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FROM THE PROFANE TO THE SACRED:  
PRISON-SPACE TRANSFORMATIONS  
IN G.G. BYRON'S "THE PRISONER OF CHILLON"  
AND O. WILDE'S "THE BALLAD OF READING GAOL"

**Abstract.** This study focuses on two prison poems: "The Prisoner of Chillon" by G.G. Byron and "The Ballad of Reading Gaol" by O. Wilde. It highlights the ordeal of the inmates with the emphasis on the change in their perception of the prison space. Based on M.-L. Ryan's definition of story space, it is argued that the changing perception of space in the poems reflects the spiritual transformation the protagonists undergo. The experience of confinement leads, in the case of Byron's protagonist, to the acceptance of prison life to the point of the dungeon becoming "a second home," sacred to him as a site of his brothers' burial. In Wilde's poem incarceration has a transformative function, culminating in spiritual awakening and in the development of faith in Christ's redemption. As a result of the change in both poems, prison becomes a space of prayer, turning thereby from the profane into the sacred.

**Key words:** G.G. Byron; O. Wilde; "The Prisoner of Chillon"; "The Ballad of Reading Gaol"; prison space; the sacred; the profane.

INTRODUCTION

The themes of crime, punishment and imprisonment have always attracted interest of writers and readers alike; hence, no wonder that the prison features prominently in each literary epoch. Although prison narratives can be

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traced back to the ancient times, through the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, in England, it is the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries that, as Freeman contends, witnessed the revival and reinvention of prison writing “to such an extent that it became one of England’s most characteristic cultural forms in the period” (Freeman 2009, 133). Prison literature includes works created from both the “inside” and “outside” the gaol. Memoirs, letters, fiction and non-fiction penned by people from all walks of life, prisoners themselves and those who did not possess first-hand experience of incarceration, have created an important picture of confinement, of the pain and trauma it involved. Apart from “trial narratives, [...] psalm translations, dialogues, religious polemics, pastoral guidance, poems, love lyrics, [...], prayers and meditative guides, letters of appeal, [...], marginalia and graffiti” (Ahnert 2013, 3), the prison letter, “first-person narrative of a prisoner’s trial and interrogations” were among the most frequently practised forms of writing (Freeman 2009, 134).

Poetry and prose works describing prison life were created, among others, Freeman posits, by “members of the social elite,” whose writing skills enabled them to provide insightful account of confinement (Freeman 2009, 134). Moreover, the detainees, Ahnert (2013) notes, “had powerful motivations to write. These motivations were as diverse as the causes for which individuals were imprisoned” (2–3), ranging from religious to political persecution.<sup>1</sup> These varied experiences of captivity, reflected in the diversity of literary forms and genres (Ahnert 2013), were described by English writers such as Sir Thomas Malory (1405–1471), the author of *Morte D’Arthur*, Sir Thomas More (1478–1535), Thomas Wyatt (1503–1542) (cf. Harrison 2009), Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey (1517–1547), Sir Walter Raleigh (1552–1618), George Chapman (1559–1634), Robert Southwell (1561–1595), Thomas Dekker (1572–1632), Ben Jonson (1572–1637), and Richard Lovelace (1617–1657). The most famous contributors were, however, John Bunyan (1628–1688), whose famous *The Pilgrim’s Progress* (1678) was written in prison, Daniel Defoe (1660–1731), the author of “A Hymn to the Pillory” (1703), and John Cleland (1709–1789) with his “Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure” (1748) (cf. Freeman 2009; Mullan 2009; Rotstein 2013). In the decades to come, the experience of incarceration

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<sup>1</sup> It is worth noting that the development of printing industry made the production and publication of prison writings possible. Needless to say, there were audiences for prison writings within prisons and outside them (Freeman 2009, 135).

influenced the work of two poets: Christopher Smart (1722–1771) (allegedly a madman, who spent six years in a madhouse [Sitter 2006, 24], and later in life, in 1770, was sent to prison for debt, where he died in 1771 [Sitter 2006, 27], and John Clare (1793–1864), who also was confined to a lunatic asylum (Nelson 2016).

