



In the Penal Colony

John Frow

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I

What are the periodicities of remembrance shared with others? Writing in the final volume of *Les Lieux de mémoire*, Pierre Nora identifies two primary forms of commemorative time: that of the *centenary*, 'voluntary, deliberate, impossible either to avoid or to manage', and that of the *generation*, 'involuntary and even unconscious, uncontrollable'.¹ These are the interwoven times of the nation-state and of living collective memory. In this paper I ask about the kinds of connection that are possible between the pain or joy of generational experience and the forms of identification invoked by that larger periodicity of the nation. But the generational experience that I posit is not necessarily a direct experience of events, for reasons that Nora explicates: if the past has lost its organic, peremptory, constraining character, he says, commemoration now tends to be made up of media events, tourism, promotions and entertainment; its medium is no longer the classroom or the public square but television, museums, expositions, colloquia, and it takes place not in official ceremonies but in television spectacles.² This is to say that the experience of historical events is shared and collectively remembered - of course in very different ways - both by those who are closely involved in them and by those who encounter them in a mediated form. Those experiences of hurt that typically knit a generational cohort together - a war, a national catastrophe, an assassination, a massacre - are experiences of shared grief and shared inability to understand the import of what has happened. They are traumatic in the sense in which Cathy Caruth uses that word: they open up a history which arises 'where *immediate understanding* may not',³ and which returns to haunt its survivors not because it is known but because it is not. Yet it is important to say as well that there is something glib about the attempt to apply the concept of trauma directly to historical events (indeed, there is already something problematic about its application to non-somatic hurt).⁴ It is this discontinuity or lack of fit between the historical time of the generation and the historical time of the nation, as well as the continuity between them, that I explore in what follows.

My argument is built around a place, [Port Arthur](#) in Tasmania, and around a set of stories associated with it - although these stories are not just there waiting to be told, part of an

inherent factuality. The first is the by-now generic narrative of a lone gunman (think of the layers of irony that phrase has acquired since the first of the Kennedy assassinations, as well as the narrative structure that now flows unhesitatingly from it) who, on the 28th of April, 1996, gunned down and killed 35 people at the site. The point of this story is that it has no point. There is absolutely no commensuration between the massive injury of the event, with all its consequences of grief and personal damage, and the triviality of any available explanation in terms, say, of Martin Bryant's low intelligence or of the influence on him of violent videos. The lack of commensuration is exacerbated by the technology: a weak and callow young man is given immense powers of destruction by the semi-automatic rifles which translate an impulse, a movement of the finger, into the mass slaughter of strangers. It is because there is no sense, no cause or motive that could sufficiently fit the crime, that the inevitable consequences flow: a community which at first came together in its grief is now torn apart, there are law suits, recriminations, broken marriages, all the devastation of lives lived in the aftermath of an intensely violent act. It is perhaps not surprising, then, that the event comes increasingly to be spoken of as a kind of uncanny repetition in which reality imitates its prior simulation: the carnage around those who survive to give witness to it is repeatedly described as being 'like a scene out of a movie',⁵ or 'like something I might have seen on television'.⁶ A security officer at the site draws on the training scenarios he has worked through in a simulated emergency exercise; the ambulance driver who is called and told of a mass shooting at Port Arthur, replies 'Oh yeah. When's the exercise going to be finished?' - only to be told 'This is not an exercise. This is a definite situation'.⁷ It is for this reason too that the question of an appropriate memorial for the dead becomes so contentious. There are arguments over whether the Broad Arrow Café, where 20 people died, should be left standing as a place of mourning or razed to the ground (in the event it has been left half-destroyed, bullet holes pocked into the bare walls, an instant ruin). Nobody uses Bryant's name, but his denied presence is everywhere. Nobody knows the forms which will lay the ghost. Nobody knows what kind of monument will insert this story into the other story for which this site is known, into that other past which is barely available for understanding.

For [Port Arthur](#) is itself a memorial, a *lieu de mémoire*, its ruined traces bearing ambiguous witness to a whole system of punishment, involuntary exile, and unfree labour which has come to represent the foundational moment of the Australian nation. Established in 1830 in the natural prison formed by a narrow-necked peninsula, an almost-island in the far south-east corner of this island to the far south-east of the Australian mainland, Port Arthur was a secondary penal settlement to which transported convicts offending elsewhere in what was then called Van Diemen's Land were sent for punishment in the chain gang, the treadmill, and the solitary confinement cells of the Model Prison. Never the most brutal of the secondary penal settlements, its harsh and unremitting regime was nevertheless designed to break the spirits of its inmates in one of the most isolated places on earth. Its instrument of last resort was the lash, a switch of nine knotted cords soaked in salt water and dried to the hardness of wire which cut the flesh to shreds. 'A lot of violence has happened there. It must be the most violent place in Australia. It seemed the right place', said Bryant in an explanation of his crime at once compelling and cynical in its displacement of blame.* For a variety of reasons, not the least of which is the paradoxical beauty of its setting and of its ruined buildings, Port Arthur has come to emblemize the Gulag created by imperial Britain for its exiled criminal population. But I want to approach it indirectly, by way of another penal settlement and another practice of inscription on the body.

