

Absolute solitude, the violent turning inward on the self, whose whole being consists in the mastery of material and in the monotonous rhythm of work, is the specter which outlines the existence of man in the modern world. . . . Man in prison is the virtual image of the bourgeois type which he still has to become in reality.—Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*

I study the art of solitude.—Ralph Waldo Emerson, journal entry, 4 July 1835

Ralph Waldo Emerson's thinking about solitude and its institutions took shape in the first week of January, 1828. On New Year's Day, in a letter, he imagined "a protestant monastery, a place of elegant seclusion where melancholy gentlemen and ladies may go to spend the advanced season of single life in drinking milk, walking in the woods & reading the Bible & the poets."¹ Whimsical, with a touch of irony, Emerson pictured a mock utopia where solitude and simplicity would free the mind, bringing it into contact with great thoughts and divine currents. In the protestant monastery, melancholy gentlemen and ladies of the privileged classes would adopt the habits of rustic laborers, tasting the spiritual delights of transcendence. Their melancholy would be remedied by milk and meditation. They would find themselves improved and uplifted—corrected, but gently—by this paradoxical, impossible institution of Emerson's fancy.

Seven days after conceiving the protestant monastery, Emerson entered the nightmarish inversion of his earlier daydream in a real

institution: "In Concord, N.H. I visited the prison & went into the cells. At this season, they shut up the convicts in these little granite chambers at about 4 o'clock PM & let them out, about 7 o'clock AM—15 dreadful hours."² "This season" was the dead of winter in New England, and the New Hampshire State Prison chilled Emerson's tone, tempering his irony and playfulness. He measures the prisoners' suffering in hours and records his dread at the prospect of their lives. The encounter with condemned bodies in granite cells seems to have hardened Emerson's prose—had the prison made him melancholy? The meaning of solitude may have solidified for Emerson when the fantastic protestant monastery met the modern penitentiary, when "elegant seclusion" met the hard time of incarceration.

My essay traces Emerson's thinking about solitude and discipline to the New Hampshire State Prison and to the problem of incarceration that preoccupied him and his culture in the 1830s and 1840s. Connecting Emerson's writing to the material and discursive history of Anglo-American prison reform suggests that some of the ways he imagined solitary subjectivity belong to that history. Emerson turned prison architecture into an imagery of the mind, abstracting the cell into a durable conceptual structure. Recognizing this translation reveals new dimensions of his relationship with the institutions of his time and place; it opens the field of engagement between the material and the abstract, a field where Emerson's imagination is active and productive. My sense is that the American penitentiary, a radical and famous novelty in Emerson's time, is more than an underappreciated part of his "context." The prison is the material structure transmuted into a universalizing abstraction by the cultural work of Emerson's writing. For over a century and a half, readers mainly concerned with Emerson's meditations on the soul have not yet fully understood the consequences of this alchemy.

The more the cell becomes a metaphor for subjectivity at large, the more the historical prison disappears. Reformers imagine the penitentiary as a mechanism that corrects criminals, and just as the image of the self-correcting penitent obscures the physical struggle between the inmate and his keepers, so the metaphor of the prisoner can obscure historical inmates and the institutions that hold them. Now you see the criminal soul correcting itself, now you don't see muscle against stone. Now you see the prisoner as a metaphor, now you don't see the Auburn system and its silent laborers. Living and

dying inmates fade from view—but if we reverse this transmutation, we might perceive new dynamics in the formation of our own conceptual vocabulary. Emerson’s essays, especially “Self-Reliance,” laid out images that continue to shape American fantasies about solitude and interior life. A look into the historical development of these ideas might move us toward a critical turn—from intellectual monasticism to a collaborative critical practice, from myths of solitude to a reckoning with the hard conditions of historical inmates. Ultimately at stake is how deeply, and often secretly, real captivity influences the ongoing imagination of freedom.



What did Emerson see in the New Hampshire State Prison? It’s possible to reconstruct the material conditions and recover the discourse that informed his perceptions. Just a few years earlier, the institution had been a jewel of the rising prison-reform movement, celebrated for its efficiency and humanity. But by 1828, overcrowded and mismanaged, it was falling back into the old, pre-reformed days of the dungeon and the *oubliette*. By all contemporary accounts, the place was in miserable condition. It was entering a crisis.

Since independence, New Hampshire had been, along with other Northern states, a leader in prison reform and “humane” punishment. “A multitude of sanguinary punishments is impolite and unjust,” declared the state constitution, “the true design of all punishments being to reform, and not to exterminate, mankind.”³ Against the South, where disobedient slaves were whipped or hanged or worse, the North developed a modern carceral system better suited to its industrializing economy; against the Southern slave, a body to be rebuked and subdued by force, the Northern deviant was defined around the turn of the nineteenth century as a soul to be corrected, reformed, and reconciled to labor through penitent contemplation of his guilt.⁴ In New Hampshire, as in Philadelphia and Massachusetts and New York, confinement to the penitentiary became the dominant sentence. The rationalized correspondence between crime and punishment was achieved by adjusting the length of the sentence. Prison labor helped to offset the cost of the new institutions, even to make them profitable, but the aim of the penitentiary system was not just rational organization and efficient management. The reformers declared that they wished to renovate the very soul of the convict. Describing their busi-

ness in spiritual terms, they imagined the prisoner as a flawed soul in need of redemptive correction. In the inverted reasoning of prison reform, the inmate's captivity, properly administered, should promise him a kind of freedom—from the vice and guilt that corrupted his soul. Redemption was the utopian aspiration, the highest aim of a movement that hoped, at least in its critical phase, to improve materially the daily lives of prisoners: “to reform, and not to exterminate, mankind.”

To lead the soul to self-corrective penitence and finally to redemption, the reformers proposed the solitary cell. As Michel Foucault and many others have recognized, isolation was the indispensable premise of prison reform.⁵ The American penitentiaries of the 1820s tested in concrete a theory of corrective solitude developed by English and Quaker reformers around the turn of the century: a mystical hypothesis connecting prison architecture and the structure of consciousness. Alone in his bare cell, the convict would confront, in the words of the English preacher and reformer Jonas Hanway, “the true resemblance of [his] mind.”⁶ Somehow the walls of the solitary cell would present the prisoner with an undistorted picture of his guilt. Revealed to himself, no longer distracted by vice and bad company, he would struggle to repair his flaw—precisely because the flaw, apparent all around him, made his confinement a torment. The prisoner would see his guilt *as* the cell that bound him; he would work to rebuild his soul as if rebuilding his chamber, repairing a cramped and ruptured dwelling place into a comfortable and solid one. Thus the living body and the stone cell were recast in the conflict of a soul divided against itself, and the suffering of prisoners was imagined as a spiritual affliction.

Solitude, reflection, correction—the prison in the discourse of reform was a relation between cell and spirit, architecture and soul. Gustave de Beaumont and Alexis de Tocqueville, visitors to the American penitentiary system who recommended its application in France, saw it this way: “Thrown into solitude [the prisoner] reflects. Placed alone, in view of his crime, he learns to hate it . . . in solitude, where remorse will come to assail him” (*PS*, 55). The reformers who built the penitentiaries thus conceived an image of the criminal soul to go with it, an architecture of spiritual correction. They described a soul split into two conflicted parts, one surrounding the other, the confined and righteous self laboring to reform the criminal self that binds it, to overcome division and achieve a redeemed integrity. The sublimation of

architecture and confined bodies into a spiritual fiction was completed with this figure of the convict's *cellular soul*.