In the novel, developing as a new literary genre, the motif of prison received many-sided treatment in the works of authors such as Daniel Defoe mentioned above, Eliza Haywood (1693–1756), Samuel Richardson (1689–1761), Henry Fielding (1707–1754), Horace Walpole (1717–1797), Tobias Smollett (1721–1771), and Oliver Goldsmith (1728–1774). As W.B. Carnochan maintains, “a history of the prison theme in eighteenth-century Britain could come remarkably close to being an account of the literature of the age” (quoted in Powell 2018, 60).

The motif of prison frequently appears in nineteenth-century literature in the works of prominent novelists such as Edward Bulwer Lytton (1803–1873), William H. Ainsworth (1805–1882), William Makepeace Thackeray (1811–1863), Charles Dickens (1812–1870), and Charles Read (1814–1884). As far as the poets are concerned, George Gordon Byron (1788–1824) and Oscar Wilde (1854–1900) made a significant contribution to prison writing with two famous poems “The Prisoner of Chillon” (1816) and “The Ballad of Reading Gaol” (1897), published, respectively, at the beginning and end of the long nineteenth century.

This study focuses on the carceral experience presented in these works, in particular, on the ordeal of the inmates as well as on the change in their perception of the space around them, reflecting the spiritual transformation they undergo. Space, as one of the basic categories structuring human experience, is understood here in Marie-Laure Ryan’s (2009) terms as “story space”—“the space relevant to the plot, as mapped by the actions and thoughts of the characters. It consists of all the spatial frames<sup>2</sup> plus all the locations mentioned by the text that are not the scene of actually occurring events” (422).

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<sup>2</sup> Spatial frames are “the immediate surroundings of actual events, the various locations shown by the narrative discourse by the image [...]. Spatial frames are shifting scenes of action, and they may flow into each other [...]. They are hierarchically organized by relations of containment (a room is a subspace of a house), and their boundaries may be either clear-cut [...] or fuzzy [...].” (Ryan 421).

## GEORGE GORDON BYRON: "THE PRISONER OF CHILLON"

G.G. Byron's poem was written as an aftermath of his and Shelley's trip in 1816 to Lake Geneva and to Chillon during which he became fascinated with the chateau—the island castle, and its history, including the history of the Bonnivard family. This experience inspired Byron to write first the "Sonnet on Chillon," which mentioned François Bonnivard, who appears as the protagonist of the longer poem, "The Prisoner of Chillon. A Fable," celebrating the idea of liberty. The poem develops, as noted by Cheeke, "the motif of a holy or consecrated place, [...] *marked out* by footsteps – Bonnivard's memory is preserved in the worn stones, retrodden by Byron in 1816" (2003, 82). The speaker-protagonist, the eponymous prisoner, was famous for his involvement in the struggle for liberty. Imprisoned in 1530 in Chillon, he remained there "without charge or questioning until 1536" (Cochran 1997, 25–26). The poem is a meditation on the bitter experience of incarceration, aggravated by the loss of two brothers, who, imprisoned with him in Chillon, died there and were buried in their cell.

The opening description introduces the damp dungeon space to which François Bonnivard and his two brothers are confined. Its focal features include thick "dungeon walls" (l. 261), (also referred to as "heavy walls" [l.377]), darkness (ll. 16; 116; 360) as well as limited mobility due to each brother being chained to a different pillar. The inmates' sense of captivity is defined by the length of their chains: despite the fact that the prisoners occupy one cell, they cannot "move a single pace" (l. 50) or see each other:

They chain'd us each to a column stone,  
And we were three—yet, each alone;  
We could not move a single pace,  
We could not see each other's face... (ll. 48–51)

Further features of the experience of incarceration comprise loneliness and impossibility to escape death, which intensifies the sense of confinement and loss. François' isolation is deepened by the fact that, chained to the pillars, deprived of eye contact, the brothers can only hear each other's voices (though "they never sounded like [their] own" [l. 68]), or the clanking of their chains – the noises which in the darkness of the dungeon sound surreal. The sense of imprisonment and separation from the world outside the prison walls is enhanced by the topography of the surroundings of the chateau, which, located on an island on Lake Lemman, with the prison cell situated

below the lake-water level, becomes “a double dungeon” (l. 113) to the protagonist and his brothers. The grimness of the place, from which, apparently, only death can set one free, cannot be brightened up by the “pale and livid light” (l. 52) which enters “through the crevice and the cleft / Of the thick wall” (ll. 32–33) and which seems to change the brothers into strangers (ll. 51–3). However, this apparent transformation does not weaken the emotional bonds among them. On the contrary, though “fetter’d in hand” they remain “join’d in heart” (l. 56).