II

An explorer (*der Forschungsreisende*) is made the reluctant witness of an execution carried out in the penal colony. The condemned man is a soldier sentenced for 'disobedience and insulting behaviour to a superior' (*Beleidigung des Vorgesetzten*), and he is accompanied to his death only by a guard and an officer. The instrument of his execution is an elaborate apparatus invented by the former Commandant of the colony, of whose regime the officer is a fanatical but isolated partisan, and the officer explains the workings of the apparatus to the explorer in some detail. The machine has three parts: a bed, covered in cotton wool, to which the naked condemned man is strapped; the designer, which, like the bed, looks like a dark wooden chest; and the harrow which shuttles on a steel ribbon between the bed and the designer. The apparatus is thus a sort of cross between a jacquard loom and an ink-jet printer; its central component, the harrow, made of glass so that an onlooker can see through it the inscription taking place on the body, contains two sets of needles, the longer ones for writing and the shorter ones for spraying jets of water to wash away the blood. What it writes on the body is the sentence (*Urteil*) that the court has handed down; but because the script is so complicated, so full of flourishes, so much like an illegible scrawl (this indeed is all that the explorer can make of it), it is only after the sixth hour that the radiance of Enlightenment comes to the condemned man, who begins to decipher the script 'with his wounds' until the moment of his death.

During the regime of the Old Commandant, executions were festivals to which crowds flocked to see Justice being done; children were given a privileged place near the apparatus in order to witness at the sixth hour the transfigured face of the suffering man, 'the radiance of that justice achieved at last and fading so quickly'. Now, however, no one attends; the machine is run down and the officer can get no spare parts for it because the New Commandant disapproves of all that it represents. It becomes clear that the explorer has been positioned in a struggle between the old and the new orders: if he condemns the apparatus as barbaric, the New Commandant will take advantage of this verdict (*Urteil*) to abolish its use; but if, as the officer implores him to, he approves of it, then the officer believes that his fantasy of a restoration of the old days will be realized. As for the explorer, although he is constrained by his position as a guest, a mere disinterested observer, from intervening to try to stop the execution, he is a liberal and humanitarian soul - a man of his progressive times - and he indicates that he does indeed disapprove of the apparatus. This is the end for the officer, who then frees the condemned man and takes his place. For him, however, there is no moment of Enlightenment: in a mechanical frenzy the disintegrating machine tears the officer to pieces, the needles jabbing rather than writing: 'This was no exquisite torture such as the officer desired, this was plain murder'. In a coda after the officer's ugly death spitted to the needles, the explorer is shown the grave of the Old Commandant, marked by a low stone lying beneath a table in unconsecrated ground; an inscription prophesies his return. Fleeing the colony, the explorer has to shake off the guard and the condemned soldier, threatening them with a heavy knotted rope in order to keep them away.⁸

Let me make a number of brief comments on this text.

The first is a question: why are there no convicts in this penal colony? The condemned man is a soldier who has broken a regulation; the story gives us no sight of anyone who is actually serving a sentence. But if we think of some of Kafka's other closed, pointless, and self-perpetuating hierarchies, it is perhaps no accident that it is a guard rather than a prisoner who undergoes punishment. There is no outside of such systems, and in this the penal colony resembles rather closely the hierarchy of surveillance envisaged in Bentham's panopticon, in which it is not only the prisoners in their cells but the warders at every level of the apparatus of inspection who are held under constant scrutiny.

The second comment concerns the nature of the regulation that the soldier infringes. The man is a servant assigned to a captain; he sleeps outside the captain's door, and 'it is his duty ... to get up every time the hour strikes and salute the captain's door'; it is for failing to perform this duty that he will be executed. I shall have more to say shortly about the place of pointless obedience in carceral systems.

The third observation concerns the extraordinary elaborateness and prescriptive detail of the Old Commandant's machinery of inscription. What kind of rationality is at work here? It is a reason informed by what Robert Hughes calls 'a passion for bureaucratic exactitude about pain',⁹ for the calculation of a precisely proportionate justice. Its philosophical counterpart is perhaps the Bentham of *The Rationale of Punishment* who, addressing the problem that whipping is administered with variable force and by means of instruments which are not standardized, suggests that

a machine might be made, which should put in motion certain elastic rods of cane or whalebone, the number and size of which might be determined by the law; the body of the delinquent might be subjected to the strokes of these rods, and the force and rapidity with which they should be applied, might be prescribed by the judge: thus everything which is arbitrary might be removed. A public officer, of more responsible character than the common executioner, might preside over the infliction of the punishment; and when there were many delinquents to be punished, his time might be saved, and the terror of the scene heightened, without increasing the actual suffering, by increasing the number of the machines, and subjecting all the offenders to punishments at the same time.¹⁰

We recognize this officer, of course, as we do the desire that drives the rationale.

My fourth comment is that the needles inscribing a message on the bound body of the condemned man are the precise analogue of one of the central metaphors in European culture for memory, the stylus which inscribes a message on a wax tablet.¹¹

Finally, let me note the formalism of the opposition of the old and the new regimes in the penal colony. Its point is of course to balance two moral perspectives, and thus to undermine our structural identification with the explorer and against the fanaticism of the officer. Against the brutal and authoritarian justice of the old regime are set the moral complicity and enlightened indecisiveness of the explorer; against the patriarchal authority of the Old Commandant the feminized world of the New Commandant, surrounded by his 'ladies' with their unhelpful pity for the condemned man; against a religious fervour of belief in justice, a modern and tolerant absence of conviction.

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John Frow delivered this paper as a plenary speaker in April 1999 at an interdisciplinary conference, [Refiguring History: Between the Psyche and the Polis](#), which was hosted by the University of Newcastle (upon Tyne), UK.