In reality, the ideal of correction never brought about anything like Emerson's protestant monastery. To those who built and operated the penitentiaries, the end of the prisoner's liberating correction was his reformation into a subject useful to industry, a productive worker. The main line of prison reform saw not dissonance but concord between its economic and its spiritual aims. Like the bodily struggle of inmates against the forces that bound them, reform's "economic preoccupations . . . were sublimated on an ideological level in the most extreme formulations of Protestant thought."⁷ The image of the cellular soul tended to mask the material dynamics of prison life. But this is not to say that economic forces were of no importance to the reform movement. The transition into an industrial economy helped to make possible a massive, regimented institution like the penitentiary. Economics also structured the debate between Pennsylvania and Auburn, the two rival systems of corrective discipline.

Like all of its contemporaries, the Pennsylvania, or separate, system was built around the central image of a self-binding and self-correcting soul. At the Eastern Pennsylvania State Penitentiary (opened in 1829) and others like it, each prisoner was confined for his entire sentence to a solitary cell. He took his meals there, received the warden and the chaplain there, and did his assigned work there, alone.⁸ Solitude, reflection, and correction governed the architecture and the discipline of this system. The correspondence between its design and the fantasy of spiritual reformation was practically complete.

But the Pennsylvania system was expensive, partly because it required large individual cells, even private exercise yards for each prisoner—and partly because the form of labor it accommodated was becoming outdated in the American North of the middle nineteenth century. Confined to their cells day and night, without machines, the Pennsylvania prisoners could only practice artisanal labor or process raw materials; they could only do the work of the proto-industrial economy that, at the turn of the century, had first imagined this system. The Eastern State Penitentiary could not serve as a factory.

In the Pennsylvania system, then, a tension arose between the economic and the spiritual ambitions of reform. The "Auburn system" evolved to reconcile them. Developed at New York's Auburn prison in the early 1820s, this "silent" system preserved the solitude of the

criminal soul while adapting prison labor to the industrial economy. As the Italian historians Dario Melossi and Massimo Pavarini have argued, “The originality of this new system lay essentially in the introduction of work structured in the same way as the dominant system of factory work.”⁹ At Auburn, and later at Sing Sing and hundreds of other American prisons built on this plan, prisoners slept alone but assembled for labor during the day. Beaumont and Tocqueville praised this “ingenious combination of two elements, which seem at first glance incompatible, isolation and reunion” (*PS*, 42).

The problem was to bring prisoners together without enabling conspiracy, to put them to work side by side without disturbing the corrective action of solitude. The solution was silence. The rules at Auburn prohibited any communication among inmates, from talking to the exchange of glances and hand signals. Any violation, any attempt at conversation or conspiracy, was punishable by violence.¹⁰ Auburn took the solitary prisoner, Pennsylvania’s divided and self-binding soul, out of his cell and put him to work beside other prisoners in a carefully managed assembly. It congregated bodies but preserved the isolation required for penitent reflection. “[T]hough united,” Beaumont and Tocqueville write, “they are yet in fact isolated.” No “moral connection,” no “sympathy” could develop among them (*PS*, 58). The prisoner’s spiritual life would remain enclosed, a conversation between individual corrective conscience and individual guilt. The Auburn system conceived its prisoner as one who, despite the congregate labor he performed, remained a self-binding, self-correcting, cellular soul.

And because of this enclosure, this cell formed within prisoners’ minds, solitude is portable. It can be carried even into the company of others: “Their union is strictly material, or, to speak more exactly, their bodies are together, but their souls are separated; and it is not the solitude of the body which is important, but that of the mind” (*PS*, 58). Assembly without communion, congregate labor without collaborative resistance, industrial production without riot. This is the design of the Auburn system: a working society of isolated prisoners, publicly imagined as a site of work and redemption, a protestant monastery.

To imagine the penitentiary in such a light, however, is to stop seeing the ongoing struggle between prisoners and the forces that hold them. The formation of the cellular soul demanded, in fact, a whole range of novel restrictions and tortures. In the new penitentiaries, detailed codes of behavior and punishment guaranteed the rule of soli-

tude. At Auburn, inmates who exchanged meaningful glances were whipped with a barbed lash called the cat's claw. At Philadelphia, an inmate who called out to another was bound with a device called the iron gag, with a metal bit in his mouth and straps around his wrists that constricted if he struggled, sometimes killing the offender. The iron gag reveals the torturous obverse of reform: in this device, the rule of silent contemplation literally bound and tormented—and occasionally destroyed—prisoners' bodies.

To put it another way, these physical chastisements highlight the gap between the promises of reform and the realities of the prison interior. The cellular soul may have been the reformers' highest imaginative achievement, but it was an abstract figure, removed from the daily struggles of prison life. Many who have contemplated the prison, from Emerson even down to Foucault, allow this distinction to collapse. Foucault's *Discipline and Punish*, easily the most influential study of punishment for contemporary cultural studies, treats the prison as "an apparatus for transforming individuals," an instrument that changes the consciousness of its inmates (*DP*, 233). This, after all, was just what the reformers claimed for it. I would not deny that the prison changes prisoners' subjectivities; it changes them in many ways, often unpredictable, sometimes totally destructive. The cell changes the mind—but it does not "correct" it. The many psychological effects of captivity have little to do with the cellular soul, which belongs not to real prison life but to discourse. The cellular soul is a fiction, and a dangerous one, used to explain the relation between solitary confinement and subjectivity. Thus prison reform, beyond its material and psychological effects, created a poetics of punishment whose normative ideal was the cellular soul. The distinction between this poetics and the lived experience of prisoners is not always maintained by Foucault, which may explain why he is so dubious about the possibility of resistance, both inside and outside prison walls.¹¹

To the living objects of modern punishment, the prisoners themselves, the cellular soul appeared mainly a false promise, a myth cynically employed, a brutal mystification. Some early critics of prison reform who witnessed prisoners' deterioration argued that solitude led not to correction but to madness—"[causing] the mind to rush back upon itself, and [driving] reason from her seat."¹² Even Beaumont and Tocqueville, ambassadors of solitary confinement, warned against this possibility: "[A]bsolute solitude, if nothing interrupts it,

is beyond the strength of man; it destroys the criminal without intermission and without pity; it does not reform, it kills" (*PS*, 41). In these ominous warnings the French magistrates were probably referring to an experiment undertaken between 1821 and 1824 in the north wing of New York's Auburn Prison, where prisoners were confined to cells measuring seven and a half feet long by three and a half feet wide. At seven feet high, they were roughly the dimensions of three stacked caskets. Within this oblong box the inmates' solitude was intended to be complete and uninterrupted. They were assigned no labor, and those considered the most hardened offenders were allowed no congregated activity of any kind. The experiment became a massacre: left entirely alone, many died of disease or by suicide, and many lost their minds. The governor of New York, after observing their conditions, pardoned most of the survivors.¹³

In the meantime, however, a few Auburn inmates had discovered a way to turn the system of their punishment against itself. The solitary prison, a novel and monumental architecture of its day, required certain innovative kinds of engineering. Especially important was the problem of circulation, of moving clean air through the institution as a protection against stagnation and the spread of disease. What the Auburn prisoners found was that the ventilation system connected their cells, and they could whisper to each other through the ducts. The cell doors were so thick that the guards in the corridors could not hear them. The Auburn prisoners kept each other company with this secret communication network, turning the instrument of their isolation into a means of conversation and conspiracy.¹⁴ This strategy testifies to the desperate resourcefulness of prisoners, their ability to exploit the very structures that bind them. The architecture of solitude, they discovered, was vulnerable to strategic subversion. Within the design of total control was the shape of a partial liberation. Eventually, Emerson would discover similar opportunities in the engineered discourse of incarceration—but first he would have to visit a prison and consider the promises of reform.