Compared to “a living grave” (l. 114), the prison is described throughout the poem as “a double dungeon wall” (l. 113), “the dark vault” (l. 116), “a cave” (l. 151), “an iron den” (l. 137), “a fatal place” (l. 218), “a sea of stagnant idleness” (l. 249), or a “dim abode” (l. 360). All of these attributes of the Chillon prison bring about associations with hell as presented in *Paradise Lost* [*PL*]. In particular, the phrase “sights of woe” (l. 303) – Milton’s expression describing hell in Book I (*PL*, Book I, l. 64)—makes one connote the Chillon prison with Miltonic hell (“a dungeon horrible on all sides round” [*PL*, l. 61]). This connotation implies also the severity of punishment.

The grave imagery used to describe Chillon’s cells foreshadows the death of the brothers, who perish one by one. Chained to his pillar, Bonnivard is incapable of bringing any relief to them. After their death he is confronted with the worst fate that he can face as a prisoner. He calls himself “a wreck” (l. 26), his “hair is grey” (l. 1) as a result of being exposed to years of anguish, his “limbs are bow’d, though not with toil, / But rusted with a vile repose” (ll. 5–6). Suspended between day and night, life and death, he has “no thought, no feeling” (l. 235); he has lost not only life-giving light and air, but also darkness seems to be lost to him (l. 234). He is as numb as a stone: he perceives a similarity between himself and the pillar he is chained to:

What next befell me then and there  
 I know not well — I never knew —  
 First came the loss of light, and air,  
 And then of darkness too:  
 I had no thought, no feeling — none —  
 Among the stones I stood a stone,  
 And was, scarce conscious what I wist,  
 As shrubless crags within the mist;  
 For all was blank, and bleak, and grey;  
 It was not night — it was not day;  
 It was not even the dungeon-light,  
 So hateful to my heavy sight,

But vacancy absorbing space,  
 And fixedness — without a place;  
 There were no stars, no earth, no time,  
 No check, no change, no good, no crime  
 But silence, and a stirless breath  
 Which neither was of life nor death;  
 A sea of stagnant idleness,  
 Blind, boundless, mute, and motionless! (ll. 231–250)

The proliferation of negative expressions implying the loss of all aspects of normal human existence, the loss of spatial and temporal coordinates (“no stars, no earth, no time”) underlines the dehumanizing impact of the prison which Bonnivard and his brothers had been confined to. His sense of extreme despair is oxymoronically described as “fixedness—without a place” (l. 244).

This dismal situation will have its end though. After this prolonged experience of physical and spiritual anguish, there comes a turning point in Bonnivard’s perception of his condition, a radical change takes place, heralded by “the carol of the bird” (l. 252) heard by the speaker and interpreted as a light which “broke in upon [his] brain,” and which “brought him back to feel and think” (l. 278).

The bird is perceived by Bonnivard as a “visitant from Paradise” (l. 284), a harbinger of a change for the better (l. 300). Its appearance creates a link between the timeless tomb-like space of the dungeon and the vast world outside. The speaker’s elaborate description of the bird, highlighting the colour of its wings and the sweetness of its song, can be seen as the recovery of his ability to perceive the loveliness of nature outside the prison walls. He also responds to the sunlight which enters the cell through a crevice in the wall (“I saw the glimmer of the sun” [l. 263]). Thus, the wall no longer seems impenetrable to the lonely prisoner.<sup>3</sup> This may be caused by the fact that the bird provokes Bonnivard to think of his youngest brother: when he died, the protagonist compared the moment of death to the soul “taking wing” (l. 177). Now the appearance of the bird makes him think that this “visitant from Paradise” “might be / My brother’s soul come down to me” (ll. 286-7). Though this “visitation by the bird” turns out to be a single event, and its disappearance leaves the speaker with the sense of loneliness again, still “a kind of change in [his] fate” (l. 300) ensues.

