

## **Looking through the Dungeon's Barred Windows: 'A small green isle' in Byron's *The Prisoner of Chillon*.**

**Mikako Ageishi**

### **Abstract**

This paper examines the landscape viewed by the prisoner through the barred windows of a dungeon in *The Prisoner of Chillon*, written by Lord Byron in 1816. The poem was originally based on the historical account of a Swiss Protestant named François Bonivard (1493-1570), who was imprisoned for political reasons for six years in the dungeon of Chillon, and also on Lord Byron's experience during a visit to the Castle of Chillon with Percy Bysshe Shelley, a contemporary of Byron and a poet himself, who had influenced Byron to read William Wordsworth. This paper particularly focuses on the latter half of the poem, which describes how the prisoner sees nature through the barred windows. The paper discusses Byron's own experience of reading Wordsworth, as well as the prisoner's view through the dungeon's windows and its interpretation.

Keywords: Lord Byron, *The Prisoner of Chillon*, Percy Bysshe Shelley, William Wordsworth, François Bonivard.

### **Introduction**

Lord Byron's *The Prisoner of Chillon* is a dramatic monologue narrated in the first person by a prisoner who is imprisoned in the dungeon of Chillon because of his status as a rebel. This narrative poem was based on a historical account, that of a Swiss patriot named François Bonivard (1493-1570) who was incarcerated for political reasons for six years in the dungeon of Chillon.

Bonivard was born in 1493. He succeeded his uncle, who had educated him, as the prior of the priory of St. Victor, a monastery near Geneva, and accepted the office and the benefice at a young age. He opposed the encroachments made by Charles III, Duke of Savoy; resisted the unpatriotic behaviours of the Savoy family; and conspired to convert the city into a republic. Subsequently, he was imprisoned by the duke at Grolé from 1519 to 1521, due to which Bonivard was ousted from his priory and his opposition to the duke increased. In 1528, with the support of the Genevese, Bonivard took up arms against those who had seized his ecclesiastical revenues and, in 1530, was once again seized by the duke and imprisoned for four years underground in the Castle of Chillon.

In his Advertisement, which is a note to the poem, Byron confesses that he did not know Bonivard well at the time of writing the poem; Byron says, 'I was not sufficiently aware of the history of

Bonnivard, or I should have endeavored to dignify the subject by an attempt to celebrate his courage and his virtues' (Venable, 17). However, it seems he did write about Bonivard's 'courage and virtues' in his "Sonnet on Chillon" which is set at the beginning of *The Prisoner of Chillon*:

Eternal Spirit of the chainless Mind!  
    Brightest in dungeons, Liberty! thou art:  
    For there thy habitation is the heart—  
The heart which love of thee alone can bind;  
And when thy sons to fetters are consigned—  
    To fetters, and the damp vault's dayless gloom,  
    Their country conquers with their martyrdom,  
And Freedom's fame finds wings on every wind.  
Chillon! Thy prison is a holy place,  
    And thy sad floor an altar—for 'twas trod,  
Until his very steps have left a trace  
    Worn, as if thy cold pavement were a sod,  
By Bonnivard!—May none those marks efface!  
    For they appeal from tyranny to God.           (Coleridge, 379)

The sonnet represents a high literary celebration of Liberty. From the prisoner's point of view, the dungeon of Chillon is 'a holy place' whose floor is an altar striated by the chains dragged by centuries of prisoners. The prisoner of unyielding morals is offered as a sacrifice.

As a defender of a free Geneva against the tyranny of the Duke of Savoy, Bonivard experiences many hardships in the 'damp vault's dayless gloom,' that is the prison, and, thereby, 'Chillon is transformed into a 'holy place' enshrining the sad-inspirational example of one saintly sufferer in Freedom's cause' (Newey, 64). However, the poem "The Prisoner of Chillon" displays the limits of the prisoner's physical and mental strength rather than his spirit of defiance. Therefore, there is a 'gulf between the Sonnet and *The Prisoner of Chillon*' (Newey, 65).

