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## [ INTRODUCTION ]

Prisoners are storytellers. Whether their tales take the form of a message tapped in code through concrete, graffiti traced on a cell wall, a conversation through the pipes of an archaic plumbing system, a lament spoken through bars in a visiting room, or written testimony left behind by the condemned, storytelling is an integral part of imprisonment.<sup>1</sup> Incarceration lends itself to telling, and narratives of crime and punishment take many forms and serve myriad functions on both sides of prison walls. A prisoner assimilates into the hierarchies and cliques of the society of captives by telling a heroic tale of rebellion or a pathos-ridden fall from grace.<sup>2</sup> Inmates ruminate on their legal cases and their appeals, determining precisely *how* to present their crime to the authorities (Who is to blame? Should I confess? How should I plead?). Isolated in their cells, prisoners seek pen and paper to record their thoughts and come to terms with their social relegation.<sup>3</sup> Convicts are often compelled to write in order to convey to the uninitiated on the outside what transpires on the inside. Stories of brutality, dehumanization, and radical deprivation are counterbalanced — often in the same narrative — by accounts of solidarity, salvation, and enlightenment.

The prison narratives with which readers are likely to be

most familiar are stories told by and about inmates that expose the horrors, the ephemeral joys, the entrenched bureaucratic processes, and the mind-numbing routines of incarceration. In those narratives, commonplaces inevitably recur, from themes (rehabilitation, corruption, rebellion), to images (high walls, bars, slamming doors), to events (entry, riots, liberation), to character types (abusive guards, angry inmates, merciful chaplains). The cultural influence of those narrative topoi is strong, a fact noted by contemporary novelists. The protagonist of Chester Himes's novel *Yesterday Will Make You Cry* (1998), for example, struggles in the first moments of his imprisonment with his received ideas about prison life: "Jimmy couldn't get used to any of it, any of the entire dormitory scene. It wasn't real—convicts walking about and mingling with each other. The real prison was the one which kept coming back—a prison of dark, dank dungeons with moldy bones in rusted chains, the prison that held the Count of Monte Cristo, Jean Valjean, Saint Paul—the real prison was the prison in his mind" (25–26). Similarly, as Jean-Baptiste Clamence—the world-weary narrator and "judge-penitent"<sup>4</sup> of Albert Camus's *La chute* (*The Fall*, 1956)—tells the story of his detention in a desert prison camp, he elects not to describe its physical characteristics. There is no need, he laments, because his contemporaries are already far too familiar with "the lyricism of the prison cell." "I'll leave it to you," he states. "You need add but a few details: the heat, the vertical sun, the flies, the sand, the lack of water" (123–24).

The frequent reiteration of the commonplaces of prison life and the public's familiarity with them is, in part, attributable to the nature of incarceration. The prison is a "total" institution distinguished by a high degree of bureaucratic regularity.<sup>5</sup> Modern penal practices began to take shape in the second half of the eighteenth century in England, Europe, and the United States when imprisonment came to be defined, to use Michel

Foucault's phrase, as "the penalty *par excellence*" (*Discipline* 267).<sup>6</sup> As a consequence of the international development of the practice of punishment, prison experiences throughout the industrialized world bear striking similarities.<sup>7</sup> Organizational and procedural similarities contribute to general familiarity with the plight of prisoners: the tale of one inmate is, in a number of ways, representative of what all inmates endure. The proliferation of prison narratives written by inmates during the twentieth century—itsself a noteworthy phenomenon commented on by historians and social scientists alike—is no doubt a significant contributing factor to a general understanding of the experience of incarceration.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, testimonies by guards, doctors, and teachers who work or have worked in prison are frequently published.<sup>9</sup> The propagation of media reports, feature films, television shows, and documentaries about prison life has also played no small role.<sup>10</sup> We should be careful to note, however, that the public's intimate knowledge of the commonplaces of prison life antedates the recent proliferation of media reports and testimonies, not to mention the maturation of the prison as the modern total institution we are familiar with today. Indeed, through his references to Saint Paul, Alexandre Dumas, and Victor Hugo, Himes underscores the fact that narratives of incarceration are far from a novelty in the Western tradition. As Victor Brombert writes in his study on prison literature from the era of Dumas and Hugo, "Prison haunts our civilization" (3).