Under Warden Moses Pilsbury (1818–1826), the New Hampshire State Prison had adopted an early version of the Auburn system, achieving two crucial aims of reformed discipline: economic productivity and corrective solitude. Pilsbury turned the prison into a stone-cutting workshop, where convict labor processed rough granite into building stone. From 1822 forward, his operation generated between

\$1,000 and \$5,000 for the state government (*APPC*, 149). Pilsbury oversaw congregate labor by day but confined prisoners to solitude by night. A 1922 history records that the “satisfactory discipline of the prison was achieved by warden Pilsbury through constant vigilance. He was an ardent believer in separate confinement. Plots, he said, were hatched in night-rooms, and he had frequently overheard whole histories of villainy in listening to the conversations of convicts at night” (*APPC*, 150). Detecting and disrupting prisoners’ secret exchanges, Pilsbury was a minor champion of reform: proto-industrial labor and the solitary correction of souls were reconciled under his supervision.

Between his dismissal in 1826 and Emerson’s trip to the prison in 1828, however, the New Hampshire State Prison deteriorated. A new warden, Abner Stinson, drove it back into debt. Stinson was publicly accused of covering his corrupt use of public goods by destroying documents and falsifying his reports.¹⁵ At the same time, a rising inmate population made solitary confinement impossible in the small prison. By June 1830, inspectors reported to the state legislature that conditions were “extremely defective. There are only thirty six cells, and between fifty and sixty convicts, and hence two or more are confined all night in the same cell.”¹⁶ By 1831, eighty-two men were held in cells designed to isolate thirty-six.¹⁷ To the eye of reform, this arrangement was more than pitiful. It was dreadful. Thrown together, obscenely intermingling as in the old *oubliettes*, prisoners were conspiring and corrupting each other. The inspectors feared the spread of disease and disobedience: “[T]his gives the old and experienced criminal complete opportunity to instruct the young and inexperienced in the great mysteries of his art, and . . . they seldom fail to be expert and active in this employment” (*JHR*, 112). Overcrowding was disastrous to the aims of correction. Through contact and contagion, the prisoner would lose the clear contours of his individuality, the bound and bordered shape ensured by the solitary cell.¹⁸ A collective, conspiratorial menace was gathering, according to state inspectors, “like a black cloud kept back by the wind which is ready to burst with redoubled fury on the objects in its way” (*JHR*, 112). This was the nightmare of a reform discourse that prized the purifying effects of solitude—an image of riot and contamination.

To break up and contain the “black cloud,” the New Hampshire reformers recommended an expansion of the State Prison and a

stricter enforcement of the Auburn system. More cells and more solitude were called for to break the collectivity; the prisoners “ought to be debarred the privileges of society, and in silence and solitude to reflect on their evil ways” (*JHR*, 113). The state legislature, moved by this argument, funded the addition of a new cell building, a “north wing.” Built in 1832, a few years after Emerson’s visit, it contained 120 solitary cells, each measuring six and a half feet high; six feet, ten inches long; and three feet, four inches wide. The Auburn system of night solitude and silent congregate work by day governed its discipline (*APPC*, 151).

When Emerson saw the New Hampshire State Prison in January 1828, it was in the decline that would provoke these renewed reforms. His dread, as it turns out, was shared by the warden and the chaplain, by the New Hampshire inspectors, and by the Boston Prison Discipline Society, the major defender of the Auburn system in the United States.¹⁹ The New Hampshire prisoners passed their “fifteen dreadful hours” locked up in their “little granite cells,” as Emerson said, but they did not pass these hours in solitude. They passed them crowded together, “two or more” at a time, in a tiny space built for one. Emerson’s 1828 note, then, was no protest against solitary confinement but a melancholy sigh in the face of a once enlightened institution that had fallen into crisis—a crisis that, according to the progressive ideal of the day, would be resolved by more solitary cells, more isolated reflection, more silent correction. The discourse of reform shaped Emerson’s understanding of what was wrong with the New Hampshire State Penitentiary. He stood with the reformers in their call for an expanded prison, increased repentance, and productive labor. The prison did not destroy but cooled and fortified his dream of a protestant monastery.



With its vision of a divided soul working toward a solitary redemption, with its faith in productive labor as a salutary discipline, with its “most extreme formulations of Protestant thought,” prison reform is a discourse whose traces can be discerned, once we look for them, all through Emerson’s philosophy and poetics. The traces are faint through most of the 1830s, while Emerson continues tacitly to accept the premises of prison reform. But punishment returns as a major concern in the period from 1838 to 1841, from the controversy following the Divinity School address, which Emerson considered a kind of trial

and punishment, through his meditations on reform and the oppressiveness of institutions in “Man the Reformer” and “Circles,” until the protestant monastery and the modern prison achieved a new resolution in the protest of “Self-Reliance.”

“Is it possible,” Emerson asked himself in his journal, “that in the solitude I seek I shall have . . . the force to work as I ought to work—as I project in highest and most farsighted hours?” (*EJ*, 122; 10 April 1834). The faith and the doubt of the protestant monk are in this worried sentence. Emerson shamed himself for idleness and sought in solitude the mystical constellation of discipline, productivity, and redemption promised by the modern prison—a set of principles brought together by reformers to justify the solitary cell, and a promise in which Emerson had come to believe. The elegant seclusion of the protestant monastery was hardening into a more severe discipline. On 19 February 1838, he wrote in his journal: “Solitude is fearsome & heavy hearted,” but he held to the faith that this hardship was the source of self-correction (*EJ*, 181). He called it his “destiny” (*EJ*, 141; 4 July 1835). In his address to the Harvard Divinity School (1838), he preached that a common redemptive “light dawns welcome alike into the closet of the philosopher, into the garret of toil, and into prison-cells. . . .”²⁰ Collapsing the solitary pursuits of writer, worker, and prisoner, he turned his studio into a lonely chamber. He studied the art of solitude.

In “Man the Reformer” (1841), Emerson declared that the “money we spend for courts and prisons is very ill laid out.” He hoped “that each person whom I address has felt his own call to cast aside all evil customs, timidities, and limitations, and to be in his place a free and helpful man, a reformer. . . .”²¹ Among the examples worth following, he listed the Quakers, founders of the Pennsylvania system, and Jeremy Bentham, designer of the panopticon. Emerson had come to believe in the hard discipline of solitude and to prod himself toward more productive labor. He had become man the (prison) reformer.

