Universiteit Leiden
The Netherlands

Het uur der waarheid

Asscher, M.W.B.

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SUMMARY

What is it like to be imprisoned? *Het uur der waarheid. Over de gevangenschap als literaire ervaring* (*The Hour of Truth. On Imprisonment as a Literary Experience*) analyses what answers literature has to offer to this question. First and foremost this book concerns itself with authors who themselves are or have been in prison and who are thus able to use their own experiences for their descriptions. Subsequently, we look at works by those who picture the condition of imprisonment, both in prose and in poetry, mainly by using their literary imagination.

For our present purposes, the prison experience is defined as a situation in which punishment, confinement and solitude are combined. Creating a separate literary genre called 'prison literature' in order to distinguish it from literature concerned with other locations than a prison, would be mere naming and would not offer much in the way of analytical advantage. It is moreover a term that is susceptible to multiple interpretation. Of more importance is the question in what way writing in a prison cell differs from writing in the isolation of an ordinary room. The need for 'clandestinité', which Barthes ascribes to every writer's activity, certainly suggests a parallel between these two forms of confinement. But with reference to a passage in Stendhal's *Le rouge et le noir* (*The Red and the Black*), the crucial difference turns out not to lie in the bars in front of the window, but in power over solitude. Keeping that difference in mind sufficiently allows us to make meaningful statements about literary works based on or about the prison experience, without forcing us to define a separate literary genre called 'prison literature', a term in which the crucial difference between testimony and imagination would be lost.

Chapter II recounts the history of solitude as a distinct manner of punishment. This new approach in penal theory was propagated widely in the last quarter of the eighteenth century. It was first proposed by the English pamphleteer Jonas Hanway (1712-1786). From the beginning of the nineteenth century onward this 'solitude as punishment' was to become the dominant idea in both European and American criminal law systems, with all due consequences for their penal regimes in general and for prison architecture in particular. Far into the twentieth century, the so-called 'separate system', the isolated confinement of prisoners who were thus supposed to achieve moral improvement, was the prevailing model for punishing convicted criminals. Against the background of this period (circa 1820 – circa 1945) three autobiographical prison texts are analysed in an attempt to discover how their genesis and content shed light on the author's prison experience.

Chapter III explores the prison memoir *Le mie prigioni* (*My Prisons*, 1832) by the Italian writer and 'carbonaro' Silvio Pellico (1789-1854), who, after being held on remand for one and a half years, was subsequently confined to Spielberg Castle in the Moravian city of Brünn (present-day Brno) for more than eight years as a prisoner of the Austrians. An analysis demonstrates that the prison experience as such is not so much the subject of Pellico's autobiographical book, rather the experience is used as the inner catalyst of a religious interpretation of the author's fate, which in its turn also serves the author as a strategy to foil the religious and political censorship of his day. Instead of concentrating on the facts of his prison experience, the main subject of the text – in terms of both quantity and content – is the story of the author's religious conversion, his Christian martyrdom becoming, as it were, the means of mentally escaping from his prison.

Chapter IV deals with the long prison letter *De Profundis* written by Oscar Wilde (1854-1900). The problematic publication history of this text mirrors the many-sided and complex character of its content. Again, the actual experience of being in prison turns out not to be at the core of the text, which is a combination of the story leading up to his confinement, an autobiography, an essay on Jesus Christ as a model for the romantic artist and a passionate declaration of love. The cell in Reading Prison where Wilde spent the last one and a half years of his sentence is not so much the object of his attention as the miserable perspective from which he observes his earlier and his hoped-for later (intellectual) life.

In the third example of an autobiographical prison text, the *Moabiter Sonette* (*Moabit Sonnets*, 1945) by Albrecht Haushofer (1903-1945) analysed in

Chapter V, it is likewise found that only one-fifth of this cycle of poems is concerned with the author's actual prison experience. By far the majority of the poems is devoted to an intellectual reflection on the civilisation of which – up to his confinement – Haushofer formed a part and on the impending destruction of the German culture to which he belonged. Rather than telling the reader what it is like to be held in a Berlin prison by the Gestapo, these sonnets are like windows onto a spiritual world that has become irretrievably lost to the author.

Since our analysis shows that these three testimonies only present a very restricted version of the prison experience, the question is raised whether the prison experience is perhaps more fully rendered when it is shaped by the literary imagination. In view of that question Chapter VI presents a detailed analysis of three contemporary literary works in which the prison experience is a distinctive feature, although the works in question were written in the freedom of a regular room in a house: two novels, *La Chartreuse de Parme* (*The Charterhouse of Parma*) by Stendhal and *Little Dorrit* by Charles Dickens, and the poem 'De achttien dooden' ('The Eighteen Dead') by Jan Campert.

The concluding Chapter VII presents a comparison between the three aforementioned autobiographical prison writings and the three works of the imagination. According to the 'letter', the authors in the first category may have complied with their Lejeunian autobiographical pact. In 'spirit', however, they have escaped from their prison experience: in a Christian conversion, in an act of accusation-cum-declaration of love and in a spiritual journey through a lost world of culture. By contrast, in the three examples of imaginative literature it is precisely the prison experience that is at work as a central, all-pervading force in the text. In the works of Stendhal, Dickens and Campert, this force is evoked and continuously fostered by a combination of symbolic references and architectural and other metaphors, as well as by a wealth of realistic – albeit not always factually correct – details. Barthes's theory of the 'reality-effect' in realistic literature and the 'sense of place' strategy as described by Furst suggest that the free writer, in the self-controlled confinement of his writing room, succeeds in conveying the imagined experience of lonely incarceration more completely and more persuasively than the writer who writes about his own prison experience. In other words: in autobiographical prison literature the reader escapes together with the author from the temporary confinement of the prison experience, in imaginative prison literature the reader is confined together with

the protagonist by the author, who deploys a variety of literary means to lock, as it were, the door of the imagined prison cell from the outside.