Captive Meditation

Book Review by Nathan Schneider

*The Prison & The American Imagination*
Caleb Smith
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Solitude can be a vehicle for liberation, or it can tear a person apart. To say nothing of sagely hermits—the American cult of reclusive individualism delivers at once intrepid pioneers and desperate housewives, mountaintop transcendentalists and deranged unabombers. As Yale English professor Caleb Smith hauntingly reveals in *The Prison & the American Imagination*, nowhere is this ambivalence better and more brutally expressed than in our penal institutions.

At least since the opening of Philadelphia’s Eastern State Penitentiary in 1829, the corrections business in this country has carried on a love affair with isolation. The Quaker capital’s flagship “penitentiary” was suffused with the theology of the Inner Light. Inmates lived in solitary cells lit by a single skylight—the “eye of God”—where they ate, slept, shat, worked at handicrafts, and waited. In so doing, the intention was, a man would drift into reveries of meditation, coming face to face with himself and the obedient divine spark within. The prison, said one of its founding documents, will “teach him how to think.” Reformist ambitions also took on the transformative language of born-again evangelicalism. Benjamin Rush, a signer of the Declaration of Independence, had imagined that upon an ex-convict’s release people would proclaim, “This brother was lost, and is found—was dead and is alive.”

Famous visitors from across the Atlantic made sure to put Eastern State on their itineraries. One of its most vocal critics was Charles Dickens, who didn’t buy the architects’ ambitions. “I hold this slow and daily tampering with the mysteries of the brain,” he wrote in his *American Notes*, “to be immeasurably worse than any torture of the body.” In retrospect, one can scarcely doubt that Dickens had it right; Eastern State delivered not new life but living death.

Meanwhile, reformers in New York State developed the competing “Auburn system.” While it shared Pennsylvania’s practice of nighttime solitude, this alternative reunited inmates during the day for hard labor. To prevent them from contaminating each other with conversation, guards enforced a rule of silence. This model caught on considerably more among prison authorities, molding delinquents with both private mysticism and (at least the appearance of) an honest day’s work.

Despite the intervening centuries, silence and solitude remain hallmarks of American incarceration today. The proliferation of Supermax facilities, in the name of security rather than any theological scaffolding, means that total segregation is more and more the norm, combined with ever-dwindling health care and rehabilitation services. (No discussion of the contemporary scene should be made in good conscience without the mention of some statistics. The U.S. imprisons 2.3 million people, more than any country in the world. More than half of them are black. Two thirds are back behind bars within three years of release.) The original ideals may be forgotten, but today’s prisons stand very much in their shadow.

While Caleb Smith offers in outline a study of American prisons themselves, this book chiefly examines what they represent. He draws on writers more likely to be found in freshman lit courses
than gone up the river. Emily Dickinson’s penitentiary was her home—“Since Myself—assault Me—/
How have I peace”—and Herman Melville traced the failure of the reformists’ good intentions through
Bartleby the scrivener, who finally dies in The Tombs, a real New York City prison designed by the
same man who designed Eastern State. Henry David Thoreau, while spending a night in jail for
refusing to pay taxes, discovered transcendental freedom there. His friend Ralph Waldo Emerson
echoed the reformers’ instincts in his dream of a “protestant monastery,” combining the austerity of
medieval abbeys with the solitude of the American frontier. Treating prison both as edifice and
metaphor, Smith’s book is much more than yet another complaint and call for reform.

On the dustjacket, British critic Terry Eagleton praises its “refusal to rely slavishly on [Michel]
Foucault,” whose Discipline and Punish (1975) is still the defining text on incarceration for literary
types. Foucault, taking Jeremy Bentham’s Panopticon for his exemplar, emphasized perpetual
observation as the modern prison’s defining trait. Across the pond, Smith uses Eastern State as his
model, revealing instead the paradoxical logic of American democracy as “a society of isolated
individuals.” In so doing, though, he affirms Foucault’s key insight that in the macabre extremes of the
prison can be found a schematic for how society imagines itself.