Notes

¹Pierre Nora, 'L'Ère de la commémoration', *Les Lieux de mémoire III: Les France, 3: De l'Archive à l'emblème*, ed. Pierre Nora (Paris: Gallimard, 1992), p. 979 (my translation).

² *Ibid.*, p. 985

³Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), p. 11.

⁴ Ian Hacking, *Rewriting the Soul: Multiple Personality and the Sciences of Memory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), p. 183.

⁵ Margaret Scott, *Port Arthur: A Story of Strength and Courage* (Milsons Point: Random House, 1997), p. 130.

⁶ Ibid., p. 108

⁷ Ibid., p. 102.

⁸ Hobart *Mercury*, 25 Nov. 1996; quoted in Scott, *Port Arthur: A Story of Strength and Courage*, p. 15.

⁹ Franz Kafka, 'In the Penal Colony', trans. Willa and Edwin Muir, *The Complete Stories*, ed. Nahum N. Glatzer (New York: Schocken, 1971).

¹⁰ Robert Hughes, *The Fatal Shore: A History of the Transportation of Convicts to Australia, 1787-1868* (London: Collins Harvill, 1987), p. 430.

¹¹ Jeremy Bentham, 'Principles of Penal Law, Part II: Rationale of Punishment' [1830], *The Works of Jeremy Bentham, Vol. 1*, ed. John Bowring (Edinburgh: William Tait, 1843), p. 415.

¹² Cf. John Frow, 'Toute la mémoire du monde: Repetition and Forgetting', *Time and Commodity Culture* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), pp. 225-6.

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III

While it would be wrong to read the story as a determinate allegory, I propose to use it as a template with which to read the two distinct regimes of punishment operative at Port Arthur. In the older mode, punishment is above all directed at the body in the form of the public spectacle of flogging, the chains worn in the work gangs, and physically arduous and dangerous labour in the settlement's various industries - farming, quarrying, shipbuilding, logging. The continuity between work and punishment is perhaps best exemplified by the treadwheel which operated in the flour mill and granary complex for several years from 1845: a form of work which was repetitive, wearing, and in which any cessation of movement on the treads would immediately cause injury. This was at least an economically productive mill: many of those in use in England at the time were nothing more than devices 'for equalizing, measuring, regulating and timing the performance of toil';¹² as they became more sophisticated, windsail masts were added to increase resistance to the rotation of the wheel, and subsequently even more precise brakes were devised to give precisely controlled and measured resistance. But this minute calculation of severity is characteristic of the Port Arthur regime as a whole. Hughes writes that

To scrutinize into the punishment records of Port Arthur men is to look into a microcosm of bureaucratic tedium. Its horror comes not from unrestrained cruelty (as the Gothic legends and popular horror stories of the place insisted) but rather from its opposite, the mechanical apportioning of strictly metered punishments designed to wear each prisoner down into bovine acceptance - Arthur's criterion of moral reform. It is like looking into the memory of some dull god interminably counting fallen sparrows on his fingers.¹³

Public flogging declined at Port Arthur from the mid-1840s and ceased in 1848. While the more traditional form of incarceration was continued in the Penitentiary, constructed between 1854 and 1857 by conversion of the flour mill and granary, a radically different model of the ends of the prison was realized in another institution. Built in 1848-9, initially to accommodate convicts transferred from Norfolk Island, the Model (or

Separate) Prison worked on the principles of solitude, silence, anonymity, and moral reflection. Designed as a cross enclosed by a circle, it consisted of three wings of single cells and, in the fourth wing, a chapel in which prisoners were enclosed in separate tiered stalls, cut off from sight of each other. Punishment was by confinement in the totally dark 'dumb cells' in which all sense of the passage of time, and indeed almost all sensory experience, were lost. The universal rule of silence meant that neither prisoners nor guards were allowed to speak, orders being given by the sounding of a bell or by hand signals, or, in the chapel, by a mechanical device displaying the number of the prisoner whose turn it was to enter or to leave. Prisoners, said the regulations, 'must never read aloud, sing, whistle, dance or make any other noise in their Cells, exercise yards, corridors or Chapel'.¹⁴ Warders wore felt slippers in the corridors to muffle any sound they made as they patrolled. Meals were served to prisoners in their cells; in public spaces such as the corridors and the exercise yards they moved only with their faces covered by a 'beak' with eyeholes which extended as a flexible visor from their caps. Work, too - tailoring, shoemaking, the picking of oakum - was performed in solitude in the cells. In short, the Model Prison was so constructed as to destroy all social relations between prisoners and between prisoners and warders. It embodied a dream of total order, of a discipline so pervasive, so destructive of human contact, that each prisoner would have no alternative but to confront and wrestle with his moral state in penitential introspection. (Nothing, of course, guaranteed that any such thing would happen.)

This discipline is structured at once by a nobility of moral purpose and by the sort of nagging, petty meanness that required the guard in the penal colony to salute his superior officer's door on the stroke of every hour. The counterpart at Port Arthur as at Pentonville Prison in London, on which the Port Arthur prison was closely modelled was the tell-tale clock, an ingenious mechanical device standing in the Central Hall and monitoring the warders' attention to duty. As Ian Brand describes it,

It resembled a standard grandfather clock except that it had no hands and the dial was surrounded by 48 brass pegs, one for each quarter of an hour. As the dial rotated, each peg came under a striker at the top. Operated by a wire, the striker could push the peg below it into the rim of the dial, but only exactly at the quarter hour. It was the job of the duty Officer at night to strike the clock every fifteen minutes, and if he was a little late, the brass peg would not go in and the Head-keeper on his morning round could see immediately that the officer had been negligent.¹⁵

Clockwork time, a strictly divided and repeated routine, and punishment: these are the elements of an all-embracing discipline that extends to prisoners and warders alike.