<sup>3</sup> This scene seems to bear strong resemblance to an episode in *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (1798) by S.T. Coleridge, in which the mariner recognizes the beauty of water-snakes, “blesse[s] them unaware” (l. 285) and regains the ability to pray.

It is worth noting here that the protagonist begins to look upward instead of looking down, under his feet, lest he should tread over his brothers' graves. This change of direction can be interpreted in metaphysical terms as the ability to establish a link with the spiritual. The horizontal space configuration, determined by the steps of Bonnivard, is thereby converted into the vertical one. This change appears to be more profound due to the fact that Bonnivard's keepers, formerly heartless and indifferent to his pleas to bury his brothers in a more appropriate place than the cell, "grew compassionate" (l. 301). His chains were unfastened (l. 305), which enabled Bonnivard to walk all over his cell freely and also to climb the wall to look through the barred windows at the world outside—the mountains, the Rhone, the lake—to realize that it has not changed during the time when, chained to the pillar, he could not see it. This restored ability to move is a mixed blessing though: he has to be careful not to tread on his brothers' graves, which would desecrate them. At this moment the protagonist realizes that the world within the prison walls is more dear to him than the one outside. For Bonnivard, the cursed space of the prison cell has become sacred; he feels transformed: like "a hermit" who in prison has found "a second home" (l. 380). He perceives himself as the keeper of his brothers' graves, the change of attitude reflecting a radical reversal in the perception of his experience. Now he calls his space of confinement "a hermitage – and all [his] own" (l. 378). In his "second home" he also feels like a "monarch" of his fellow creatures—spiders and mice. He says: "My very chains and I grew friends, / So much a long communion tends / To make us what we are" (ll. 389–91). Here, Cheeke aptly notes, "Bonnivard's observation plays with the religious connotations of 'communion', a word Byron enjoyed using to suggest that the mind will instinctively and profoundly interact with whatever its location may be" (2003, 84). In this place, the lines from Milton's *Paradise Lost*: "The mind is its own place, and in itself can make a heaven of hell, a hell of heaven" (*PL*, Book I, ll. 254-55) seem to apply fully to Bonnivard's experience as presented in "The Prisoner of Chillon" (cf. Bernhard Jackson 2011, 222).

The concluding lines of the poem show the protagonist as a person transformed by the experience of confinement in Chillon, whose perception of the hell-like dungeon alters: as mentioned above, the cell becomes his second home, which Bonnivard leaves heavy-hearted, saying: "even I / Regained my freedom with a sigh" (ll. 391-92). Peter Cochran in "Byron and the Essence of Imprisonment," rightly claims that the "Prisoner of Chillon" "is so powerful, not merely because of the universality of its theme—the loss of family,

and then the endurance of solitary confinement, in a political cause—but because of the uncompromising psychological realism with which Byron depicts [...] the way in which prisoner gets used to his prison—the way in which imprisonment becomes not a metaphor for his life, but that life itself” (Cochran 1997, 3).

#### OSCAR WILDE: “THE BALLAD OF READING GAOL”

While George Gordon Byron never experienced incarceration first-hand and thus presented carceral experience through the story of François Bonnard, Oscar Wilde, arrested for “gross indecency” and sentenced to two years of hard labour, was acquainted with the ordeal of prison life, and could elaborate on the hardships of Reading Gaol from the witness-inmate point of view. However, “The Ballad of Reading Gaol” went well beyond Wilde’s personal experience, developing into a protest against the grim reality of the prison system and the inhuman conditions the prisoners were subjected to.

Wilde wrote his “Ballad,” as the subtitle informs, “In Memoriam C.T.W., sometime Trooper of the Royal Horse Guards obiit H.M. Prison Reading Berkshire July 7<sup>th</sup>, 1896.” C.T.W. is Charles Thomas Woolridge, Wilde’s co-prisoner who was sent to Reading to wait for his execution for the murder of his wife. The generic form chosen by the author, Ellen L. O’Brien contends, represents “the conflation of the criminal, poet, and victim of execution entangled in the rhetoric of the ballad, problematising moral judgement and re-defining the criminal” (2001, 324). The narrative which is rendered from the point of view of the prisoner who occasionally reveals himself as the persona of Wilde himself (e.g. ll. 393-395), and who identifies with the Trooper (C.T.W.) and other inmates, also includes the portrayal of the prison functionaries.