The long list of canonical writers who were incarcerated and subsequently wrote about the imprisoned and the condemned—Silvio Pellico, Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Oscar Wilde, and Jack London, to name just a few—attests to the cultural and literary significance of the prison and prison narratives, not to mention the relationship between imprisonment and storytelling. The present study is an investigation into a specific form of prison narrative: fictional texts that purport to document con-

ditions and relations behind bars. *Jail Sentences* examines the narrative mechanics, the thematics, and the ideological impulses of such “prison novels,” as I will refer to them.<sup>11</sup> The authors studied here—Victor Serge, Jean Genet, Albertine Sarrazin, and François Bon—had direct experience with prison and composed texts about incarceration that artfully straddle, cross, and blur the line between fiction and nonfiction. For reasons explained in more detail later in this introduction, *Jail Sentences* limits itself to texts about prison, as opposed to other spaces of confinement in widespread use during the twentieth century, such as penal colonies, concentration camps, and Nazi extermination camps. The novels studied here claim to document, rather than simply represent, the specificities of the “prison-institution” defined by sociologist Corinne Rostaing as a “place of detention, materialized by a fixed space and a bureaucratic organizational apparatus” (4).<sup>12</sup>

Although “prison writing”—a term that encompasses journals, letters, autobiographies, and novels—has received some attention in scholarly studies and anthologies, scant critical work has been done on the prison novel as a literary form. *Jail Sentences* explores the narrative particularities of the prison novel, investigating the use of fiction as a documentary tool. This study thus aims to analyze techniques that are employed in fictional and autobiographical literature as well as in hybrid genres (such as autofiction) that attempt to obfuscate the distinction between the two. Furthermore, this book examines critiques of the prison promoted in these fictions, underlining the relationship between form and ideology. *Jail Sentences* focuses on novels published in French that describe life in French prisons during the twentieth century. However, as we will see over the course of this book, study of French prison novels sheds light on prison literature from a number of other national traditions because of a host of shared narrative, thematic, and ideological characteristics.

## “My Hand Is Severe but My Intention Benevolent”

Given the brutality that has come to characterize modern prison life, it is perhaps difficult to envision the well-intentioned severity promoted by Seneca’s motto, which was carved in stone above the doorway of the Amsterdam Rasp House. The rehabilitation methods in use during the late 1700s at that Dutch jail (such as regimented meal, work, and prayer schedules) led British reformer John Howard to admire it as a model of criminal punishment.<sup>13</sup> Howard, the most prominent figure in the early penitentiary movement in England, was not alone: a trend toward “benevolent” treatment of criminals was evident in Europe and America in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. In France it was the hope of many reformers that post-revolutionary prisons would constitute a shift from the filth, danger, and promiscuity of ancien régime holding cells to more efficient, more fair, and more rehabilitative modes of punishment.<sup>14</sup> The prison came to be envisioned as a site for reflection, inspiration, edification, and transformation. Indeed, the very concept of the penitentiary is based on the notion that inmates will be rehabilitated and transformed into decent, law-abiding citizens through a combination of solitude, silence, work, discipline, and religious instruction—a monastic existence of sorts.<sup>15</sup>

Although prisons are most often notorious for endemic violence, the notion that incarceration lends itself to reflection has persisted throughout its history, particularly in the literary realm. One of the most famous episodes of intellectual awakening in twentieth-century literature takes place in a prison, as Malcolm X sits in his cell, honing his reading and writing skills by copying the pages of his dictionary one by one.<sup>16</sup> That scene, along with the prodigious and often radical intellectual activity of many other prisoners, led critic H. Bruce Franklin to hy-

pothesize in his 1978 book on American prison narratives that “in our society the two main competing intellectual centers may be the universities and the prisons” (*Literature* 235). Although vastly overstated, Franklin’s comment is worthy of note as it illustrates an enduring perception of the prison as a privileged center for thought. The notion of the prisoner-turned-intellectual goes beyond simple personal enrichment and radicalization: prisoners are commonly seen as having a special relationship with art. Martin Esslin, for example, opens his widely cited book *Theater of the Absurd* by telling the story of San Quentin penitentiary inmates’ fascination with an in-house production of *Waiting for Godot* (1952). Esslin writes that Beckett’s masterpiece made an immediate and profound impact on the convicts (who were intimately familiar with empty time and alienation), whereas its meaning escaped supposedly highbrow audiences on the outside.<sup>17</sup>