This paper focuses on the last part of the poem, which describes the sight seen by the prisoner while looking out through the barred windows. This poem is also based on Byron's own experience of visiting Chateau de Chillon in 1816 with Percy Bysshe Shelley, who was a contemporary of Byron and a poet himself. On seeing the castle's dungeon, they were motivated to write some accounts. Additionally, Byron read poems written by William Wordsworth, a well-known Romantic nature poet, under Shelley's recommendation. The remainder of this paper discusses what the prisoner sees outside the dungeon's windows and what it represents.

## 1. Lord Byron's Departure from London, and Visit to Geneva

Byron visited the Castle of Chillon in Geneva, just a year after Napoleon's final defeat at Waterloo. 'Napoleon on St Helena was a major topic of interest for the chattering classes in the early days of 1816,' says David Ellis, 'but an almost equally important one was the separation of Lord Byron from his wife' (6-7). Annabella Milbanke, who had been Byron's wife for slightly more than a year, left him on 15 January 1816, taking with her their new-born baby. The collapse of his marriage was a profound psychological shock for Byron and provide him with a strong incentive to leave the country. In this manner, Byron left England in 1816, leaving behind him a triumphant nation and the scandal surrounding his separation from his wife.

On 27 May 1816, Byron met Shelley at Sécheron and initiated the most important literary friendship of his life.

On 22 June 1816, Byron and Shelley went sailing on Lake Geneva and stopped at the Castle of Chillon for visit. The castle is associated with the Swiss philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778), whose works were read by both poets in the weeks. To explore the places associated with Rousseau, they toured the castle and walked through the dungeon in which Bonivard had been imprisoned. After the dramatic tour, they spent two nights in Hotel de l'Ancre in Ouchy, near Lausanne, where, in a room facing the lake, 'Byron meditated on the meaning of Bonivard's survival' (Eisler, 527).

## 2. The Prisoner of Chillon—A Prisoner's Dramatic Monologue

The poem describes the trials faced by a solitary prisoner's family in the form of the prisoner's reminiscing in his cell in Chillon. It can be divided into three part, the first of which encompasses the first six stanzas. This part details the prisoner's history and the status of his confinement in the dungeon. His father was burnt at stake and, three of his five brothers are dead, two killed on the battlefield and one was burnt to death. The remaining two brothers, and the prisoner, were sent to the Castle of Chillon as prisoners. Two died in prison pining for freedom. In summary, only the speaker of the poem has survived the family's ordeals. He recalls his life with his brothers in prison; since they were tied separately to different columns, they could not see each other in the darkness. However, they identify each other and sense each other's presence by their voices. However, with the passage of time, their speech became lethargic and their voices faint. Soon, the only sounds reaching the prisoner's ears are waves noisily dashing against the outer wall of Chillon. The world inside the dungeon is just like 'a living grave'(l. 114).

Part two mentions the death of his brothers and the prisoner's feelings regarding their deaths. The older brother passed away first. He, who preferred to live his life freely out in the open, could not adapt himself to the cold, dim environment of the gaol. He refused food and finally died, after which he was roughly buried in a shallow grave. The speaker's last, profound desire for his brother's burial in a place

in the sun was in vain. Later, the prisoner's youngest brother died. In anguish, the prisoner suddenly breaks his chain. The bereaved speaker, who survives only by a hairbreadth, keeps his faith without any hope, and his consciousness is seared.

The final part of the poem describes through some episodes regarding his liberation. When a blue bird comes through a crevice, he identifies it as his beloved dead brother and, listens to 'the sweetest song ear ever heard' (l. 254), which soothes his soul for a moment. Now, he can walk around unchained in the dungeon: however, he avoids treading on his brothers' graves 'without a sod' (l. 313). In this manner, the prisoner shows that he is resigned to his fate, rather than striving to change his destiny to uphold his family's faith in the sonnet.