As early as 1815, the Board of Directors of the Massachusetts State Prison had drafted a code of discipline for reformed prisons, a code that would come to shape the practice of the Auburn system:

The diet of a convict ought, though wholesome and sufficient to support the calls of nature, to be of the coarsest kind; his clothes, while calculated to keep him warm, ought to be so arranged as to be considered as a means of punishment; his mind ought to be reduced to a state of humiliation and discipline; all intercourse with each other,

and more especially with the world, ought to be suppressed . . . if the convict wishes to commune with the world, let him do it by reading moral books . . . the prison should be considered as a world by itself, and its inhabitants know nothing of what is passing without its orbit.²²

By 1841, thirteen years after his conception of the protestant monastery and his visit to the New Hampshire State Prison, Emerson had composed his own disciplinary code, one that substantially echoed the premises of prison reform. These were his charges not to convicts but to melancholy gentlemen like himself—especially to the free person who felt “any strong bias to poetry, to art, to the contemplative life”:

[T]hat man ought to reckon early with himself, and, respecting the compensations of the Universe, ought to ransom himself . . . by a certain rigor and privation in his habits. For privileges so rare and grand, let him not stint to pay a great tax. Let him be a caenobite, a pauper, and if need be, celibate also. Let him learn to eat his meals standing, and to relish the taste of fair water and black bread. . . . He must live in a chamber, and postpone his self-indulgence, forewarned and forearmed against that frequent misfortune of men of genius—the taste for luxury. (“MR,” 138–39)

In its subjunctive commandments, its invocation of the solitary chamber, its denigration of human collectivities for the communion of books and the “compensations of the Universe,” even in its sexual prohibitions, Emerson’s discourse resonates with Auburn’s disciplinary program. Reform, for Emerson, began with the self. The transformation of institutions like the prison was a valuable undertaking, but the reformer, like the prisoner, must correct his own soul first of all: “I think we must clear ourselves each one by the interrogation, whether we have earned our bread to-day . . . and we must not cease to *tend* to the correction of flagrant wrongs, by laying one stone aright every day” (“MR,” 142). The metaphor of rebuilding, the transmutation of stone into an element of the soul, enters Emerson’s imagination here and paves the way for his rhetorical question, a few lines later: “What is a man born for but to be a Reformer. . . ?” (“MR,” 142) A curious transference: Emerson’s regimen for intellectuals and would-be reformers turns *them* into prisoners; the reformer takes on the prisoner’s flawed and cellular consciousness, along with the bur-

den of interrogating and purifying himself toward a moral and economic redemption.

Yet “Man the Reformer” also began to move toward a more sweeping protest, a more radical reform. Even as Emerson drew up his code of hard and solitary discipline, promoting a version of the Auburn system in the daily lives of scholars and poets, he considered the social causes of crime, the forms of dehumanization and suspicion that filled up the penitentiaries: “We make, by distrust, the thief, and burglar, and incendiary, and by our court and jail we keep him so. An acceptance of the sentiment of love throughout Christendom for a season would bring the felon and the outcast to our side in tears.” He went on: “See this wide society of laboring men and women. We allow ourselves to be served by them, we live apart from them, and meet them without a salute in the streets” (“MR,” 144–45). The beginnings of a social and political critique might be built from these lines: criminal law and its courts and jails become instruments of class warfare, used to degrade the “society of laboring men and women” and keep them in a state of abjection, quarantined away from the masters made rich by their labor. The laborers in prisons might be, after all, the defeated and degraded adversaries of the protestant-monastic “melancholy gentlemen and ladies.”²³ But Emerson had hardly introduced the notions of class and social structure before he ascended again into the spiritual realm; he proposed no uprising (not here, surely, not now, at the Mechanics’ Apprentices’ Library Association) but a change of heart, “an acceptance of the sentiment of love.” Still, a different insight had presented itself; the movement toward a social and material critique of the prison was underway. Just as Emerson reached his closest alliance with the Auburn reformers, his mind divided and began to oppose their system. “Man the Reformer,” then, is a sort of pivot in Emerson’s thinking about the prison, his fullest acceptance of solitary discipline *and* his turn toward a protest in social terms of disciplinary institutions as such, a protest he went on to develop in “Circles” and gave fullest expression in “Self-Reliance.”

Emerson’s ideas about solitude in “Man the Reformer,” as in “Circles” and “Self-Reliance” (all delivered or published in 1841), were shaped by his public fall from grace after the Harvard Divinity School address. In his speech to the graduating class of 1838, Emerson had attacked the institutions of “Historical Christianity”: the oppressive authority of the church, the Bible as the testament of a distant age

of miracles “as if God were dead,” the worship of Christ as a God on earth, rather than as one more human individual capable of access to the divine (HDSA, 114, 116). This address to an audience of six students and their families soon became Emerson’s most notorious work. The controversy began when Andrews Norton indicted Emerson in print, accusing him of “a great offense” against religion. Norton called on the authority of Christian institutions to condemn Emerson, insisting that “there can be no intuition, no direct perception of the truths of Christianity.”²⁴ The debate soon filled newspapers and journals and severed Emerson from an increasingly conservative Unitarian establishment. One biographer, Robert Richardson, writes that Emerson in this period “was impressed with how society could whip an individual for not conforming.”²⁵ Tried and punished in the press, Emerson came to identify with the convict.

Barbara Packer has argued that the aftermath of the Divinity School address was the occasion for Emerson’s attempt, in “Circles,” to think about insurgence (his own) and oppression (his critics’) as “the opposing principles whose interaction shapes the contours of social and political history.”²⁶ Suddenly feeling power wielded against him, Emerson took a renewed interest in these dynamics. His conflict with the Unitarian establishment, experienced as a sort of trial and punishment, led him to consider the life cycle of radical movements. The Unitarians, once insurgents, had grasped a measure of institutional authority and turned it against Emerson, shaming him for his own radicalism; and this shift provoked him to consider the hardening of reform’s spirit into new oppressive institutions. By 1841, he had arrived at an account of reform and reaction in a dialectical cycle, an alternation of explosive energy and containing order where, as Packer summarizes, “the boldest speculation of one era becomes the reactionary obstruction of the next.”²⁷ Emerson had seen radical Unitarians become judges and censors as they ascended to power. He perceived that the force of reform, once it establishes a new system, quickly ossifies; its bones become the cage against which the next generation must rail and fight—the hard, confining circle that the self-liberating individual must break through. Was Emerson, with this metaphoric of containment and escape, losing faith in the solitary cell? Considered alongside the history of the prison, “Circles” seems to intimate that reform, once a radical program with the utopian aim of redeeming its subjects, had hardened into a system of cynical domination.

The promise of redemption seemed little more, by 1841, than a rhetoric used to obscure the exploitative economics and bodily coercions of the penitentiary system. In “Self-Reliance,” Emerson invoked Bentham again, as a “mind of uncommon activity and power” but also as a will to dominion that “imposes its classification on other men, and lo! a new system.”²⁸ In his cyclical history of liberation and oppression, “system” was Emerson’s term for a once radical and illuminating perception that had petrified, becoming a tyrannical discipline. Bentham’s system no longer enlightened; imperial, it imposed itself: “the classification is idolized . . . so that the walls of the system blend . . . in the remotest horizon with the walls of the universe” (“SR,” 197). Emerson applied the figure of Bentham’s model prison to his discourse in general and to all system-building discourses, which surround the mind with a false and binding façade. The “system” was an artificial horizon through which the genuine expanses of the universe were so much harder to reach. It did not set the mind free into enlightenment but confined it in a corrupt, “strait and low” redemption (“SR,” 197).