Prison has proved to be a site not just for personal enrichment and edification but also for writing. To be sure, inmates who are able to write in prison or who testify to the experience of incarceration are exceptions: illiteracy, the difficulty of writing under harsh conditions, censorship, and seizures of property often inhibit prisoners from writing. In some cases, imprisonment can destroy a prisoner’s will to witness. Jack London, for instance, writes that he felt so “meek and lowly” upon his release from jail that his once-strong determination to tell the story of his unjust arrest and detention simply dissolved (49).<sup>18</sup> In spite of those many obstacles, however, many well-known texts were produced in prison, such as Wilde’s *De Profundis* and Gramsci’s celebrated prison notebooks.<sup>19</sup> Imprisoned writers, not to mention writers who produced texts about their experiences with incarceration, are found on the French literary-historical landscape from the medieval era through the twentieth century. The tradition of the prisoner-turned-writer dates as far back as François Villon, whose reputation as a fif-

teenth-century *poète maudit* is based on the extent to which his literary production was informed and enriched by his legendary criminal exploits, exiles, wanderings, and multiple incarcerations.<sup>20</sup> Prison is integral to descriptions of the literary career of the Marquis de Sade, who wrote *120 journées de Sodome* (*120 Days of Sodom*) in 1784 and 1785 while locked in the Bastille.<sup>21</sup> Similarly, while jailed in Saint Lazare prison before being guillotined in 1794, André Chénier wrote his last *Iambes* on strips of paper used for wrapping dirty laundry (Scarfe 323). It was in that prison, moreover, that he wrote “La jeune captive,” the famous ode written in the voice of an incarcerated young woman awaiting execution. Several decades later, a prison in Belgium proved to be the site of Verlaine’s (at least temporary) religious awakening, not to mention the composition of some of his most famous poems, which he describes in detail in his 1893 text, *Mes prisons* (*My Prisons*).<sup>22</sup> A generation after Verlaine, Apollinaire was compelled to put pen to paper after his imprisonment: his short stanzas of “A La Santé” in *Alcools* (1913) provide a glimpse of the lives of prisoners in that notorious Parisian prison in the early part of the twentieth century. Perhaps the most legendary of all prison writers, Jean Genet, whose 1946 novel *Miracle de la rose* (*Miracle of the Rose*) is the primary focus of chapter 2 of this study, was canonized a literary saint by Sartre in the middle of the twentieth century. Alongside Genet in this same long tradition, Victor Serge, Albertine Sarrazin, and François Bon are the most prominent twentieth-century writers in France who have used their experiences in prison for literary inspiration.

Among studies of the literature of incarceration, *Jail Sentences* is the first to isolate and describe the characteristics of the prison novel, a form of documentary and testimonial literature. Previously, critics have underlined the importance of the theme of imprisonment (both literal and metaphoric) in a

number of periods, genres, and traditions, going as far back as early Greek drama and the Platonic dialogues, not to mention a host of biblical tales.<sup>23</sup> Book-length studies of American and British prison literature have also been published in recent decades, focusing on authors such as Daniel Defoe, Malcolm Braly, and Chester Himes.<sup>24</sup> In French studies, among the most prominent critical works is Victor Brombert's *The Romantic Prison*, an analysis of incarceration, both literal and figurative, as a dominant preoccupation in nineteenth-century literature. Highlighting the dialectical nature of representations of the prison, Brombert argues persuasively that nineteenth-century French literature consistently depicted spaces of detention—no matter how horrid—as privileged sites for reflection and edification. In *Imagination in Confinement*, Elissa Gelfand analyzes, through a “socioliterary feminist” lens (23), the figure of the female criminal-prisoner in French women's writing from the Revolutionary era through the twentieth century.<sup>25</sup> In *Existential Prisons*, Mary Anne Frese Witt studies the theme of confinement (in prisons, bedrooms, and cities, among other sites and situations) in mid-twentieth-century French literature, with chapters on Malraux, Sartre, Camus, and Genet. Those noteworthy book-length studies have underlined the significance of the prison not only as a site for the production of culture but also as an important literary and philosophical device in nineteenth- and twentieth-century texts.<sup>26</sup> *Jail Sentences* fills lacunae left by those studies, as it is the first to focus on the narrative and ideological characteristics of twentieth-century French prison novels.