### 3. Vision of Nature

According to Rosemarie Rowley, there is no doubt that Byron initially was influenced by Wordsworth in composing Canto III of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*. When Byron and Shelley met in Geneva, Shelley 'dosed' Byron with Wordsworth, due to which Wordsworth's influence is clearly present at times in Byron's works (Rowley, 3). Franklin mentions how Byron makes a Wordsworthian vision of nature his own 'to show nature as essentially changeable' (41). When Byron describes Lake Lemán at night in Canto III, which was written in the same year as *The Prisoner of Chillon*, the speaker affirms the mystical stillness and unity of a sacred nature, 'All Heaven and Earth are still: From the high host/ Of stars, to the lulled lake and mountain-coast, / All is concentered in a life intense', (Canto III, 89). The speaker follows this affirmation with a description of a violent storm:

And this is in the Night: —Most glorious Night!  
Thou wert not sent for slumber! let me be  
A sharer in thy fierce and far delight, —  
A portion of the tempest and of thee!           (Canto III, 93)

Further, Franklin mentions that the changeability of nature mirrors Byron's own mobility of temperament (41). In *The Prisoner of Chillon*, Byron sublimates the prisoner's own misery through his act of imaginative creation; however, the natural scenery viewed by the prisoner through the barred windows of the dungeon is not changeable like he is:

I saw them—and they were the same,  
They were not changed like me in frame;  
I saw their thousand years of snow  
On high—their wide long lake below,

And the blue Rhone in fullest flow;  
 I heard the torrents leap and gush  
 O'er channelled rock and broken bush;  
 I saw the white-walled distant town,  
 And whiter sails go skimming down; (ll. 332-340)

The prisoner composes his vision of the outside world 'through his own gaze and memory' (Radine, 117). The scenery is the striking beauty of the surrounding mountains and lake, and the poet highlights the significant contrast between the world of nature and that of the prisoner. In addition, as pointed out by Radine, the narrator's diction emphasises his separation from nature. He uses 'the diction "I" to show his isolated state and describes the mountains as "they," a separate entity from himself' (Radine, 117).

#### 4. Looking through 'My Barred Windows'

Following his brothers' deaths in the dungeon, the prisoner makes a footing in the wall and climbs up to see the outside world through the barred windows, which can be considered his first spontaneous action since his imprisonment.

I made a footing in the wall,  
 It was not therefrom to escape,  
 For I had buried one and all,  
 Who loved me in a human shape;  
 And the whole earth would henceforth be  
 A wider prison unto me:  
 No child—no sire—no kin had I,  
 No partner in my misery; (ll. 318-325)

The prisoner says he 'made a footing' not to escape but because he 'was curious to ascend' (l. 328) to his barred windows and 'to bend / Once more, upon the mountains high' (ll. 329-330). The windows of the dungeon in Chillon visited by Byron are 'at head-height, but the thickness of the walls would make it hard to see through them for any distance with one's feet on the floor' (Cochran, 17). However in the poem, the prisoner's windows seem to be placed in quite a high position; when he descends again to the floor, he says the prison is like a 'new-dug grave' (l. 362). This suggests a significant gap in his positions, between the spot on the wall to which he climbs and the floor on which he currently standing. This represents the difference between not only brightness and darkness, but also sunny paradise and dark hell.

The ‘window’ denotes the act of perception and promises a route to consolation. Newey points out, ‘this is a trial of a former intimacy, of a remembered privilege of finding repose in fruitful intercourse between self and nature.’ (58). However, it ‘has become a return-passage to a consciousness of the narrowest, most absolute cell of all’ (Newey, 59-60). ‘Nature never did betray / The heart that loved here,’ Wordsworth says in his ‘Tintern Abbey.’ His nature tends to consolation. However, Byron’s nature is more complicated.

The poem clearly contrasts the scenery viewed by the prisoner through his barred windows, which is beautiful, strong, bright, and shining, with the sight inside his dim, motionless, silent, and dark dungeon, as follows:

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. 243-250)

This repeated negative diction expresses how the prisoner’s life and day, have remained unstimulated for a long time, due to which his nerves are paralysed. After the deaths of his brothers, the prisoner says, ‘What next befell me then and there / I know not well—I never knew—’ (ll. 231-232), which suggests his heart is starting to feel empty and vacant.

