Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon as Metaphor: Science and Supervision in Tobias Smollett and Gilbert White

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The eighteenth century, the Age of Enlightenment, is for Michel Foucault[1] the Great Confinement, in which huge numbers of people in Western Europe were incarcerated for the first time.

Enlightenment and confinement present themselves as mutually exclusive conditions. But the apparent incongruity can be resolved in a single, totalising structure, a design so abstracted that only modifications of it were ever able to be built; Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon penitentiary. It is easy for anyone who has ever seen a gaol based on the Panopticon design—and there are at least two in Australia, one in Port Arthur and one in Darlinghurst—to be fundamentally misled as to its project. For while sandstone gaols may replicate the radiation of blocks of cells from a central watchtower, the original Panopticon was meant to be made of glass.[2]

As a building material, glass is uniquely qualified to enlighten while confining. The same thing could be said of a putatively realist narratorial voice like that of many eighteenth-century novels. Bentham's plan, as John Bender put it, 'suspended inmates in a transparent medium dominated by a hidden omniscient authority'.[3] The institution of supervision lends credence to the illusion of a super vision. Author and authority alike scrutinise the subject, who is backlit for their benefit as much as for its own. In each case the observation is the essence of the sentence. To be watched is both the punishment of the prisoner and the misfortune of the experimental subject. The Panopticon is meant to comprehend, in the dual sense of understanding the subject and encompassing it, and so to afford a comprehensive punitive system, or a comprehensive description of natural and human phenomena.

Much of the scientific and literary activity of the eighteenth and later centuries can be explained in terms of the cultural context of the Panopticon. In one sense the all-seeing eye is undiscriminating. Every thing and every person is of interest and has to be accounted for in the schema. All classes of experience are appropriate matters for investigation. But the watcher in the watchtower does draw a single, crucial distinction; the distinction between

itself and the subjects of its supervision. In making this distinction the 'eye' denies that it is also an 'I', itself a potential subject for scrutiny. This is a denial of implication, of a predicament that is implicit in the institution of the Panopticon. The watcher is in fact doubly confined, and hence, by virtue of an inescapable physicality, centrally implicated in the structure of punishment for crime.

To put it another way, the design of the Panopticon is foolproof until it tries to manifest itself in practice. Both glass and human character are too frail to support the weight they are required to bear.

I want to examine two texts in terms of their enlightening project and the physical reality that confines them. These texts are neither wholly literary nor purely scientific; they are Tobias Smollett's *Travels Through France and Italy* and Gilbert White's *The Natural History of Selborne*. Both writers define themselves somewhere in what was then still a continuum between men of science and men of letters; Smollett was a physician who wrote novels, White a cleric engaged in the study of nature. Each text owes something to travel literature, something to journals, and something to the epistolary novel. Each was originally or ostensibly directed towards personal correspondents of the author, and only secondarily, if at all, intended for publication. Ironically, Smollett's book, the more overtly commercial of the two, never recovered from Laurence Sterne's scathing satire of it in *A Sentimental Journey*, while White's more reticent opus is reputed to be the fourth most published book in the language. Finally, both books, as I hope to show, are partly predicated on the unacknowledged physical predicaments of their authors.

Toby or not Toby? Tobias Smollett's *Travels through France and Italy*

> You knew, and pitied my situation, traduced by malice, persecuted by faction, abandoned by false patrons, and overwhelmed by the sense of a domestic calamity, which it was not in the power of fortune to repair. You know with what eagerness I fled from my country ...[4]

The pretexts for Smollett's European tour are manifold and overdetermined. They revolve around various meanings of the word consumption. Smollett was consumed with grief for his dead daughter. He wished to abandon Britain, as the Earl of 'Jack' Bute's journal *The Briton* had consumed and then abandoned him. Like any tourist he proposed to sample new scenes, to enjoy a change of air and to bathe in the sea. He committed himself to the time-consuming task of producing letters as articles for consumption by his friends at home.