Discursive systems, then, were like prisons—and the prison itself was a system, an imposed horizon whose promise of redemption became suspect in “Self-Reliance.” Emerson, at his most apparently abstract, turns out to be engaged with a major theme of his historical moment. He refers to a real, historical prison, the modern institution built for solitary confinement, when he writes that “man” in society is “clapped into jail by his consciousness” (“SR,” 178). Readers mainly interested in Emerson’s spiritual abstractions pass over this image almost without seeing it; nearly two centuries after the rise of prison reform, we may take for granted that the jail in question is a solitary one—and surely Emerson’s metaphor can’t make sense otherwise. But an understanding of the evolution of solitary confinement reveals Emerson’s historicity here, his feet planted in the American North of the middle nineteenth century, in a time and place where the question of individual liberty was already deeply conflicted. Even three decades earlier, before the Auburn and Pennsylvania systems, the image of a self “clapped into jail by his consciousness” could not have had the particular meaning it has in “Self-Reliance.” This bound consciousness belongs to no collectivity; it can’t be imagined with a cell mate or, even less, languishing in the crowded filth of the unreformed *oubliette*. In this historical light, Emerson’s discussion of the shape of conscious-

ness, what he calls the “divided and rebel mind” (“SR,” 177) shows its political force as a protest against the figure of disciplinary solitude enshrined in the modern prison.

Advocates of solitude from Hanway and Bentham to the early admirers of the Auburn system had imagined the prisoner in the act of self-correction as, in a sense, a “divided and rebel mind”—they had placed the repentant soul, the agent of righteousness, at the center of the cell, surrounded on all sides by its guilty, criminal counterpart. The repentant soul, tormented by its guilty adversary, struggled to correct it, to redeem it, believing that this transformation would bring the end of torment. By the 1840s, this two-part figure was, for Emerson, no longer the redemptive vision of a few radical reformers. It belonged to a newly monumentalized and oppressive power, and it was losing Emerson’s trust.

In a key passage written during the controversy following the Divinity School address and later included in “Self-Reliance,” Emerson attacked the cellular soul by a reversal, turning it inside out: “[M]an is as it were clapped into jail by his consciousness. As soon as he has once spoken with *éclat* he is a committed person, watched by the sympathy or the hatred of hundreds, whose affections must now enter into his account” (“SR,” 178).²⁹ The jail of consciousness here, the structure that binds, is no native element of the mind; it is the opinion of an external public, which the individual in his weakness allows to judge and sentence him. Convention, classification, cultural rules—the “conformity” of a society that “is everywhere in conspiracy against the manhood of every one of its members”—this is the disciplinary system that enters and controls the mind (“SR,” 178). It imposes itself. In Emerson’s version, the cell is not the private guilt of the soul, projected outward, but an intrusive social pressure; and the bound, central self is not remorse struggling to repair guilt but the “nonconformist” agent freeing itself from and expressing itself against the falsity of “customs” (“SR,” 178). The drama of the soul’s self-redemption is recast: the soul saves itself not by coming into unison with social standards but by discovering and adhering to those aspects of itself that are the most deviant, the most peculiar, and therefore, paradoxically, the most universal and divine. Deviancy, the contemptuous disregard of social strictures, is the method and the sign of self-reliance.

Emerson’s critique of the jail in “Self-Reliance” is a critique of what some contemporary critics call social control. Against conformity,

Emerson defends the peculiarity, the individuality of the soul as its genuine redemption. Prison reform reduced everything about the convict, the totality of his memories and experience, to a flaw, and set the abstract, universalized corrective principle against this flaw. Emerson recognized, in 1841, that this kind of correction was the disciplinary technique of a suspicious governing order. It was the mechanism by which a power—once insurgent, now oppressive—produced unthinking conformists. It did not redeem but domesticated the soul. To achieve a genuine redemption, in Emerson’s vision, the prisoner would have to reverse this two-part structure, pushing his deviant individuality through the walls of social pressure in a liberating and redemptive jailbreak.

Emerson, then, restored to a relationship with historical prison reform, can be seen grasping and resisting prison reform’s central image at a crucial moment in its development, just as its radical energy expired and it became an instrument of domination. The cellular soul, as Emerson saw it in 1841, was passing over to join the side of backwardness and coercion. Turning the figure inside out, insisting that the corrective element of cellular consciousness was in reality a soul-destroying pressure to conform, Emerson protested the modern prison in its petrified state, a mechanism of social control. Like the whisperers in Auburn prison, he subverted the very architecture of solitary discipline.

Cultural critics often celebrate subversion as a way of resisting dominating systems from within, and I’m tempted to end with this analogy, making Emerson and the Auburn prisoners the twin heroes of a struggle against the emergent order of solitary discipline in the nineteenth century. But Emerson’s relationship to reform is much more complicated than such a reading would allow; in fact, his subversion of the cellular soul provides only a limited, perhaps even dangerous, sort of liberation. In order to understand its full range of consequences, it is necessary to see how this protest slides across the boundary between the material and the abstract. In a curious way, Emerson’s engagement with material structures of domination actually depends on two levels of abstraction. First, prison reformers introduced the image of the cellular soul, using a language of spiritual correction that obscured the realities of stone cells and confined bodies. Second, Emerson used the prisoner, the figure “clapped into jail,” as a metaphor for modern consciousness in general: everybody is, in a sense,

an inmate, suffering a universal kind of mental captivity. This double abstraction, in the end, is what enabled Emerson's protest of coercive institutions. The discourse of prison reform provided him with the metaphor of the cellular soul, and he imagined opposition by subverting it. Abstraction allowed Emerson to turn the poetics of the penitentiary against itself.

But just as ascending into the ether of abstraction enabled Emerson to tinker with prison reform's conceptual figure, to master and redeploy it in new directions, the same departure from the material world inevitably limited his protest. If the coercion of the cell is mainly a state of mind, if everybody in the social world is really a prisoner, then the particular violence of life inside real prisons can be ignored. Emerson's mode of protest extends and generalizes the poetics of the penitentiary, and his call for a universal liberation ignores the most physically urgent, most torturous kinds of nonfreedom at work in his time and place; the walls of the New Hampshire State Prison, for instance, all but disappear. Emerson stages the drama of personal redemption outside social time and circumstances. Like so many romantic complaints about "social control," his critique evades the complex dynamics of historical collectivities and material conditions.

The departure from material conditions may in fact have kept Emerson from seeing how close his own rhetoric remained to the rhetoric of prison reform, many of whose principles he continued to accept in 1841. Like Warden Moses Pilsbury and the captains of the industrializing economy, Emerson believed that production was the measure of the soul's value and that productive labor was the proper use of time. "Power ceases," he wrote in "Self-Reliance," "in the instant of repose" ("SR," 190). When he lumped "rest" and "inertia" with the forces of conservatism and coercion, he repeated a central tenet of those forces—that idleness is a vice to be destroyed, that the criminal should be prepared, upon his release, for factory work.³⁰

And the labor Emerson believed in was solitary labor.³¹ Intimacy, solidarity, community had no place in Emerson's vision of the soul's redemption in "Self-Reliance," which rested on the assumption that "We must go alone" ("SR," 192). Praising the solitude of spiritual labor, his vision seems shaped by the very prison he aimed to resist. The protestant monastery returns: "I like the silent church . . . better than any preaching. How far off, how cool, how chaste the persons look, begirt each one with a precinct or a sanctuary! So let us always

sit" ("SR," 192). With this frigid and lonesome arrangement of bodies, the imagery of disciplinary solitude repeated itself in "Self-Reliance." Emerson reconfigured meanings and reassigned value, but he finally accepted a cellular figure, an isolated self closed off from human intimacy and communion. Like the designers of the Auburn system, he dreamed of the "man . . . who in the midst of the crowd keeps with perfect sweetness the independence of solitude" ("SR," 181). The solitary cell drew a horizon around Emerson's meditations in "Self-Reliance," around a consciousness which, in the same year, thinking of "History," had conceived a profoundly different vision of collective warmth and communal insurgence:

A mind might ponder its thoughts for ages and not gain so much self-knowledge as the passion of love shall teach it in a day. Who knows himself before he has been thrilled with indignation at an outrage, or has heard an eloquent tongue, or has shared the throb of thousands in a national exultation or alarm? ("History," *SE*, 171)

In "Self-Reliance," on the other hand, Emerson adopted the posture of the New Hampshire reformers, recoiling from collectivity as from a contagion. He assembled a congregation only in order to sever any connection among its members, a gesture recalling Auburn's silent congregate labor and Bentham's own system, where a chaplain positioned at the center of the panopticon would allow prisoners "to receive the benefits of attendance on Divine service . . . without stirring from their [solitary] cells."³² The very architecture of captivity formed Emerson's image of liberation.