If the apparatus that the explorer witnesses in the penal colony belongs to the old regime of spectacular punishment written on the body, it also, paradoxically, partakes of the spirituality of the new, 'humane' regimes of moral inculcation which operate on the prisoner's soul. This is the crucial transition made by the 'reformed' prisons of the nineteenth century, and it comes to permeate every detail of prison architecture, prison administration, and prison discipline. Monika Fludernik gives a schematic outline of the opposition between ideal types of the 'old' and 'new' regimes in the following table:

Old	New
prison as waiting room for	prison as correctional and penal institution

trial & execution	
darkness	light
closure (dungeon)	open to surveillance (bars)
filth	cleanliness
idleness	forced labour
dissolute behaviour	enforced discipline
association with others	solitary confinement
corporal constraint (chains)	freedom of movement
cruelty	humaneness
contact with outside (family)	complete isolation from outside
social stratification within prison	absolute standardization of treatment
corrupt prison administration	efficiency and professionalism
repentance before possible execution	repentance and disciplining supposed to result in production of a good citizen
sentence as punishment	correction (privileges for good behaviour)
corporal punishment	behavioural disciplining (focus on prisoners minds)
<i>metaphors</i>	
dungeon	cell (panopticon)
prison as world	world as prison
body as prison, freedom of mind	depersonalization, brainwashing (mind as carceral body) ¹⁶

Such a dichotomized chart drastically simplifies the complexity of transitions and intermixtures between different conceptions of the prison (and, for Port Arthur, the fact that the Penitentiary and the Model Prison represent no more than different faces of the reformed, disciplinary prison); but it does convey a notion of the starkness of the historical transformation.

At the centre of the reforms initiated by Beccaria, Howard and others in the late eighteenth century and pursued through the first half of the nineteenth was a notion of moral reformation which depended on the infliction of a 'just and unvarying quantum of pain'.¹⁷ Two things come together here: an operation effected upon the soul in accordance with religious conceptions of conscience and conversion from sin; and the development of forms of discipline which are equitable, non-arbitrary, mechanical, and thus independent of human will. Their object is a self conceived as 'at once isolated and transparent to view'.¹⁸ In Foucault's account, this birth of the prison as a technology of moral conversion is a moment of a larger elaboration of a disciplinarity which, emerging from monastic and military organizations of life, comes to govern the school, the workshop, the hospital, the reformatory, indeed all of those systems which at once control and productively form the 'isolated and transparent' self, its habits and its moral consciousness, within the complex of power/knowledge. The unrealized prototype of

disciplinarity is Bentham's [Panopticon](#), a utopian model prison formed on the equation of power with visibility and using architecture as its major instrument of moral correction. The question that preoccupied Bentham, writes Robin Evans, is: 'How could human behaviour, and through behaviour the human condition as a whole, be controlled and made certain by design?'.¹⁹ This question brings into play that mobilization of architecture in the service of virtue that Evans describes as underpinning the strategies of nineteenth-century prison reform, and which addressed two related sets of problems in existing regimes of punishment.

The first was the psychological problem that 'impalings, burnings, flayings and dismemberings could only serve to exacerbate the passions and increase the culprits' hatred of God. The problem was to describe a punishment that did not alienate in this way. The solution was to put mental anguish in the place of physical tortures.²⁰ *Memory* thus becomes the instrument of moral conversion, and its effects are to be heightened through an enforced solitude which will necessarily promote introspection. The cellular prison comes to stand at the centre of a 'technology of salvation'²¹ employed by the State rather than the Church.

The second problem is the reproduction of a culture of crime through the association of criminals in a confined space, and especially the cultural (and, although this is rarely made explicit, sexual) contamination that results from mixing different categories of prisoner (the hardened with the novice, for example). Two major solutions are proposed in the early nineteenth century, conveniently symbolized for contemporaries by the 'associated' system in operation at Auburn in New York, and the 'separate' system at Cherry Hill in Philadelphia. At the former, after an initial failed experiment in total solitary confinement, the regime consisted of hard labour in 'silent association', with any communication between convicts being rigorously punished. As Mayhew explains, however, this system is open to subversion by the prisoners' use of codes and muttered words to remain in contact with each other.* The separate system, in which a rule of total silence is enforced by the almost continuous separation of prisoners in their cells, removes this possibility. It raises the classification system 'to the highest level of generality',²² since each prisoner belongs to a category of his own, and is segregated accordingly; and its use of solitude depends upon three principles which had been central to the first wave of reform in the late eighteenth century: 'reformation through reflection, resistance to the spread of corruption through the prevention of communication, and deterrence through terror'.²³