“The Ballad of Reading Gaol,” a poem of 654 lines, of 109 stanzas, divided into six sections of varying length, is based on the most traumatic episode in Wilde’s two-year sentence: the execution of the Trooper. The opening section presents C.T.W., the murderer of the “woman whom he loved” (l. 1.5), simultaneously introducing the argument developed repeatedly that “each man kills the thing he loves, / Yet each man does not die” (ll. 1.53-54). Seen from this perspective, the Trooper’s sentence seems to be unjust and undeserved.



The second section of the ballad describes the inmates' waiting for the execution of their co-prisoner and the amazement of other prisoners when they see that C.T.W. never shows any sign of despair apart from a wistful look at the blue sky. The third, the longest and most dramatic part of Wilde's poem, juxtaposes the Trooper's indifferent attitude to his impending execution and the other prisoners' deep concern and solidarity with him. During the night prior to the hanging they pray and are haunted by spectres who torment them by reminding them about their own crimes, sins and guilt. When the morning comes, the prisoners feel that something was "dead in each of them, / And what was dead was Hope" (ll. 3.185-186). Even though they do not witness the hanging, they cannot help visualizing it. In section four, describing the execution day and the despicable burial of the convict, the narrator dwells on the ruthlessness of capital punishment, and highlights the cruelty of the penal system:

For Man's grim Justice goes its way  
 And will not swerve aside:<sup>7</sup>  
 It slays the weak, it slays the strong,  
 It has a deadly stride:  
 With iron heel it slays the strong  
 The monstrous parricide! (ll. 3.187-92)

Changing the perspective from the jailors to the inmates, the speaker realizes that the Guardsman, Christ-like, suffers for the latter, for,

[...] had each got his due,  
 They should have died instead:  
 He had but killed a thing that lived,  
 Whilst they had killed the dead. (ll. 4.27-30)

The fifth part of the ballad offers the narrator's depiction of the plight of the inmates and his meditation on the function of prisons which exclude the "outcast men" from society, and keep them concealed even from God Himself, depriving them thereby of their only chance of experiencing Christ's intervention in their lives. The concluding, sixth section, the shortest in the ballad, commemorates the Trooper, mourning him as the man who, punished for all, sadly, has no one to mourn him.

In Wilde's "Ballad," Reading Gaol is depicted as a "House of Shame" (l. 3.128), "the iron town" (l. 3.75) whose walls, "all too real" for the speaker, create the borders of the world in which inmates have to live, each in his

narrow “numbered tomb” (l. 3.76), which, behind its padlocked door is like “a dark and foul latrine” (l. 5.38). Apart from the “Debtors’ Yard” (l. 3.1) and the cell for the condemned prisoner, the speaker evokes the premises occupied by the remaining inmates who lead their solitary and silent lives, allowed but an hour of exercise, tramping the “asphalte yard” (l. 4.40) or treading the mill. Otherwise, they can merely look at the world beyond the prison wall through the barred windows which reveal but a “little tent of blue [the prisoners] called the sky” (l. 4.21).

With the exception of C.T.W. and the speaker, the prisoners of Reading Gaol: “the fool, the fraud, the knave” (l. 3.87) are deprived of individuality, which, as Marcovitch posits, is “the great punishment of prison life” (2010, 205). Made all the less distinctive by their guilt (each man is guilty “of kill[ing] of the thing [he] love[d]”), dressed in their prison rags, they become merely grey mass, never referred to by name. With cricket caps<sup>4</sup> on their shaven heads, “suits of shabby gray” (ll. 1.8-9) which constitute the “monstrous garb,” and with the “feet of lead” (l. 3.41), the inmates look like “ape[s] or clown[s]” (l. 4.37), and are ironically referred to as a “merry masquerade” (l. 3.42). Kept in this enclave of evil, forgotten by all, they are abandoned and left “to rot,” “their souls and bodies marred” (l. 5.66). Under constant surveillance, the prisoners become actors in the theatre of crime, participants in the grim spectacle to be watched day and night by the warders and other prison functionaries. Even the ruthless hanging is perceived in grotesque terms as dancing in the air (cf. ll. 2.51-54). However, their roles change during the prayerful vigil which they keep before the Trooper’s execution: they become spectators in the frightening drama in which various “forms of fear” (l. 3.74), “evil sprite[s]” (l. 3.113) and phantoms enact “the damned grotesques” (l. 3.125) of the prisoners’ lives of sin.

