**Forms of Fear and Dread and Doom: ‘The Ballad of Reading Gaol’ - Sensations of Crime and Rhyme**

‘The Ballad of Reading Gaol’ is dedicated to CTW – Charles Thomas Wooldridge, a Trooper of the Royal Horse Guards, who, in 1896, was held at Reading Gaol, and there executed for cutting the throat of his wife. While the murder itself was violent, and committed out of jealousy, Wooldridge threw himself with equal passion into the business of remorse and penitence, even going so far as to reject any pleas for clemency on his behalf, that might reduce the charge to manslaughter (Nell Wooldridge was having an affair and had returned to using her maiden name!) Wooldridge surrendered himself to the police and is recorded as having said he would have cut his own throat had he not been immediately arrested, a point on which Wilde’s poem elaborates: several times it is noted how the condemned man is watched ‘lest himself should rob’ the prison or scaffold ‘of its prey’. Records also confirm the poem’s impression of Wooldridge’s acceptance, even welcoming of his fate. Regina Gagnier cites the Reading Mercury’s report that Wooldridge ‘had died “truly penitent . . . without a struggle and without a word’ (172); the poem emphasizes how:

His soul was resolute, and held

No hiding place for fear:

He often said that he was glad

The hangman’s hands were near.

In my proposal for this paper, which I am shamelessly going to use as an introduction now, I cite Patrick Brantlinger’s definition of the sensation novel as ‘deal[ing] with crime, often murder as an outcome of adultery […] in apparently proper, bourgeois settings’; he further clarifies popular instances of the genre in the 1860s as sharing a ‘unique mixture of contemporary domestic realism with the elements of the Gothic’, the ‘Newgate novel of criminal “low life” and the “silver fork” novel of scandalous and sometimes criminal “high life”’.[[1]](#footnote-1) These elements are immediately evident in the poem itself, its subject, and the circumstances of its author’s imprisonment. The phrase “truly penitent” applied to Wooldridge links his case to those criminal biographies that inspired Defoe’s *Moll Flanders*; he murdered his wife for her adultery; Wilde is himself, one fallen from high society, while the poem employs Gothic tropes and imagery in section 3, as the prisoners endure all manner of foreboding on the eve of Wooldridge’s hanging.

Pamela K Gilbert notes how the sensation novel’s appeal lay in its deliberate address ‘directly to the “nerves”, eliciting a physical sensation with its surprises, plot twists and startling revelations’.[[2]](#footnote-2) In other words, the content of the sensation novel is concerned with affect - making the reader feel - as much as it is with plot; this is grounds for Kirstie Blair’s claim that where affect was the matter, ‘[p]oetry had a certain advantage over the novel […] in terms of form’ since ‘formal effects (rhythmic disturbances, for example) were considered capable of embodying and creating physiological responses’ too. The ballad, with its kinship to the broadside, its reliance on narrative, shock and denouement, and its insistence on refrain and rhythm, is a form already close to the sensation novel. Oscar Wilde’s poem draws on all these traditions, but Wilde deploys them to offer an interrogation of the psychology of fear as it works through and on the prisoners as a collective body.

However, the further body on which the poem works is of course, that of the reader, and I will return to Blair’s point about the capacity for rhythmic disturbances to excite – literally – the reader’s feelings. The poem, Gagnier argues, is a coded plea for those (men) whose love takes them outside of the Law and Society, evident in ‘[Wilde’s] apparent limiting of the inmates’ crimes to crimes of love. The poem depicts a community of men who kill the thing they love and their banishment and divorce from society.’[[3]](#footnote-3) I want to argue that the poem knowingly and carefully deploys, only to stagger the ballad metre, frequently enough that the metre will settle into its narrative and swing so that its irregularities will jar. And I use the word ‘irregular’ here with intent: for Wilde is writing about love but love that is ‘irregular’. Wilde furthermore, does this at the latter end of a century that, as Blair shows, has exhibited an intense cultural fascination with the relationship between the heart or pulse, and poetic metre.