The logic of the reformed prison is that of an architecture which, working passively and continuously to shape and control experience, invests power in places rather than people. With the eventual triumph of the radial over the polygonal design of the prison, and thus of a logic of multiple, ramified classification and of an unlimited surveillance which comprehends the supervisors amongst the supervised,²⁴ it comes to function in a fully performative manner as 'an instrument for the imposition of the very authority it had set out to symbolize'.²⁵ Its most complete nineteenth-century expression is the prison at Pentonville, completed in 1848. This 'total institution',²⁶ which Mayhew compares both to the Crystal Palace and to 'a bunch of Burlington Arcades', contains 520 cells which are, for all intents and purposes, separate and self-sufficient buildings, each one carefully connected to but isolated from each other by a complicated machinery of thermo-ventilation.²⁷ Each prisoner is wrapped in anonymity; it is an offence for an officer to utter his name, and his face is covered, when he leaves his cell, in a cloth mask with slots for the eyes. As with the Model Prison at Port Arthur, the purpose of this machinery is 'to crush the will of its 450 inmates by means of absolutely inflexible routine, complete

isolation and unvarying task-work, with each convict identically engaged in a twelve-hour day of cobbling or weaving'.²⁸ As at Port Arthur, the effect of a regime of silence and solitude is to produce high levels of neurosis and insanity. Mayhew carefully documents the fact that 'the discipline pursued at this prison yields *upwards of ten times more lunatics* than should be the case according to the normal rate'; these figures, he writes, 'tell awful tales of long suffering and deep mental affliction; for the breaking down of the weaker minds is merely evidence of the intense moral agony that must be suffered by all except the absolutely insensible'.²⁹ Ignatieff, finally, reports that 'those who observed prisoners upon their release noticed that many suffered from bouts of hysteria and crying. Others found the sounds of the street deafening and asked for cotton wool to stop up their ears. Still others frightened their families by a listless torpor that took weeks to shake off. Even those who thought they had got used to solitude found themselves dreaming about the prison long after.'³⁰

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Notes

¹³ Robin Evans, *The Fabrication of Virtue: English Prison Architecture, 1750-1840* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), p. 297

¹⁴ Hughes, *The Fatal Shore*, p. 404.

¹⁵ Ian Brand, *The 'Separate' or 'Model' Prison, Port Arthur* (Launceston: Regal Publications, n.d.), Appendix I, p. 48.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 13-14.

¹⁷ Monika Fludernik, 'Carceral topography: spatiality, liminality and corporality in the literary prison', *Textual Practice* 13:1 (1999), p. 44.

¹⁸ Michael Ignatieff, *A Just Measure of Pain: The Penitentiary in the Industrial Revolution 1750-1850* (1978; rpt. London: Penguin, 1989), p. 10.

¹⁹ John Bender, *Imagining the Penitentiary: Fiction and the Architecture of Mind in Eighteenth-Century England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), p. 201.

²⁰ Evans, *The Fabrication of Virtue*, p. 196.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 67.

²² Ignatieff, *A Just Measure of Pain*, p. 57.

²³ Henry Mayhew and John Binny, *The Criminal Prisons of London, and Scenes of Prison Life* (1862; rpt. London: Frank Cass, 1968), p. 101.

²⁴ Evans, *The Fabrication of Virtue*, p. 325.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 326.

²⁶ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979), p. 177.

²⁷ Evans, *The Fabrication of Virtue*, p. 294.

²⁸ Ignatieff, *A Just Measure of Pain*, p. 11.

²⁹ Evans, *The Fabrication of Virtue*, pp. 357, 360.

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IV

If memory has so central and so institutionalized a place in the disciplinary systems to which we are heir, then it is surely wrong to oppose, as Nora does, the involuntary memory of lived, generational experience to the voluntary memory of national historical time. The former is always in some sense rehearsed and repeated; the latter is in some sense always beyond our control. Disciplinary memory, if I can call it that, continues to play an important role in the routine formation of moral selves, perhaps most particularly in its transformation into a memory-work understood as the therapeutic exorcism of repressed and traumatic material. This is not a matter of a historical evolution away from some lost premodern realm of spontaneous and natural memory we know that memory has always had a technical foundation. It is a matter, rather, of the modalities of remembrance which are specific to our world, and of the pasts that they construct. My question, then, is: how has the lived violence of Port Arthur's past been folded into national historical time? To what extent has this making-past happened within a moral economy where memory still functions in a disciplinary way, as a duty of self-healing, as moral catharsis? And how to pose this as an ethical task *should* the violence of those events be remembered? How is it possible to keep alive the intensity of their wounding while at the same time turning it to productive use?

The dream of the prison continues to be dreamed in the many aftermaths of nineteenth-century penalty and of the convict transportation system. At Port Arthur the vision of total order and an all-pervasive discipline declined as the settlement did. Transportation to Van Diemen's Land was finally abolished in 1853. Although Port Arthur was retained as a penal settlement well after the other stations were closed, the proportion of its inhabitants classified as paupers, invalids and lunatics men who had known nothing but prison for most of their lives and were incapable of surviving outside it grew steadily; a Paupers' Mess was erected in 1864, and a Lunatic Asylum in 1867. The penal settlement was closed in 1877, and although it survived as a town, its buildings were vandalized by tourists and then gutted by bushfires in the 1890s.

To this aftermath of physical and civil decline, however, which was to continue for a century after the closure of the settlement, was counterposed a different kind of aftermath

as Port Arthur was slowly and unevenly integrated into an imaginary of national origins. The process was complex, and involved a forgetting as much as a remembering. And this was more generally true of the afterlife in memory of the convict system: Stanner speaks of two 'cults of disremembering' in Australia,³¹ deep-rooted reticences about the dispossession of the indigenous peoples and about the convict beginnings of European settlement. Until well into the twentieth century, convict ancestry was 'that hated stain', a social and perhaps genetic taint which few, and perhaps especially few Tasmanians, were willing to acknowledge. This anxiety about origins was reflected in attitudes towards the physical remains of the Port Arthur settlement. An editorial in the Hobart *Mercury* of 1913 recommended that

the large rambling ruin of the Penitentiary, a relic of that very worst style of British architecture which gave the Old Country the most hideous factories that Lancashire and Yorkshire ever possessed, should be razed and cleared away entirely and its site used for some edifice of more aesthetic appearance, and pleasanter associations ... We need memorials and reminders that are cheerful and inspiring, not depressing, humiliating, saddening ... Men rise on stepping-stones of their dead selves, and need not have those ugly corpses hung round their necks or sitting at their tables.³²