I raise these complexities and contradictions not because I wish to quarrel with Emerson, nor even simply to reject his manner of critiquing coercive systems; rather, I mean to explore how, for this canonical theorist of American self-liberation, the imagery of freedom is bound up with the imagery of captivity. A long critical tradition has examined Emerson's account of liberation without discerning the depth of this interdependence.

The modern prison, in Emerson's treatment, is mainly the latest manifestation of a cyclical repressive force, a universalized spiritual law. For this reason, readers can approach and adopt his model of confined consciousness without recognizing the model's specificity, its relationship to the solitary cell in the moment of its enshrinement. When Emerson's followers and critics respond to the figure of self-

liberating subjectivity in “Self-Reliance” without perceiving how it subverts the cellular soul, the “clapped into jail by his consciousness” passage becomes a doorway: it permits prison reform’s image of self-binding consciousness to enter the discourse of selfhood in general, to shape how writers outside prison walls imagine the mind. Emerson in “Self-Reliance” was historical and political, a critic of the modern prison, but he was also an alchemist, treating real institutions as figures for themes outside history. He took the image of the soul whose temples were the Eastern Pennsylvania State Penitentiary and Auburn Prison, and he turned it into an abstraction. At this moment the cellular soul, inverted but still intact, entered undetected into the discourse of modern subjectivity at large.



A critical return to Emerson’s engagement with the solitary cell, to this crucial moment of figuration and resistance, recovers what hides in his metaphors: the contingent formation of fantasies about subjectivity, work, and liberation, fantasies taking shape around the solitary cell. Emerson’s writing engages the ideology of prison reform, and his protest matters: reclaimed as an inversion of the penitentiary model of correction, “Self-Reliance” invites us toward a renewed critique of that model, even as Emerson yields to his faith in some of its fundamental notions. Emerson’s reading of the cell becomes, in such a history, part of a long discursive struggle over the meaning of solitary confinement and its relation to the rest of society. To see Emerson’s fantasy of the contemplative life in terms of prison reform, then, is to see it as a way of addressing a specific, historically novel architecture of captivity. And such an understanding is the first move toward the sense that our fantasies of solitary intellectual labor and individual transcendence still bind us to that institution and its imaginative formulation in the nineteenth century.

“Everything a man knows & does,” according to Emerson, “enters into & modifies his expression of himself” (*EJ*, 70; 6–7 September 1830). Penitentiaries were well known to this writer, and his thinking was marked by his visit to the New Hampshire State Prison during its period of crisis. Prisons and reform discourse, especially the Auburn system, entered into and modified his expression. The question of incarceration—its economics, architecture, methods and meaning for the young democracy—was a major aspect of Emerson’s cul-

tural moment, crucial to New England's public conversation in the early and middle nineteenth century. At least one historian suggests that the debate between the Philadelphia and Auburn systems in the newspapers of the day was second only to the debate between abolitionists and the defenders of plantation slavery.³³ Not only Emerson but such cultural dignitaries as Tocqueville and Charles Dickens visited the new penitentiaries on their American tours; the Eastern Pennsylvania State Penitentiary, for one, was a "rival to Niagara Falls and the U.S. Capitol in popularity. In 1839 . . . four thousand people, including school children and groups of Native Americans, toured the prison."³⁴ The historical penitentiary, then, must have been more easily recognizable to Emerson's contemporaries than to his later readers. Deep into the metaphors of incarceration and the wide acceptance and influence of the modern prison, we are likely to miss the subtler references, the traces of the historical institutions.

Emerson's critics in the twentieth century, when they mention the prison at all, have seen it as one more metaphor for the loneliness of the soul. In this sense, criticism finishes Emerson's alchemy, his abstraction of the granite cell into an ontological condition. And this conclusive gesture works a disappearance of its own: criticism, overlooking Emerson's engagement with prison reform, overlooks the imaginative field, itself historical, where the meanings and valences of historical structures like the prison cell are contested and transmitted. Readers lose sight of writing in the act of imagining, protesting, and translating institutions into conditions of the soul. We accept as universal a fantasy of solitary labor and redemption that actually has a contingent literary and historical formation.

F. O. Matthiessen describes Emerson's "cheerful temperament" this way: "the turning of the individual upon his own inner life was a matter not for resignation but for exuberance. The possible tragic consequences of the soul locked into its prison, though not envisaged by [Emerson's] optimism, were the burdens of Hawthorne and Poe."³⁵ Matthiessen's literary heroes, Emerson among them, all came of age in the early days of the modern prison, when discussions of carceral practices filled legislative sessions and the pages of journals, including Emerson's own, the *Dial*.³⁶ One of Emerson's closest acquaintances, Margaret Fuller, was active in the campaign for prison reform.³⁷ Yet Matthiessen divides American romanticism. He opposes Emerson's cheer to the haunted gloom of Hawthorne and Poe, the

poets of isolation-as-imprisonment. Emerson's burning notion, Matthiessen writes, is "not man's separateness from man, but his capacity to share in the divine superabundance."³⁸ Matthiessen confines the prison, even the metaphor of solitude, to the most gothic imaginations of the times. He does not hear the prison's reverberations, the echoes of Auburn's silence, when Emerson ponders, in a letter to his aunt: "[w]hat stone walls of incommunicability do exist between mind and mind."³⁹

Emerson's critics since Matthiessen, no matter how they address his complicated authority, tend to follow him in excluding the penitentiary. Those such as Packer and Christopher Newfield, who connect Emerson to institutional histories, have so far focused on other areas: religious organizations, businesses, universities.⁴⁰ In the last few years, some scholars have begun to restore the American disciplinary system to the study of nineteenth-century literature. "Why," H. Bruce Franklin asks, with a note of exasperation, "have we overlooked something so obvious?"⁴¹ But the specific consideration of Emerson and incarceration starts, as far as I know, with this essay. If as T. S. McMillin has argued recently, the struggle over Emerson's meaning is almost always the struggle to create "a 'usable' ancestor capable of inspiring the present," then the stakes are high here, not just for literary history but for how we conceive intellectual practice now.⁴²

The solitary rigors of intellectual labor are not a universal condition, and the lonesome contemplative rebel breaking through the walls of social control is not a transcendent self-liberator. These are fantasies shaped by writing like Emerson's, partly out of its engagement with the historical penitentiary. The stirrings of a new understanding and a new collaboration might begin with these perceptions, these reversals. To see "Self-Reliance" as a reckoning with the cell is to move away from solitude, toward a different, perhaps more collective, conception of critical work whose proper adversary is not Emerson but the real penitentiary system and its many consequences in our social and imaginative lives.