The tradition of the prison reformers rests on an intoxication with the power that law invests in the
prison, making it the unlimited laboratory of their otherwise untestable ideals: I, a busy homme
d’affaires, cannot be bothered to seek enlightenment (or my law-abiding shows that I have done so
already), but you, poor ward of our benevolent state, have the opportunity and obligation to do so full-
time.

Yet the meaning received is not the meaning of such intentions. Eastern State’s inmates experienced
darkness, not Light; in the name of humaneness, they must leave their humanity at the gates. What
rebirth they discover, as in the case of Thoreau—or Malcom X—is a soul utterly alien to the system
that imprisoned its body.

Smith’s analysis turns to this country’s habitual vices, with the prison as a mirror. Through William
Faulkner, he shows us the South’s prison farms, where black inmates found themselves returned to
barely disguised slavery. Acoma Pueblo poet Simon Ortiz encounters the echoes of American empire
in a Colorado military asylum. In captivity, the prisoner can’t see himself as a person anymore, much
less a criminal. He goes in as an offender but becomes a victim.

Buddhism arrived relatively late to the prison business, having been largely absent in the antebellum
heyday of the reformers. Lacking Jesus’ reminder to Christians that visiting a prisoner amounts to
visiting himself, no such precise injunction directs Buddhists to comfort the incarcerated.

Still—and this is not a topic treated by Smith—American Buddhism has found its way into prisons. In
the last several decades, more and more groups have became involved in bringing instruction and
support to inmates. Fleet Maull founded the Prison Dharma Network in 1989 while serving fourteen
years behind bars himself, during which he depended intensely on meditation. A few years before that,
the Mountains and Rivers Order established the National Buddhist Prison Sangha in response to
requests they received from inmates in New York.

Those engaged in this work are careful not to romanticize the prison’s potential for spiritual
transformation, as Smith’s early reformers did. “There is a big difference between when one
voluntarily enters quiet and solitude and when one is forced into it under the threat of violence,”
Maull told me. “For most prisoners, it’s a soul-destroying experience.” At the least, he hopes that what
he brings to inmates will help them survive their “toxic” environment.

Shugen Sensei [Geoffrey Shugen Arnold, Sensei of the Mountain and Rivers Order], who directs the
NBPS, points out that solitary practice was traditionally undertaken only by those who had spent
many years with a teacher and a community. “It needs to come from a place of maturity,” he says, “and
it needs to be voluntary.”
Still, Maull does believe that a disciplined meditation practice in prison can be, as it was for him, “a source of transformation.” And Noah Levine, a tattoo-covered teacher in Maull’s network who has worked with juvenile and adult prisoners, says, “There are two choices. Prison can be hell, or it can be a monastery.” However soberly, the penitentiary’s founding motifs continue to hold some currency among contemporary Buddhists. It is fitting that they should: however deeply perverted by violence and excess, Caleb Smith reminds us, the prison in America is an institution that rests on the conviction that spiritual insight comes from within.

Before picking it up, be sure not to mistake The Prison and the American Imagination for something it isn’t. It’s not a history, for the sequence is scattershot. Inviting too much of the reader’s patience to be a polemic, neither is it a manual with practicalities on offer. It is a study, a—to use a different meaning of the word—meditation. Indeed, the book’s impracticality is itself a virtue: the problem of American prison reformers has been trying to do too much, when simply imprisoning less may have been in order—thus Smith’s cryptic, concluding prophecy that the prison “must be sacrificed in order to be redeemed.”

During a recent reading in New York City, Smith was accused by an audience member of hiding behind the ivory tower rather than “actually doing something” about prisons. He replied, “I think I’ll just absorb the insult.” But he does much more than that. Imagination, his book proffers, is precisely what we need: not one that conjures yet another grotesque discipline to impose on those at the public’s mercy, but one that can grant even offenders the dignity due to all human beings.

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