And when fires gutted many of the buildings in 1897, 'the *Tasmanian Mail* observed that many people would make no concealment of their satisfaction at the destruction of the penitentiary. Some thought the fire a manifestation of Divine vengeance; others saw it as symbolizing the final release from the spell of convictism'.³³

The only way, it seems, in which Port Arthur and the convict system it represented could be appreciatively seen was through an aesthetics of ruin. Anthony Trollope, indeed, envisages the place as always already ruined: 'It seems hard to say of a new colony, not yet seventy years old', he wrote after his first visit to Australia in 1871-2, 'that it has seen the best of its days and that it is falling into decay, that its short period of importance in the world is already gone, and that for the future it must exist, - as many an old town and an old country do exist, - not exactly on the memory of the past, but on the relics which the past has left behind it'.³⁴ Later, with a self-consciously elegiac cadence, he adds that if, as it inevitably will be, Port Arthur is abandoned, 'there can hardly, I think, be any other fate for the buildings than that they shall stand till they fall. They will fall into the dust, and men will make unfrequent excursions to visit the strange ruins'.³⁵ His vision of what he calls 'probably the most picturesque prison establishment in the world'³⁶ inaugurates a tradition of convict tourism for which, as another early visitor puts it, 'it is easy to forget, wandering through this beautiful garden, that 700 fellow creatures, who have lost home and liberty through crime, are in chains so near you'.³⁷ But it is above all the ruins that capture the imagination and effect a reconciliation with a distanced past. 'The infamous penal colony of Port Arthur on the Tasman Peninsula is now a collection of picturesque ruins set in a spectacular landscape', writes one recent guide; 'the work of man there, wrought in the interests of British penal policy, joins harmoniously with nature in all her moods'.³⁸ The Port Arthur church, in particular, came to have iconic status; 'its ivy-covered walls made it seem like Australia's Tintern', that is, 'like a genuine (i.e., English) ruin'.³⁹ It is on this basis that successive regimes of site-conservation begin to come to terms with the ways in which its fabric bears witness to a past of which it is the direct indexical trace.

At the core of the aesthetics of the ruin is the sense that an edifice passes, with time and

weathering, from its social function (punishment, for example) to a merging with the natural world. Gilpin wrote that 'It is time alone which meliorates the ruin; which gives it perfect beauty; and brings it, if I may so speak, to a state of nature ... Rooted for ages in the soil; assimilated to it; and become, as it were, part of it; we consider [the ruin] as a part of nature, rather than of art'.⁴⁰ We might at the same time suspect in this aesthetic a disavowed pleasure at the ratio between past devastation and present survival.⁴¹ But in a *lieu de mémoire* like Port Arthur it is surely the softened glow that the ruin gives to a convict past now half-merged into the natural world that constitutes its appeal. Hence the paradox that, to the extent that the buildings of the Port Arthur penal colony are preserved at all, they are preserved precisely *as* ruins.

The fate of the site after 1877 is largely a history of accident and of government incompetence. Many of the major buildings were completely destroyed by the fires of 1895 and 1897-8; the rest survived numerous schemes for the management of the site which, while often seeking to restore or maintain the Church, sought also to tear down the largest and least stable remaining structure, the Penitentiary; they were saved by bureaucratic hesitation and the failure of prosecution, rather than by any policy of preservation. Only the determined opposition of a few individuals prevailed over government indifference and widespread resentment towards the shameful past that the site represented. The Tasmanian Engineer-in-Chief, T.W. Fowler, recommended in 1913 against the demolition of the Penitentiary, arguing that the entire complex of ruined buildings was an asset in fostering tourism; and the Superintendent of Reserves at Launceston, W. McGowan, commissioned in 1944 to produce a graphic representation of the Minister's vision of a cleansed and prettified tourist park, instead successfully argued the case that

the attraction of Port Arthur lay in its 'historical nature'. Consequently, 'to alter it by endeavouring to make modern improvements would have a tendency to loss of splendour'. Tourists, he argued, could see modern gardens and parks in almost any township, but historical buildings of such a nature were very rare. McGowan therefore proposed not to 'attempt to intermingle the new with the old, but to preserve the old landmarks in such a way as to convey to those who visit them, the architectural nature of the times and its historical value'.⁴²

It is important to be clear about what this appeal to the value of the past entails: it means that the past is entirely separate from the present, and that the traces of the past can represent it to the present. The ruin thus signifies in its very form the non-existence of the past which it simulates. This historicist vision is spelled out with great clarity in the 1975 Port Arthur Management Plan, which states that 'The site and buildings must ... retain their romantic flavour.... To achieve this feeling, some structures will be maintained as ruins, stressing by their condition the fact that, whatever it was that happened there, it is gone and will not return'.⁴³ 'Whatever it was that happened there': euphemism connives in the abolition of that past which is here sealed off in its pastness. And because it is sealed off, because it is discontinuous with all other times, it exists as a kind of essence of the site. It is for this reason that the argument to historical value tends at the same time to call for the demolition of all of the accretions to the site that date from after the convict period, accretions which are seen as an inauthentic overlay on the authentic historical core.