Prison literature—whether in the form of a personal journal, an autobiography, a novel, or reportage—is a compelling form of writing due in part to the nature and design of the prison-institution, not to mention its complex history.<sup>27</sup> The modern prison is a penal instrument whose mechanisms are hidden from public view. That fact is well demonstrated by Foucault in the

opening segment of *Discipline and Punish*, which contrasts the public spectacle of the corporal (and, ultimately, capital) punishment of a regicide with the intensely regulated daily routine of a youth detention center in Paris (3–7). The latter, of course, unfolds exclusively behind the walls of the institution. Prison novels expose the details of life behind bars to an outside public that is ostensibly uninitiated in the bureaucratic practices and the sociological and psychological processes of the carceral universe. Prison literature reveals, often in highly personal and politicized terms, how individuals respond to a hostile and foreign environment.

In the modern prison system, inmates are collectively subjected to systematic and radical deprivation.<sup>28</sup> They are stripped of freedom, contact with loved ones, and normal daily routines. Upon incarceration, after being examined, photographed, and measured, prisoners must trade their own clothes for regulation uniforms and their names for numbers. Inmates are then exposed to surveillance, power structures in a rigid bureaucracy, and a strictly regimented schedule.<sup>29</sup> The world of the inmate is a subculture with distinct mores and methods of communication.<sup>30</sup> Prisoners have a slang that is all their own and exhibit distinct signs of community living, such as the embrace of specific value systems (solidarity among inmates, resistance to the power of the administration, etc.), tattooing, and black marketeering. They must integrate into hierarchies in inmate populations and must cope with what Erving Goffman calls “batch living,” that is, situations in which individuals who are not members of the same family share living space. Guards are often corrupt and cruel. Riots, the pain of solitary confinement, sexual abuse, vermin, filth, and inadequate nutrition represent other legitimate hazards. Finally, after being subject to the dehumanization of incarceration, prisoners find themselves stigmatized upon their release.<sup>31</sup> To tell the story of a prison sentence is therefore tantamount to telling the tale of a person exposed

to a universe with distinct risks, humiliations, values, and rules and regulations.

As we will see in the chapters that follow, prison novels portray, in great detail, daily life behind bars and use the prison as a vehicle to question and critique socioeconomic, cultural, and political power structures. While such works constitute neither histories of the prison nor sociological studies of prison life, they do proffer testimonies and stories that complement and inform a variety of scholarly, scientific, and philosophical investigations of the prison. This is especially the case with recent historiography of the prison, which has sought to examine the everyday lives of prisoners and, moreover, to study the prison as an expression of economic power, state priorities (some say obsessions), and chronic social ills.<sup>32</sup> Prominent examples of such historical examination of incarceration in the French context include Patricia O'Brien's *The Promise of Punishment*, an excellent study of prison and the living conditions of prisoners in nineteenth-century France. Jacques-Guy Petit's highly informative *Ces peines obscures* (These Mysterious Punishments) examines penal reforms, philanthropy movements, and daily life in prison from 1780 to 1875. Petit also contributed to a collaborative study with Claude Faugeron and Michel Pierre, *Histoire des prisons en France (1789–2000)* (History of Prisons in France), which is, to date, the best and most concise history of twentieth-century French prisons. Also noteworthy is former justice minister Robert Badinter's *La prison républicaine* (The Republican Prison), which delves into the political machinations of prison reform between 1871 and 1914.<sup>33</sup> Outside the French context, other prominent social histories include David Rothman's study of the birth of the American asylum and prison, *The Discovery of the Asylum*, and Michael Ignatieff's book on the prison reform movement in England, *A Just Measure of Pain: The Penitentiary in the Industrial Revolution, 1750–1850*.<sup>34</sup> A number of those historians credit Foucault's