Emerson, with the reformers, redefined coercive isolation as a productive and redemptive discipline. As he considered prisons and reform, he conceived a version of the "contemplative life" that continues to shape the way we think now about intellectual practice. Consider, for instance, the architecture of an ordinary office for a professor in the humanities: a little cube, lighted by a single window, within which

the scholar pursues the solitary life of the mind. But if the field of engagement between the material prison and the protestant-monastic fantasy—writing in the act of making the cell meaningful and available to a readership outside the prison—can become visible again, the melancholy solitude of intellectual life might begin to lose its universality, its false appearance as a natural and necessary condition. We might begin to sense the historical possibility of what, if we're melancholy, we already desire: an escape from solitude.

More important, when this field of engagement is opened and critically contested, it will change the character of our identification with the prisoner. Instead of invoking a metaphor to express our own loneliness, we might reckon with the lives of people whose confinement has deeply informed the discourse of freedom and redemption in the modern United States. What comes to light is an often unperceived interdependence between the discourse of liberation and the hard facts of captivity. Prison reform involved new tortures and new architectures; it also involved a whole poetics, developed around the image of the cellular soul. Emerson grappled with that image, and his grappling was part combat, part embrace. Attending to this difficult and ambivalent dance reveals how deeply bound are the discourses of individualist freedom and the historical realities of incarceration.⁴³ Hidden in Emerson's vision of liberated self-reliance are the bodies of prisoners, held solitary in the name of their own personal redemption. Interrogating the alchemy of abstraction, we can detect how the protestant monastery and the penitentiary reflect each other—how freedom and captivity, in this familiar imaginative tradition, are after all not opposites but intimates.

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Notes

Writing this essay was no solitary labor. I am grateful to Jenny Mellon, Matt Cohen, Tom Ferraro, and Marianna Torgovnick for their help with it.

- 1 Ralph Waldo Emerson to Charles Chauncy Emerson, 1 January 1828, *Selected Letters of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Joel Myerson (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1997), 92. Further references will be cited parenthetically as *SL*.
- 2 Ralph Waldo Emerson, 8 January 1828, in *Emerson in His Journals*, ed. Joel Porte (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard Univ. Press, 1982), 66. Further references will be cited parenthetically as *EJ*.

- 3 State constitution of New Hampshire, quoted in Orlando F. Lewis, *The Development of American Prisons and Prison Customs, 1776–1845* (Albany: Prison Association of New York, 1922), 151. Further references will be cited parenthetically as *APPC*.
- 4 I think of the penitentiary before the Civil War as an instrument of counterdefinition, a tactic by which the North declared its modernity and humanity against the retrograde brutality of the South. The Northern convict, trained and disciplined for factory work in the modern prison, was imagined in opposition to Southern slaves, a mass of bodies laboring in the fields. For this dialectic at work, see Benjamin H. Coates, *On the Effects of Secluded and Gloomy Imprisonment on Individuals of the African Variety of Mankind in the Production of Disease* (Philadelphia: John C. Clark, 1843). On the penitentiary defined against the plantation, see Mark Colvin, *Penitentiaries, Reformatories, and Chain Gangs* (New York: St. Martin's, 1997); and Michael Meranze, "A Criminal Is Being Beaten: The Politics of Punishment and the History of the Body," in *Possible Pasts: Becoming Colonial in Early America*, ed. Robert Blair St. George (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell Univ. Press, 2000). For an opposing view, which describes deep connections among the legal conditions of slaves and prisoners, see Joan Dayan, "Legal Slaves and Civil Bodies," in *Materializing Democracy: Toward a Revitalized Cultural Politics*, ed. Russ Castronovo and Dana D. Nelson (Durham, N.C.: Duke Univ. Press, 2002), 53–94.
- 5 See Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage, 1977), 236; further references are to this edition and will be cited parenthetically as *DP*. See also Gustave de Beaumont and Alexis de Tocqueville, *On the Penitentiary System in the United States, and Its Application in France*, trans. Francis Lieber (Carbondale: Southern Illinois Univ. Press, 1964), 55; further references are to this edition and will be cited parenthetically as *PS*.
- 6 Jonas Hanway, *Distributive Justice and Mercy* (London: J. Dodsey, 1781), 65.
- 7 Dario Melossi and Massimo Pavarini, *The Prison and the Factory: Origins of the Penitentiary System*, trans. Glynis Cousin (Totowa, N.J.: Barnes and Noble, 1981), 127.
- 8 See Norman Johnston, *Forms of Constraint: A History of Prison Architecture* (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 2000), 69–74. See also Johnston's study of the institution, *Eastern State Penitentiary: Crucible of Good Intentions* (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 2000).
- 9 Melossi and Pavarini, *The Prison and the Factory*, 129.
- 10 See the Boston Prison Discipline Society's *Annual Report* (Boston: Prison Discipline Society, 1841), 42–43. See also Norval Morris and David J. Rothman, eds., *The Oxford History of the Prison: The Practice of Punishment in Western Society* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1995), 117.
- 11 This difference in understanding grows out of a more general difference

in emphasis. Many applications of Foucault are centrally concerned with panoptic surveillance and the power of the gaze; see, for example, Robyn Wiegman, *American Anatomies: Theorizing Race and Gender* (Durham, N.C.: Duke Univ. Press, 1995). My interest, by contrast, is in the architecture of isolation and the structures of subjectivity that come with it: solitude rather than surveillance.

- 12 Robert Vaux, *Brief Sketch of the Origin and History of the State Penitentiary* (Philadelphia: McLaughlin, 1872), 24.
- 13 Having seen the miseries created by solitude, Beaumont and Tocqueville nonetheless did not recommend against it. As a corrective to the problems of death and madness, they suggested that the prisoner should be given the blessing of productive labor, presented as a distraction and a relief—a gift to the suffering inmate. The massacre of the Auburn prisoners came, by this rhetorical turn, to justify the congregate labor of the “Auburn” or “congregate” system of isolation by night and collective, silent work by day—an innovation that brought the penitentiary ever closer to the “divided” labor of the factory.
- 14 See Norman Johnston, *Forms of Constraint*, 75–76.
- 15 See *Plain Truths, Addressed to the People of New Hampshire, Concerning Their State Prison, and the Management of Its Affairs*, anonymous pamphlet, 1834, reprinted on microfilm in *Nineteenth-Century Legal Treatises 36686* (Woodbridge, Conn.: Research Publications, 1988).
- 16 *New Hampshire Journal of the House of Representatives* (Sandborn, N.H.: N. Howland, for the State, June 1830), 112; further references will be cited as *JHR*.
- 17 See *New Hampshire Journal of the Senate* (Concord: Luther Roby, for the State, June 1831), 90.
- 18 Another subtext here is prison sex. The Boston Prison Discipline Society defined the Auburn system against older prisons where “the old corrupted the young, by practising the sin of Sodom” (*Annual Report* [Boston: 1841], 41).
- 19 In its 1831 Report, the Boston Prison Discipline Society recorded its concern that the New Hampshire State Prison “has no solitary dormitories and corresponding discipline; and if this evil is not remedied, old convicts [from other states] will soon . . . flee to New Hampshire, where, if arrested, they may enjoy each other’s society in the State Prison” (*Annual Report* [Boston: 1831], 13).
- 20 Ralph Waldo Emerson, Address to the Harvard Divinity School, in *Selected Essays*, ed. Larzer Ziff (New York: Penguin, 1982), 126; further references to this address are to this edition and will be cited parenthetically as HDSA.
- 21 Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Man the Reformer,” in *Selected Essays*, ed. Larzer Ziff (New York: Penguin, 1982), 144, 130. Further references to “Man the Reformer” are to this edition and will be cited parenthetically as “MR.”