We can see something of the tenacity of this historicist structure of thought in a critical account by Jim Allen of the federally funded archaeological restoration that began to take place in the 1970s. Restoration, in Tony Bennett's definition, is a 'fabrication of idealized

pasts by stripping ancient buildings of their subsequent accretions so as to restore to them the architectural purity they were once thought to have had', or at least a purity thought to be 'essentially and spiritually theirs no matter what the historical record might say'.⁴⁴ The practice that Allen describes is one in which two contradictory tendencies operate: on the one hand, buildings are brought back as close as possible to the state they were in prior to 1877; on the other, highly sophisticated stabilization techniques are used to counter their decay. Thus some of the crumbling bricks in the Penitentiary, which were never fired at a sufficiently high temperature in the settlement's primitive kilns, are refired and the walls rebuilt; and damp courses are inserted into the fabric to counter the erosion from the reclaimed land on which the foundations stand. For Allen these practices represent a failure of historical imagination: the historical reality is the decay of the site and of the system it represents; this system 'should be *seen* to have failed and the ruined buildings are the most poignant testimony of its failure'. The technical deficiencies of the buildings, which render them vulnerable to decay, 'underline the inadequacies of the system a lack of skills, a lack of understanding of the environment, and the imposition of an alien culture by force'. Thus, he concludes, 'to replace original building standards with modern ones of greater durability cannot be historical restoration but merely renovation the creation of a grotesque silhouette which does violence to the past and defrauds the future'.⁴⁵ In writing this, however, Allen espouses precisely that criterion of fidelity to a single authentic past, an originary essence, which restoration sets as its aim and which leads it to exclude all other historicities from its purview.

Historicism is one major strand in the struggle for preservation of the site. The other is that of the repeated attempts to turn it into a theme park, with *son-et-lumière* shows, ghost tours, reconstructions of working life, craft production, and guides in period dress. Again, it is accident rather than good management that has prevented much, but not all, of this recurrently proposed theatricalization. In one sense these two strands are opposed, as the serious to the entertaining, the scholarly to the touristic. In another sense they are not. Each has as its goal the representation of a vanished past, and they converge in the notion of a 'heritage' which is to be preserved and enhanced for the sake of the rapidly expanding market in heritage tourism.

The approach to Port Arthur is now physically dominated by a [Visitors' Centre](#) which mediates access to and experience of the site. All visitors pass through it, and are encouraged before entering the site itself to induct themselves (bearing a historical identity randomly assigned to them with their entrance ticket) into the past as it is recreated in a series of displays on the Centre's lower floor. The displays attempt, with considerable ingenuity and on the basis of solid and detailed scholarship, to give a sense of the life lived in the settlement at its height. It follows the careers of various convicts, and it works hard to reconstruct the material ambience of the prisons and workplaces. Workshops the smithy, the carpenter's shed, the cobbler's shop, the saw-pits, the commissariat store, the overseers' room, and so on are fully recreated, as are the cells and watch-houses in which prisoners were incarcerated. Cardboard cutouts represent convicts, guards, officers, and the miscellaneous personnel of a penal colony. Maps and scale models construct in its entirety a living penal settlement of which, beyond the Centre, there are now only broken and scattered traces.

The contrast set up as one passes outside is that between the hermeneutic fullness of the simulation and the bare, scattered bones of the ruined township. The site itself then becomes a secondary appendage to this reconstruction opaque, resistant to interpretation, puzzling. One barely needs to visit it when the reconstruction is so much richer, carries so much fuller a sense of the texture of lived experience. In this it conforms, of course, to that highly mediated structure of commemoration that Nora describes as its dominant contemporary mode. Everything is meaningful here, far too meaningful....

***In the Penal Colony* continues with parts [V & VI](#). Or you may wish to return to parts [I & II](#) or [III](#). ...**

John Frow delivered this paper as a plenary speaker in April 1999 at an interdisciplinary conference, [Refiguring History: Between the Psyche and the Polis](#), which was hosted by the University of Newcastle (upon Tyne), UK.

Notes

³⁰ Hughes, *The Fatal Shore*, p. 649, n. 64.

³¹ Mayhew and Binny, *The Criminal Prisons of London*, p. 104.

³² footnote * Ignatieff, *A Just Measure of Pain*, p. 11.

³³ Quoted in Tom Griffiths, 'Past Silences: Aborigines and Convicts in our History-Making', *Australian Cultural History* 6 (1987), p. 18.

³⁴ Quoted in David Young, *Making Crime Pay: The Evolution of Convict Tourism in Tasmania* (Hobart: Tasmanian Historical Research Association, 1996), p. 82.

³⁵ Henry Reynolds, 'That Hated Stain: The Aftermath of Transportation in Tasmania', *Historical Studies* 14: 53, p. 23.

³⁶ Anthony Trollope, *Australia*, ed. P.D. Edwards and R.B. Joyce (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1967 [1873]), p. 487.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 518.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 501.

³⁹ Captain H. Butler Stoney, *A Residence in Tasmania: With a Descriptive Tour through the Island from Macquarie Harbour to Circular Head* (London: Smith, Elder and Co., 1856), p. 48.

⁴⁰ *The Heritage of Australia: The Illustrated Register of the National Estate* (Melbourne, 1981), quoted in Kay Daniels, 'Cults of Nature, Cults of History', *Island Magazine* 16 (Spring 1983), p. 4.

⁴¹ Jim Davidson, 'Port Arthur: A Tourist History', *Australian Historical Studies* 26: 105 (October 1995), pp. 657, 658.