The letters themselves, and by implication Smollett's preoccupations, are intimately concerned with the rituals of consumption, with the market-place and the table. At every station there is a comprehensive list of foodstuffs

available, often with suggestions for their preparation. Letter XIX, for example, describes the following produce of Nice; veal, fish, turkey, capon, partridges, hare, woodcock, pigeons, wild-ducks, teal, halcyon, king's-fisher or martinets, sea-turtle or tortoises, bread, green pease, asparagus, artichokes, cauliflower, beans, French beans, celery, endive, cabbage, coleworts, radishes, turnips, carrots, sorrel, lettuce, onion, garlic, shallot, potatoes, mushrooms, champignons, truffles, pickled olives, oranges, lemons, citrons, citronellas, dried figs, grapes, apples, pears, almonds, chestnuts, walnuts, pomegranates, cherries, gourds, apricots, peaches, plums, musk melons, water melons, sorbets, wine, brandy and liqueurs. The local currency is also discussed and most of the prices are given. Smollett adds that the natives are charged not two-thirds as much as the English and rails at the imposition. The letter is an eighteenth century consumer's guide to the south of France. Consumption is, in fact, the very means by which Smollett locates himself in a social and cultural framework in order to conduct transactions with the French. By privileging him as the observer, and by allowing the imposition of his views onto the observed, this framework reproduces the structure of the Panopticon.

The point is that Smollett was dying of consumption, and that having been trained in medicine he must have at least suspected this, and known that he was incurable. But he refers only to 'the weak state of [his] lungs', to his 'very declining condition', his 'violent cough' and his 'asthmatic disorder'. His denial means that his few overt encounters with the disease are charged with tension.

In Boulogne he meets an English gentleman who seems 'far gone in a consumption'. This gentleman believes he has caught cold from swimming in the sea. As sea bathing is Smollett's sovereign cure-all, derived from Celsus' dictum 'in omni tussi utilis est natatio',[5] 'in every cough, swimming is of service', he is amused by the man's credulity and self-deception. His considered professional advice is 'to make a trial of the air of Nice, where I myself proposed to reside'.[6] Different diagnoses, same cure.

In Montpellier Smollett declines to visit the celebrated local specialist, Fizes, but instead writes him a letter fully describing his own case, in Latin. In spite of Fizes's obviously limited knowledge of that language (he is a speaker of the patois of Provençal and Languedoc) he correctly diagnoses tuberculosis. Smollett is enraged. Significantly, rather than directly contradicting Fizes, he takes violent exception to 'the stile of his prescription, replete as it is with a disgustion repetition of low expressions'; and this after Smollett himself has described in detail (but in Latin) the consistency of his own phlegm, the changing colour of his urine, his flatulence and his nocturnal emissions. He demands the right of reply and a short sharp exchange ensues, from which Smollett emerges battered but unconvinced, while Fizes finishes thirty-eight

livres ahead.[7]

It is at around this time that the reader becomes aware of Smollett's unreliability as the narrator of his autobiography. In spite of the language barrier, Fizes is a more competent and effective reader of the signs and symptoms of the case than Smollett is himself. If the consumers of these letters hope to profit from them, they must decode Smollett's Latin (his medical terms, his Classical education, his cultural conditioning) into the vernacular. Latin has ceased to be (if it ever was) a transparent vehicle for objective truth; it is an institution enclosing a living, suffering man. The dual nature of the Panopticon discourse is exposed. The watcher is himself imprisoned. It is the agent of his enlightenment that confines him. The distinction between watcher and watched, between subjective and objective perception, has been erased. 'Every object seems to have shrunk in its dimensions since I was last in Paris.'[8]

In presenting his case history, it becomes clear that Smollett is only telling his side of the story. More and more he allows his impressions to colour his judgement. He is ravished in Languedoc, enchanted by Nice. His ostensibly dispassionate scientific vocabulary draws on a novelistic discourse, itself predicated on the philosophical fiction of an impartial observer. The letters, which are manifestly intended to affirm the concrete reality of Smollett's self-deceiving fictions (that he is curable, that he can leave England behind him), realise their own negation, becoming suffused with Englishness and disease.

When, as a practising Augustan, he contemplates at last the monuments of Classical and Renaissance Rome, his response is so visceral that his critical faculties fail him altogether.