In this evil ‘garden’ the “vilest deeds” bloom like “poison weeds” (l. 5.25) while that which “is good in Man [...] wastes and withers there” (ll. 5.27-28). Bent on punishment, Reading provides its inmates only with “[t]he shard, the pebble, and the flint” (l. 4.93): “For flowers have been known to heal / A common man’s despair” (ll. 4.95-96). In this place of oppression which transforms the inmates into “Mad mourners of a corse” (l. 3.104) and in which everything that is good crumbles to dust, the jailors will take any opportunity to harm and hurt others: “gibing the old and grey,” “starving the

<sup>4</sup> According to Peter Robinson, a ‘cricket cap’ was “the large-visor hat prisoners were required to wear to make it more difficult for them to see and communicate (the latter a punishable offence) with those around them” (2015, 312).

child,” “scourging the weak” and “flogging the fool” (ll. 5.31-4)—easy targets at which to lash out. Equally devastating is the impact of the senseless work the prisoners are forced to do: sewing the sacks, breaking the stones, or turning the dusty drill, (ll. 3.49-52). These stupefying tasks cannot eradicate the terror “lying still” in the heart of every man (l. 3.53), or the darkness that dwells there: “With midnight always in one's heart, / And twilight in one's cell” (ll. 5.55-56), the prisoners live “each in his separate Hell” (l. 5.58).

Wilde, Nassar aptly writes, presents his prison as “a hell on earth” (1995, 158), and this “terrifying hell that swallows up criminals or a hideous man-made Satanic crime against humanity” (1995, 159) shows many affinities with Dante's *Inferno*. In Reading, pained souls exist in rings, the most important of which are two circles: “the Murderer's Hole” (l. 3.34), “inhabited by the Guardsman, who has committed a great crime, and one inhabited by [the speaker] himself and other prisoners, whose crimes are small by comparison” (1995, 159). Whereas “Dante's many circles of hell never merge, Wilde's two rings soon dissolve into one another” (1995, 159), allowing the narrator's identification with the Guardsman, whose sense of guilt he is capable of feeling (cf. l. 3.92).

The hellish space of the prison is further marked by the presence in it of “the Lord of Death” (l. 3.173), and “Dread and Doom” (l. 3.68), as well as by the prevalence of darkness, of the sense of entrapment and sin, reflected in such metaphorical descriptions of the gaol as “the web of gloom” (l. 3.153), “a cave of black Despair” (l. 2.16), or “the black dock's dreadful pen” (l. 2.64). Living in “dark disgrace” (l. 1.56) which results from man's “grim Justice” (l. 3.187) involves prolonged torture, including food, drink and sleep deprivation (cf. ll. 5.43-5.54). It brings about total degradation of criminals, reducing them to an easily controllable “herd of brutes” (l. 4.50).

Subjected to this harsh treatment, inmates become “prison prey” (l. 1.166), the word “prey” suggesting the voracious quality of the place that destroys and devours all that is left of their humanity. The “dread figures” (l. 1.68) of prison staff—“[t]he Sheriff stern with gloom, and the Governor” (ll. 1.69-71)—do not even relent in the attitude to the condemned man, who begins his execution day by listening to “The Burial Office” read to him (l. 1.85):

[...] while the terror of his soul  
Tells him he is not dead,  
Cross his own coffin, as he moves  
Into the hideous shed. (ll. 1.87-90)