⁴² Samuel Gilpin, *Observations on ... the Mountains and Lakes of Cumberland*, 3rd. ed. (1808) I, 74; III, 183; cited in Charles Kostelnick, 'Wordsworth, Ruins, and the Aesthetics of Decay: From Surface to Noble Picturesque', *The Wordsworth Circle* 19:1 (1988), p. 23. Cf. Barbara Maria Stafford, *Voyage Into Substance: Art, Science, Nature, and the Illustrated Travel Account, 1760-1840* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1984), p. 10 and passim.

⁴³ Cf. Laurence Goldstein, *Ruins and Empire: The Evolution of a Theme in Augustan and Romantic Literature* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1977).

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In the Penal Colony

John Frow

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V

Let me make a very particular criticism of the historicist vision as it is carried both by a certain form of archaeological restoration and by the three-dimensional reconstructions of the Visitors' Centre. It is that it conceives of the past as singular, cut off at the moment when the penal functions of the settlement ended, and thus discontinuous with the living growth of the township and with that present in which, among other things, a massacre took place. This process of continuing growth was one in which, for example, the Lunatic Asylum functioned as a civic centre comprising a dance hall, a gymnasium, a concert hall and a church, before being converted into a Town Hall in 1895-6, then into Council offices in the 1930s and finally a museum in 1990. Margaret Scott writes that

some of those who went to school in the restored Asylum and went shopping at Gathercole's General Store and Bakery are still very much alive. They remember playing in the ruins where some of their forebears had been held prisoner, reciting the pledge of loyalty on Empire Day and, when dances were held in the Asylum building, sliding up and down the floor between dances in a mixture of sawdust and candle grease.⁴⁶

A different way of thinking about the complexly layered temporality of the site is to note that even at its height in the 1840s and 1850s it was made up of buildings of diverse and changing ages and functions; the granary was transformed into a Penitentiary; the wooden prisoners' barracks, which later became a temporary asylum for the insane and then a store, coexisted with the guard tower and the Commandant's house but, unlike them, did not survive the fires of the 1890s. And the rigid, totalitarian world of the Model Prison coexisted with the economically and socially diverse worlds of the settlement in which people worked as boat-builders, schoolteachers, loggers in a chain gang, market gardeners, book-keepers, lunatics, non-commissioned officers, and trustees.

To singularize the past and to isolate it in its pastness is to reduce this complexity to a single story, to sever a monumental time of national origins from the generational times which continuously modify it. This means in part the continuing institutionalized

forgetting of that system of penal exile and civil death which has been rendered so bland, so quaint, so much a period costume drama in the national imaginary. It means forgetting the line that runs from the Model Prison to the coldly violent maximum-security institutions of today.⁴⁷ It means failing to understand how the violence of the past is both repeated in and is radically discontinuous with Martin Bryant's shooting spree in April 1996, which cannot be told as part of the 'same' story. 'Every attempt is made', writes Richard Flanagan, 'to quarantine Port Arthur in its convict past, to present it as an endpoint to the British Empire rather than as a series of beginnings for modern Australia'.⁴⁸ Commemoration is mourning, and it is not achieved when remembrance and meaning are so easily given.

VI

Before it was invaded and settled by Europeans, the Tasman Peninsula was the country of the Pydairrme band of the Oyster Bay tribe. Rhys Jones estimates that bands numbered from 30 to 80 people. In Tasmania as a whole, he writes, under the onslaught of European invasion and the effects of pulmonary diseases, 'the aboriginal population collapsed until by 1830 there were only about 300 of them still living'.⁴⁹ In the few years between the 'war of extermination'⁵⁰ which culminated in 1830 with a line of over two thousand armed men seeking to drive the Aboriginal population of Tasmania into the 'natural prison' of the Tasman Peninsula, and George Robinson's philanthropic rescue which led to the effective extermination of the native population,⁵¹ they vanish from sight. The comment of a visiting British officer summarizes their fate. Tasman's Peninsula, he writes, 'remained unnoticed for many years, and it was at last selected as a good place to confine the aborigines, who were doing much mischief'. The 'grand Battue' having failed, 'other plans were adopted, and they were all at last got together in Flinders Island, where they gradually became extinct'.⁵²

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Notes

⁴⁴ Young, *Making Crime Pay*, p. 129.

⁴⁵ Cited in Davidson, 'Port Arthur: A Tourist History', p. 661.

⁴⁶ Tony Bennett, 'History on the Rocks', in *Australian Cultural Studies: A Reader*, ed. John Frow and Meaghan Morris (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1993), p. 222.

⁴⁷ Jim Allen, 'Port Arthur Site Museum, Australia: Its Preservation and Historical Perspectives', *Museum* 28:2 (1976), p. 105.

⁴⁸ Scott, *Port Arthur: A Story of Strength and Courage*, p. 31.

⁴⁹ Daniels, 'Cults of Nature, Cults of History', p. 6.

⁵⁰ Richard Flanagan, 'Crowbar History: Panel Games and Port Arthur', *Australian Society* 9:8 (1990), p. 38.

⁵¹ Rhys Jones, 'Appendix: Tasmanian Tribes', in Norman B. Tindale, *Aboriginal Tribes of Australia: Their Terrain, Environmental Controls, Distribution, Limits, and Proper Names* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974), p. 319.

⁵² Marcus Clarke, 'Port Arthur Nos. 1, 2, and 3' [1873], *Marcus Clarke: UQP Australian Authors*, ed. Michael Wilding (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1976), p. 512.

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