> I was not at all pleased with the famous statue of the dead Christ in his mother's lap, by Michael Angelo. The figure of Christ is as much emaciated, as if he had died of a consumption: besides, there is something indelicate, not to say indecent, in the attitude and design of a man's body, stark naked, lying upon the knees of a woman.[9]

In this image Smollett is face to face with both his unspeakable fears; the dead child, the consumptive man. He is forced to utter the forbidden word. But the experience is so horrifying that it takes on the aura of perversion, of transgression. The watcher in the tower has become an incestuous voyeur, peering at the secrets of his own soul. The illusion of scientific detachment, adopted in self-defence, has degenerated to the merely reflexive. By projecting his prejudices onto what he sees Smollett has made the world a mirror. Now all he can see is his own face reflected in it. Just as his enlightenment threatens to carry him towards a recognition of his own confinement within the totalizing project of the Panopticon, he rejects the process altogether and resigns from his post as observer declaring his curiosity satisfied.

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B flat or not B flat? Gilbert White's *The Natural History of Selborne*

Gilbert White was born in the Vicarage in Selborne in 1720, and in 1793 he died a hundred yards away in 'The Wakes'. Through his journals and letters, the parish of Selborne became one of the best known in England; and as a naturalist White himself made a considerable and lasting contribution to observational method. His devotion to his native parish is commonly attributed to sentiment, and rarely to the acute coach-sickness which must have made every journey a torment. Having gone up to Oxford at nineteen White resettled in Selborne when he was forty. He rarely, if ever, left it again. He describes himself as a 'stationary man'.[10] The parish must have seemed part sanctuary and part prison; White set about making it his whole world.

> It is, I find, in zoology as it is in botany: all nature is so full, that the district produces the most variety which is the most examined.[11]

His project thus neatly inverts that of Smollett; physically unable to escape from his particular environment, White tacitly acknowledges, and in acknowledging celebrates, his confinement. Largely unencumbered by onerous duties to the church, he devotes his attention to the minutiae of Selborne; its rocks, roads, forests, hills, lakes and ponds; its birds and beasts. Sometimes he relates his anecdotes with an anthropomorphic compassion that borders on sentimentality, as in this description of a broody raven whose oak was felled from underneath her.

> ... the bird was flung from her nest; and, though her parental affection deserved a better fate, was whipped down by the twigs, which brought her dead to the ground.

At other times his dealings with animals are disarmingly cruel. He pickles a mouse and her child in brandy, celebrates the gallantry of a red deer hind being torn to pieces by dogs, and relates how he

> went to the sheep-down, where ring-ousels have been observed to make their appearance at spring and fall, in their way perhaps to the north or south; and was much pleased to see three birds about the usual spot. We shot a cock and a hen ...[12]

He is, himself, what he often describes as the ideal dweller in Selborne; both sportsman and naturalist; and to suggest that these are incompatible in the eighteenth century is to introduce an anachronism. The most telling parallel for this sort of capriciousness is the means by which the governing classes of the time attempted to maintain social order; through the wielding of laws alternately draconian and merciful. Nor is this parallel a coincidence. The human and moral laws from which the Panopticon is derived themselves claim to

derive from the minute observation of natural law. In each case a sentence is imposed upon a subject, with the effect of increasing scholarly or judicial detachment. Language is made a distinguishing and distancing device. When he says he procures a specimen for study, White kills it. He is little less detached from his human parishioners.

> We abound in poor: many of whom are sober and industrious ... the parish swarms with children.

Ultimately White's endeavours to comprehend Selborne within an Enlightenment schema compensated in part for his isolation.

> We have remarked in a former letter how much incongruous animals, in a lonely state, may be attached to each other from a spirit of sociality ...[13]

Once committed to paper, his precise, detailed observations became his link with an intellectual world beyond the parochial boundaries. The very existence of the letters testifies to the existence of a corresponding scientific community. Similarly, White's virtual obsession with migratory birds and his attention to their arrivals and departures places him in a larger context by proxy. Moving in and out of Selborne, the letters and birds correspond to White himself, enacting his proscribed motility through the exercise of other kinds of power.

Though White resigned himself to his incapacity where Smollett strenuously denied his, the result was the same. In subtle but pervasive ways White's implication in the natural history of Selborne means that his preoccupations are projected onto his material. Once again the text becomes a pretext for an elusive autobiography.