During the six weeks when the Guardsman “walked the yard” (l. 2.1), the prison staff members’ main interest in him resulted, ironically, from their task to keep him alive for the execution. Visiting him, the Governor emphasized the importance of the regulations, the Doctor gloated about death as “a scientific fact” (l. 3.16), and not even the Chaplain, coming twice day, would have a word of consolation for the convict. Incapable of sharing Christ’s message of grace and peace, the Chaplain can hardly offer spiritual comfort to the inmates. Most tellingly, after the execution and the burial:

The Chaplain would not kneel to pray  
 By his dishonoured grave;  
 Nor mark it with that blessed Cross  
 That Christ for sinners gave,  
 Because the man was one of those  
 Whom Christ came down to save. (ll. 4.127–132)

“The Humanity’s machine” (l. 5.42) which has “the face of Doom” [l. 1.72]) is made all the more frightening by the cooperation of other loyal ‘assistants’: the Horror [...]which stalk[s] the prisoners and Terror [...] which [creeps] behind” (ll. 4.47–48). Then there is “Pale Anguish” to reckon with and the Warder [who] is Despair” (ll. 5.29–30) (cf. De Marinis Mezzapesa 2013, 53–4). This ruthless treatment results in systematic destruction of the inmates. Physically degraded, they turn into zombieified caricatures of humanity. Seen from this perspective, the crimes for which Reading prisoners have been detained appear to be minor in comparison with the crimes against humanity committed by the warders on a daily basis in the name of the law. It is precisely here that Wilde’s accusation of the hypocritical society of the English fin-de-siècle is articulated with great strength. “The society’s set up is such that the murderer becomes the scapegoat. According to Wilde, the murderer becomes the victim and is transmuted into a modern Christ like figure [...] depicted like a martyr of the outcasts and criminals of Reading Gaol.”<sup>5</sup> Amongst the many parallels between Christ’s passion and the Trooper’s punishment, David Lodge enumerates the following: “[t]he ministry of the prison chaplain is called ‘the kiss of Caiaphas’; the last night before the execution is a kind of Gethsemane for the condemned man and for those who watch him in spirit. [Besides], there are metaphoric allusions to the Passion like ‘And the bitter wine upon a sponge / was the savour of

<sup>5</sup> [http://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/bitstream/10603/22747/10/10\\_chapter%205.pdf](http://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/bitstream/10603/22747/10/10_chapter%205.pdf), 10.

Remorse'; references to cock crowing, to 'bloody sweats', 'the wounds of Christ' and the Good Thief (l. 5.88). The gallows, like the Cross in the typological and devotional tradition, is compared to a tree. [...] The warders 'strip' and 'mock' the prisoner's corpse and so on" (Lodge 2015, 24). Also, the colours — red and white — carry, in this context, a specifically Christian meaning (ibid.).

The prisoners' spiritual struggle with their demons constitutes the background for the speaker's reference to the cleansing power of the wounds of Christ. His reappearance in later sections of the ballad will reveal the belief in His mercy and forgiveness. Moreover, the speaker's conviction that "God's eternal Laws are kind / And break the heart of stone" (ll. 5.71–72) allows Christ to take up residence in the man's heart, which, once broken, can "peace of pardon win" (l. 5.80). He whose passion cleansed all sinners will not despise the Trooper: "And the crimson stain that was of Cain / [Would become] Christ's snow-white seal" (ll. 5.101–102).

The Reading-Gaol inmates are shown as sufferers, "wretched men" (ll. 4.61; 4.109; 6.3), "souls in pain" (l. 1.29). Their hearts may be hardened, yet they have not lost their sensitivity and ability to feel, be moved and to sympathize with the sufferer. More importantly, the prisoners show their solidarity with C.T.W. when, united in prayer, they keep their nocturnal vigil before the Trooper's execution. They thus demonstrate that even in such a hostile place, "a word of grace [...] / Could help a brother's soul" (ll. 3.35–36). This scene brings about the associations with the Apostles' vigil in the Garden of Gethsemane: "Gospel reference confirms the prisoners' profound *imitatio*, as they live out the Saviour's own despair and agony in their concern for the condemned man" (Willoughby 1987, 275). Their behaviour shocks the warders, who, peeping into the cells,

[...] saw, with eyes of awe,  
Grey figures on the floor,  
And wondered why men knelt to pray  
Who never prayed before. (ll. 3.99-102)