*Discipline and Punish* as being a greatly influential study of the evolution of discourses of punishment from the ancien régime to the modern era. Foucault's seminal work demonstrates convincingly that the prison is an institution whose development, internal organizational processes, architecture, and goals are profoundly linked to the formation of other social institutions and the spaces in which they practice their disciplines and assert their normative power. His work is distinct from the histories of the prison cited above, as it does not emphasize the chronological development of specific reforms, legislation, prison construction, philanthropy movements, and so on.<sup>35</sup> However, his insights on changes in discourses on punishment, the body, and the soul in the modern age, as well as his examination of the modern state's power apparatus, have indeed proved influential in recent social and cultural historiography of the prison.

The link Foucault emphasizes between the prison and other important social institutions is reflected in many sociological studies, even those published before the recent wave of social histories. Goffman's definition of total institutions in *Asylums*, for example, encompasses not simply prisons but also concentration camps, mental institutions, tuberculosis sanatoria, army barracks, naval ships, and religious cloisters. In his book on maximum-security prisons, *The Society of Captives*, Gresham Sykes notes that in order to study the prison it must be interpreted not as an isolated institution (as its physical separation from the outer world would suggest) but rather as an instrument of the state: "The prisons of the 18th and 19th centuries replaced the dungeons and detention rooms of prior years. The criminal was no longer simply to be killed, tortured and dismissed, or thrust beyond the pale in the exile of transportation. Now he was to be encapsulated in the body of the State" (xii).<sup>36</sup> Given the widespread perception of the prison as an institution linked to state power structures and to institutions that are central to social order, it is not surprising that when prisons fail to

rehabilitate prisoners (as they often do) and when abhorrent conditions behind bars are exposed (as they often are), their failures are interpreted as failures of society at large. Faugeron, Petit, and Pierre, for example, conclude their collaborative history with the following bleak observation: “Everything that diminishes the dignity of the guarded has an effect on the guard, humiliates the Republic and contributes to the development of the feeling of insecurity in society” (239).<sup>37</sup> In a similar vein, Winston Churchill, in an oft-quoted observation made before the House of Commons on 20 July 1910, stated: “The mood and temper of the public in regard to the treatment of crime and criminals is one of the most unfailing tests of the civilization of any country” (1598). As we will see, prison novels tell the story of the difficulties of incarceration—which are often linked to larger social and economic forces—from within the institution.

Modes of punishment and the plight of the punished have long attracted the attention of French intellectuals and have been the subject of innumerable studies, inquiries, and polemics. As Foucault remarks in *Discipline and Punish*, “The prison has always formed part of an active field in which projects, improvements, experiments, theoretical statements, personal evidence, and investigations have proliferated” (235). In the earliest days of eighteenth-century reform, changes in the treatment of criminals were advocated by the likes of Mirabeau, Malesherbes, Voltaire, Montesquieu, and Rousseau.<sup>38</sup> Early reformers hoped that imprisonment could represent an enlightened and humanitarian form of punishment, especially when compared to the treatment of criminals during the ancien régime. Later in the nineteenth century, humanitarians, early social scientists, and state workers—true to the ideals of their predecessors—often described the prison as a source of individual and social corruption and sought remedy through the penitentiary model of punishment, which included varying degrees of

work and solitary confinement.<sup>39</sup> Gustave de Beaumont and Alexis de Tocqueville, perhaps the most widely known advocates of penal reform in France, took a nine-month trip to the United States to study methods of prison reform in 1831 and 1832.<sup>40</sup> They were attracted above all by the American penitentiary, which was at that time considered a revolutionary and model instrument whose central goal was prisoner rehabilitation.<sup>41</sup> As Beaumont and Tocqueville note in their classic 1833 report, *On the Penitentiary System in the United States and Its Application in France*, French prisons not only failed to reform criminals but succeeded in completing the corruption of the “working classes who are in want of bread and labor” (34).