##### 5. “A small green isle” as His Bound Family

Finally, a little island caught the prisoner’s eye:

The only one in view;  
A small green isle, it seemed no more,  
Scarce broader than my dungeon floor,  
But in it there were three tall trees,  
And o’er it blew the mountain breeze  
And by it there were waters flowing,  
And on it there were young flowers growing,  
Of gentle breath and hue. (ll. 343-350)

Thinking of Byron's intimate connection with his 1816 consciousness due to the collapse of his marriage to Annabella and, the scandal, caused by his intimacy with his half-sister, Augusta, the 'three tall trees' here recall Annabella, Ada (her daughter with Byron), and Augusta. The familial triumvirate "is supported by the emphasis on generation in "young flowers growing" in the natural family' (Shilstone, 151-152).

The 'small green isle' is described as having the same dimensions as the floor of the prisoner's dark cell, which means he seemingly, but unconsciously, compares the isle to his dungeon. Therefore, the 'three tall trees' in the island can be interpreted as the prisoner himself and his two dead brothers. The island's green colour refers to its verdant land, in which 'young flowers growing, / Of gentle breath and hue' (ll. 349-350). As pointed out by Jackson, the prisoner 'sees into an image of his imprisoned family, depicting not only the three brothers huddled together, but the middle brother's elemental link to the "steep mountain's side" and the flower-like innocence of the youngest' (231-232). When his nearer brother died in the cell, the prisoner desperately appealed to the prison keepers 'to lay / His corse in dust whereon the day / Might shine' (ll. 153-154). However, they laughed at the prisoner and laid the body on the 'turfless earth' (l. 160). The striking contrast between the greensward on the isle and 'turfless earth' in the prison reminds the prisoner of his family's life in the outdoor.

The eagle rode the rising blast,  
 Methought he never flew so fast  
 As then to me he seemed to fly;  
 And then new tears came in my eye,            (ll. 353-356)

The prisoner also sees 'the eagle' through the barred windows. This reminds the reader of the reference to the prisoner's nearer brother as one of the 'young eagles' in the previous stanza.

And truly might it be distressed  
 To see such bird in such a nest;  
 For he was beautiful as day—  
 (When day was beautiful to me  
 As to young eagles, being free)—            (ll. 77-81)

Although the eagle is written about in the plural form here, as mentioned by Gerald Wood, one of the 'young eagles' is a reference to the prisoner's nearer brother (113). The speaker of the poem says 'He was a hunter of the hills, / Had followed there the deer and wolf' (ll. 103-104). Like the brother, the eagle is a hunter in the woods that sometimes chases animals larger than itself. The prisoner's nearer

brother and the eagle overlap each other in terms of ‘hunter.’ Further, the prisoner says, ‘we were used to hunter’s fare’ (l. 130), which indicates the prisoner might have been a hunter, as well. He is compared to the eagle, and the youngest a “bird” in a horrible “nest”. Generally, birds including eagles, symbolise freedom. The prisoner’s imprisoned brothers were deprived of all freedom; therefore, they are, figuratively, birds in a dreary cage. Hence, the colour green of the small isle must remind him of their earlier outdoor life, as well as his brother’s painful death and burial in the ‘turfless’ grave.

### Conclusions

*The Prisoner of Chillon* emphasises the isolation from nature, rather than the causes of this isolation. As mentioned earlier, the scenery viewed by the prisoner through the dungeon’s barred windows is described as being colourful and active and having an overwhelming influence on the emotions and mental state of the prisoner, who is looked up in the dark, motionless, and silent dungeon. Such a vision in the poem contains ‘nothing of the Wordsworthian pantheistic peace and comfort,’ but rather reflects ‘of the naturalistic novelists’ indifferent nature’ (Gleckner, 198). Further, the prisoner might have failed to find any consolation in the landscape because he says that ‘new tears came’ in his eyes, as noted by Beatty. Moreover, Beatty points out that it ‘shows his anxiety and uneasiness to be released to be free’ (124). However, ‘green’ must have reminded the prisoner of the turf he wished for his brother’s grave and of the brother’s life as ‘a hunter’ in the wilderness, even though the green colour is generally associated with concepts like life, energy, and hope.

This paper deals with the sight outside the dungeon’s windows considering Byron’s biography and the prisoner’s mental state with Wordsworthian perspective of nature. Byron deeply respected Rousseau, who wrote a novel that is also set in the Castle of Chillon. For future research, Byron-Rousseau connections would be examined.

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