As can therefore be seen, Reading Gaol "constitutes the environment where expiation takes place, and which [...] provides the purification required not only of the murderer, but of any person or sacred object coming into contact with him" (Mezzapesa 2013, 193), (Wilde's persona including). Thus, importantly, through their collective prayers, the prisoners transform the space of death and doom into the space of spiritual awakening and hope,

revealing thereby the power of contrition, which can prove instrumental in attaining salvation. Simultaneously, by saying that the Trooper was one of those “[w]hom Christ came down to save” (l. 4.132), the speaker expresses his firm belief in the sanctification of the executed convict, which is confirmed by the quotation below:

And he of the swollen purple throat,  
 And the stark and staring eyes,  
 Waits for the holy hands that took  
 The Thief to Paradise;  
 And a broken and a contrite heart  
 The Lord will not despise.  
 [...]
 For only blood can wipe out blood,  
 And only tears can heal:  
 And the crimson stain that was of Cain  
 Became Christ’s snow-white seal. (ll. 5.85-102)

Willoughby claims that “[p]rostrate in humility and ‘mad’ grief, [the speaker] in effect relives Christ's despair before His own death on the Cross” (Willoughby 1987, 275).

## CONCLUSION

The analysis developed in this study shows how the experience of the ordeal of incarceration as presented by George Gordon Byron and by Oscar Wilde may transform the perception of prison spaces by the inmates. The depiction of the physical aspect of the space of confinement has been shown as a backdrop for an exploration of the metaphysical significance of imprisonment, leading in the case of Byron’s poem to the acceptance of life in prison to the point of the dungeon becoming “a second home,” or to spiritual awakening as is the case with Wilde. For the latter the experience of prison suffering, shown in both personal and collective terms, has a transformative function, culminating in spiritual conversion of the speaker and the other inmates and in the development of deep faith in Christ’s redemption. As a result of the change, prison cells become spaces of prayer, turning thereby from the profane into the sacred.

Bonnivard, Byron’s protagonist, whose faith has not been weakened by the prolonged incarceration, and who maintains his humanity, does not dege-

nerate spiritually. As a result, he becomes a hermit, a guardian of his brothers' graves. The profane dungeon space around him, shown as hell, acquires features of the sacred. In this respect the descriptions of prison spaces in both poems coincide. Thus, it follows, that in both Byron's and Wilde's poem, the ultimate nature of change is similar: the profane, Godless spaces to which the protagonists in their poems had been confined, turn into sacred ones.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> The sacred, as defined by Stefan Sawicki, is understood here as "the cover term for a variety of sacred elements closely related to a religious attitude, to the supernatural" (Sawicki 1980, 25).

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OD PROFANUM DO SACRUM.  
TRANSFORMACJE PRZESTRZENI WIĘZIENNEJ  
W „WIĘZNIU CZYLLONU” G.G. BYRONA  
I „BALLADZIE O WIĘZIENIU W READING” O. WILDE’A

Streszczenie

Artykuł poświęcony jest dwóm utworom o tematyce doświadczenia więziennego: „Więźniowi Czyllonu” George’a Gordona Byrona i „Balladzie o więzieniu w Reading” Oskara Wilde’a. Wykorzystując pojęcie „przestrzeni fabuły” (*story space*) Marie-Laure Ryan, artykuł omawia utwory pod kątem ewolucji postrzegania więzienia, do jakiej dochodzi pod wpływem doświadczeń skazańców. Bohater Byrona, po wielu latach cierpień, zaczyna traktować loch jak swój drugi dom, uświęcony obecnością w nim grobów pochowanych tam braci. U Wilde’a także ma miejsce zmiana percepcji więzienia, będąca wynikiem duchowej przemiany, jaką przechodzą skazańcy. Cela — świat koszmaru, opresji więziennego życia — staje się miejscem modlitwy, umocnienia wiary. W obydwu utworach, można wnioskować, dochodzi do przemiany sfery profanum w sferę sacrum.

**Słowa kluczowe:** G.G. Byron; „Więzień Czyllonu”; O. Wilde; „Ballada o więzieniu w Reading”; przestrzeń więzienna; sacrum; profanum.