Similar critiques of the prison in its early decades as the form of punishment *par excellence* surfaced in the literary realm. Victor Hugo, for example, wrote passionately about the nature of punishment in his era in works such as *Le dernier jour d'un condamné* (*The Last Day of a Condemned Man*, 1829) and *Claude Gueux* (1834). Although never an inmate himself, Hugo visited prisons, interviewed prisoners, and wrote about their living conditions. He championed above all the abolition of the death penalty and sought to raise public awareness of its inherent cruelty.<sup>42</sup> Like other reformers and humanitarians of his era, he discerned a clear role for the state in eliminating what was perceived as a hardened criminal class. For example, *Claude Gueux*, which is based in actuality, emphasizes the importance of social support and education of the poor while denouncing the treatment of prisoners and the death penalty. The story's eponymous protagonist is a capable but impoverished worker driven to theft by need and imprisoned for his crime. Gueux is productive in the prison workshop and displays excellent leadership skills, surviving the vagaries of carceral life by forging strong bonds with his fellow inmates. His closest relationship is with a younger man named Albin, who generously

shares his food ration with Gueux. For no reason other than harassment, a cruel workshop superintendent has Albin removed from the cell block in which Gueux resides. The latter sees this as a life-threatening action, as he has come to depend on Albin for friendship and food. The protagonist kills the guard in revenge and is then executed. The ultimate lesson Hugo emphasizes is that society is responsible for the atrocity, not Gueux. He writes: “Take the common man’s head, cultivate it, weed it, water it, sow it, enlighten it, moralize it, and put it to good use; then you will have no need to cut it off” (129). *Claude Gueux* serves as a precursor to the transformation of reality into fiction found in the prison novels studied here. The author fictionalizes a real-life murder trial and execution, as Geoff Woollen argues, thereby turning a habitual criminal and bully into an “apostolic martyr and victim of society” (xv). Woollen correctly notes that Hugo does not emphasize Gueux’s cruelty and violence as a criminal and prisoner; rather, he underlines “the environmental causes determining criminal behavior” (xv).<sup>43</sup> Hugo uses his skills as a writer of fiction to transform actuality into a compelling prison narrative that promotes a distinct sociopolitical message.

Serge, Genet, Sarrazin, and Bon represent a recent manifestation of the distinguished French tradition of prominent intellectuals who have commented on, investigated, and advocated reform of prisons and the treatment of criminals. Indeed, through the late twentieth century in France, the prison continued to serve as a vehicle for social critique for a diverse group of thinkers, including politically committed writers and philosophers. Sartre and Foucault, for example, were active in the Groupe d’information sur les prisons (GIP) from 1972 to 1974. The goal of the GIP, as Foucault wrote in its manifesto, was to expand knowledge of prison, which he characterized as “one of the hidden regions of our social system” (43).<sup>44</sup> The

prison novel, like other forms of testimony about prison, serves a similar function. The narrative particularities of the fiction studied here—which are detailed below—create a contract between text and reader such that referentiality and verifiability are emphasized. The actuality of prison, as we will see, plays a prominent role in these fictions.

### The Prison Novel

Each of the prison novels examined in the following chapters—Victor Serge's *Les hommes dans la prison* (*Men in Prison*, 1930), Jean Genet's *Miracle de la rose*, Albertine Sarrazin's *La cavale* (*The Runaway*, 1965), and François Bon's *Prison* (1997)—claims to document, rather than simply represent, the experience of life behind bars. The manner in which the documentary value is postulated varies from text to text. Prison novels rely on a combination of textual and paratextual strategies to blur the line between fiction and nonfiction, and this ambiguous generic boundary establishes a contract between text and reader that opens the possibility for both referential and fictional interpretations. This fluid contract influences readings of the texts in two ways. On the one hand, the autobiographical inclinations enhance the documentary effect of the novels.<sup>45</sup> The heightened referential implications indicate to the reader that the experience portrayed is not simply the product of the author's imagination but rather is representative of actual conditions of captivity. On the other hand, the fact that the texts are works of fiction allows writers to manipulate their source material without a breach of contract between text and reader. The authors use the flexibility afforded to them by the production of fiction to achieve a variety of ends. In some instances their version of the reality of incarceration can be designed specifically to promote an ideological agenda, such as an anti-capitalist or anti-bourgeois stance. In others, writers simply