> It has been my misfortune never to have had any neighbours whose studies led them towards the pursuit of natural knowledge; so that, for want of a companion to quicken my industry and sharpen my attention, I have made but slender progress ...[14]

White and his brother are famous for having calculated that the hoot of an owl is in the key of B flat. (As the Western octave scale was not yet standardised in the eighteenth century, this may no longer be true.) Conscious that he has been denied oral gratification—intellectual nourishment and conversation—White locates his sense of beauty and loss in his aural faculties; in the apprehension of sound. The only congenial conversation he hears, rather than reading, is that of the birds. And he finds their discourse extremely sympathetic.

> The language of birds is very ancient, and, like other ancient modes of speech, very elliptical; little is said, but much is meant and understood.[15]

'Little is said, but much is meant and understood.' The same applies with equal

force to White's rare comments on his hearing in his letters to Daines Barrington. The first is objective, or nearly so.

> Swifts are no songsters, and have only one harsh screaming note; yet there are ears to which it is not displeasing, from an agreeable association of ideas, since the note never occurs but in the most lovely summer weather.[16]

The hearer, by implication White himself, is a passive agent in whom sound produces its effects. The next letter reveals a little more.

> Frequent returns of deafness incommode me sadly, and half disqualify me for a naturalist; for, when those fits are upon me, I lose all the pleasing notices and little intimations arising from rural sounds: and May is to me as silent and mute with respect to the notes of the birds, etc., as August. My eyesight is, thank God, quick and good; but with respect to the other sense, I am, at times, disabled:
>
> And Wisdom at one entrance quite shut out.[17]

Deprivation of pleasure is one of the central punitive effects of confinement. Supervision requires the isolation of subject and of object. If the eye is the image of the rational, impartial observer, White locates his humanity, his aestheticism, his sense of isolation and his vulnerability in his ear. A final, uncharacteristically personal comment makes this abundantly clear.

> When I hear fine music I am haunted with passages therefrom night and day; and especially at first waking, which, by their importunity, give me more uneasiness than pleasure ...[18]

By transferring his sense of loss onto his sense of hearing, White recognises and validates it and balances it against the power and authority of his eye. In tacitly acknowledging his limitations the observer denies them the power to undermine his structure. That his absorption in Selborne is a consequence of his immobility is partly recompensed by the fact that his knowledge of its natural history entitles him to transcend the parish boundaries. Smollett denies that he is subject to confinement in any way, and his judgement suffers for it. By recognising the implications of his predicament, White sees and comprehends more.

These texts stand at the threshold of a modern literary and scientific discourse, exemplified not only in the works of Stephen Jay Gould and Stephen Hawking which commodify science for mass consumption, but in a scientific method which assumes the detachment and impartiality of the observer. More subtly, the discourse of enlightenment has incorporated structures of detachment and judicious observation into all kinds of exchanges. A speaker addressing an audience is imposing sentences upon them and thus replicating the Panopticon project. The structure needs to be recognized for what it is; not only a vantage point from which to scrutinize all subjects, but by virtue of our

inescapable physicality and human frailty, a confining and punitive cell.

Notes

1 *Discipline and Punish: the Birth of the Prison*, tr. Alan Sheridan, London, 1977.
2 Jeremy Bentham, *Panopticon* and *Postscript to the Panopticon*, Collected Works, Oxford, 1988.
3 John Bender, *Imagining the Penitentiary: Fiction and the Architecture of the Mind in Eighteenth-Century England*, Chicago, 1987, p.23.
4 Tobias Smollett, *Travels through France and Italy*, Oxford, 1981, p.2.
5 Smollett, p.14.
6 Smollett, p.40.
7 Smollett, pp.88-102.
8 Smollett, p.45.
9 Smollett, p.255.
10 Gilbert White, *The Natural History of Selborne*, Penguin Classics, Harmondsworth, 1977, p.3.
11 White, p.55.
12 White, p.64.
13 White, p.19.
14 White, p.194.
15 White, p.31.
16 White, p.216.
17 White, p.171.
18 White, p.175.
19 White, pp.244-45.