- 22 Report of the Board of Directors of the Massachusetts State Prison, 1815; quoted in Gideon Haynes, *An Historical Sketch of the Massachusetts State Prison* (Boston: Lee and Shepard, 1869), 215.
- 23 Theodore Parker, in an essay published in the same volume of the *Dial* as Emerson's "Man the Reformer," made a fuller version of the same argument. Parker distinguished between primitive societies where "crimes are few [and] the result of violent passions" and an exploitative industrial society where crimes "are numerous;—the result of want, indolence, or neglected education; they are in great measure crimes against property" ("Thoughts on Labor," *Dial* 4 [April 1840]: 512). The idea that crimes are produced by social and economic conditions, rather than corruptions of the soul, strikes against the logic of spiritual correction and calls for sweeping reforms beyond the sphere of penal law. The social causes of crime, however, were not ignored by the reformers who conceived the penitentiary; in fact, their sense that there was a redeemable soul in every convict was based, in some accounts, on the premise that criminals are made by pernicious social and environmental influences, and that prison discipline should undo these effects.
- 24 Andrews Norton, "The New School in Literature and Religion," *Boston Daily Advertiser*, 27 August 1838; and *A Discourse on the Latest Form of Infidelity* (Cambridge, Mass.: John Owen, 1839); quoted in Robert D. Richardson Jr., *Emerson: The Mind on Fire* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1995), 299.
- 25 Richardson, *Emerson*, 300.
- 26 Barbara Packer, *Emerson's Fall* (New York: Continuum, 1982), 133.
- 27 *Ibid.*, 135. Charles Lane had put it this way: "[A]s soon as warm spontaneous thoughts are chilled into orthodoxy, the fluid stream, which would facilitate our progress, is frozen into an unyielding barrier" ("Social Tendencies," *Dial* 14 [October 1843]: 192).
- 28 Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Self-Reliance," *Selected Essays*, ed. Larzer Ziff (New York: Penguin, 1982), 196. Further references are to this edition and will be cited parenthetically as "SR."
- 29 On the composition of these lines and their inclusion in "Self-Reliance," see Richardson, *Emerson*, 299–300.
- 30 Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Circles," in *Selected Essays*, ed. Larzer Ziff (New York: Penguin, 1982), 236.
- 31 A few months before the publication of "Self-Reliance," Emerson had seriously considered joining George Ripley's experimental commune at Brook Farm. After a long deliberation, he declined the invitation, writing to Ripley on 15 December 1840: "[A]ll I shall solidly do, I must do alone" (SL, 244, 245). Emerson reckoned with his solitude as a natural and necessary destiny: "He could join no association that was not based on the recognition that each person is the center of his or her own world" (Richardson, *Emerson*, 343). The controversy following the

Divinity School address and Emerson's rejection of Brook Farm are two pieces of biography that can stand for the two conflicted tendencies in his relation to the cell in "Self-Reliance": the first drives him to attack institutions that shame and punish the deviant individual; the second signifies the limit of his attack, his unwillingness to give his isolated selfhood up into a collectivity. While his public punishment leads him to distrust institutions, his refusal to join the Brook Farm collective shows his continued commitment to a solitary "destiny." In "Self-Reliance," Emerson develops his most profound critique of the prison even as his resigned embrace of solitude makes him more than ever a believer in a cellular selfhood and the soul's lonesome toil. Richardson notes that Emerson, at the same time he rejected Brook Farm, also rejected the account of systemic social problems and the call for systemic social change proposed by Orestes Brownson in "The Laboring Classes." By 1841, Richardson writes, Emerson's "faith in the power and the infinitude of the individual was greater than his faith in collective action" (*Emerson*, 344). The social critique initiated in "Man the Reformer" seems to have been abandoned by this point—not just abstracted but actively suppressed.

- 32 Jeremy Bentham, *Panopticon Writings*, ed. Miran Bozovic (London: Verso, 1995), 50–51.
- 33 See Rothman, chapter 4, in *Oxford History of the Prison*, ed. Morris and Rothman, 117.
- 34 Johnston, *Forms of Constraint*, 74.
- 35 F. O. Matthiessen, *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman* (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1941), 8.
- 36 See Lane's "Social Tendencies," for instance, which argues that the multiplication of "penitentiaries and jails, hospitals and insane asylums" is evidence of social stagnation, institutional without spiritual reform (197).
- 37 See Margaret Fuller, "Our City Charities: Visit to Bellevue Alms House, to the Farm School, the Asylum for the Insane, and Penitentiary on Blackwell's Island," *New York Daily Tribune*, 19 March 1845; reprinted in *The Portable Margaret Fuller*, ed. Mary Kelly (New York: Penguin, 1994), 370–76.
- 38 Matthiessen, *American Renaissance*, 8.
- 39 Emerson to Mary Moody Emerson, 26 March and 1 April 1830, *SL*, 107.
- 40 I hope my reading of the penitentiary in Emerson's imagination can collaborate with, rather than displace, such accounts. Packer's importance to my understanding should already be clear. Christopher Newfield's *The Emerson Effect: Individualism and Submission in America* is a nuanced treatment, based mainly on hierarchical corporate structures, of how Emerson's rhetoric of individual liberty enfolds within itself a logic of "submission" (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1996). The penitentiary provides an especially rigid, concrete instance of a similar rever-

- sal, where Emerson's rhetoric of self-reliance smuggles in the imagery of punishment and "correction."
- 41 H. Bruce Franklin, "Billy Budd and Capital Punishment: A Tale of Three Centuries," *American Literature* 69 (June 1997): 337. In the face of the dominant critical exclusion of historical prisons, I'm greatly encouraged by the efforts of Franklin, who has been arguing for three decades that the justice system deserves a central place in our understanding of American literary history, and by the recent work of Joan Dayan, especially her "Poe, Persons, and Property" (*American Literary History* 11 [fall 1999]: 405-25), which traces the influence of the Eastern Pennsylvania State Penitentiary on Poe's nightmares of isolation. Yet Franklin has tended to focus on Melville and Hawthorne, and Dayan's work is, so far, limited to Poe, perhaps reinforcing the divide drawn by Matthiessen that keeps these themes out of our reading of Emerson.
- 42 T. S. McMillin, *Our Preposterous Use of Literature: Emerson and the Nature of Reading* (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois, 2000), 98.
- 43 Tocqueville's official reason for visiting the United States in the 1830s was to observe the new penitentiaries and to make recommendations about their use in France. While he and Beaumont compiled their report, Tocqueville was also making notes for his monumental study *Democracy in America*. I think the connection gives a special resonance to Tocqueville's claim that in American democracy, "[e]ach man is forever thrown back on himself alone, and there is danger that he may be shut up in the solitude of his own heart" (*Democracy in America*, ed. J. P. Myer, trans. George Lawrence [New York: Harper/Perennial, 1988], 508). As Thomas Dumm has argued, the interconnected penal and political structures of democracy and the penitentiary belonged to a common radical vision where "solitude was the condition of all members of society" (*Democracy and Punishment: Disciplinary Origins of the United States* [Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1987], 111.)