the modern function of art is not necessarily to beautify the world, but also to bear witness to its horrors. That Byron understood this new moral and artistic imperative as he walked out of Chillon's dungeon in June 1816 is a testament to his age's political disillusion and to his creative vision.

Figure 6. Zoran Mušič, *We are not the Last Ones* (1974), Acrylic on canvas, Galerie Ditesheim &Maffei, Neuchâtel.

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