Terry Eagleton observes that Wilde deliberately chose the ballad as a ‘*popular* literary form, as befits a poem which takes sides with the common people against their judges and rulers. It has,’ Eagleton continues, ‘a simple, direct centrality of feeling about it’; furthermore, the ballad ‘is essentially a collective form, which avoids lyrical subjectivism to distil a kind of impersonal wisdom.’[[4]](#footnote-4) I would like you to keep the words, and notions of both ‘feeling’ and ‘collective’ in mind: I have already stressed how Wooldridge, in truth was clearly a man of high feeling; and ‘feeling’ is prized above all else in the poem: the narrator early on, claims how he walks ‘with other souls in pain’, and when he hears of the condemned man’s pending execution experiences such dread and horror, that the prison walls ‘reel’, while:

[. . . ] the sky above my head became

Like a casque of scorching steel;

And, though I was a soul in pain,

My pain I could not feel.

From there, we proceed quickly to the famous stanzas which argue that ‘each man kills the thing he loves’, a catalogue of ways in which this might happen, and then, as the narrator empathizes extensively with the condemned man, a description of how ghastly it must *feel* to be awaiting execution.

This is why, the last line of the stanza quoted is particularly significant, as the rhyme choice leads us to suppose. ‘Reel’ and ‘steel’ climax with ‘feel’. But ‘feeling’ is neither the concern of the individual ‘suffering’ from it and its effects/consequences, nor that of the poet alone. It is at every point, a communal matter, to the extent that in Section 3 especially, each man’s fear or pain invades the other inmates as if cell walls, and skulls were permeable: in the stanza quoted above, the other’s pain drives out the narrator’s own entirely, and paradoxically, the narrator renounces, even as he uses it, that (specifically post-Romantic, self-examining) lyric subjectivism Eagleton mentions; in Section 3 this recurs, as the narrator, who is now utterly identified as ‘we/us’, declares that, all that night ‘through each brain on hands of pain/Another’s terror crept.’ Section I, which is largely the narrator imagining the condemned man’s state of mind prepares the reader for that collective experience. When the execution has happened, the prisoners ‘feel’ as a collective body, the executed body as:

. . . all the while the burning lime

Eats flesh and bone away,

It eats the brittle bone by night,

And the | **soft flesh** | by **day**,

It eats the flesh and bone by turns

But it **eats** | the **heart** | al**way**

That ‘heart’ is every inmate's heart.

As one reads this stanza aloud, it is hard to ignore pronounced arrhythmia which lines 4 and then 6 force into play. The reader must linger on ‘and the soft flesh’ – the pace has to slow as the iambic drive of all the preceding lines shifts suddenly into pyrrhic – *and the* – then spondee – *soft flesh* – only to resume the iambic pattern in the final third foot. The driving rhythm is whipped away from us, and the reader may hover uncertainly at this line, searching for the moment of stress which does not arrive until ‘soft flesh’ and is then, unnaturally prolonged. The return of the iamb in that final foot is almost a relief, but by then it is too late, and the reader has had to encounter the ‘soft flesh’ in all its vulnerability, undefended as it is by the weakness of ‘and the’. By the same token, line 6 stutters into its grim promise and again departs so noticeably from the iambic metre of line 5, its first foot being an anapest – But it *eats* – which places unbearable emphasis on ‘eats’. There is a similar arrhythmia in an earlier stanza, already quoted:

Dear Christ! the very prison walls

Suddenly seemed to reel,

And the sky above my head became

Like a **casque** | of **scorch**ing **steel**;

And, though I was a soul in pain,

My pain I could not feel.

The caesura in line 1 is a dramatic one, and ‘natural’. But in line 4, again, the anapest that leads us in, causes a stumble, much greater than that on the preceding line. There are several examples of such arrhythmia – might show more – but what highlights them as interesting, is not just their ‘sensationalist’ potential, but the fact that these lines could quite easily be written to fit the metric pattern of the overall poem; eg. ‘And the sky above my head became/A casque of scorching steel’ is stronger rhythmically, and as metaphor rather than simile, arguably more committed to its image. There is no need for ‘Like a…’, that is, unless the sputtering pace is intended to cause an echoing faltering in the reader’s heart. Similarly, the other two examples seem deliberate, as that stanza can be rewritten to sustain the metre:

. . . all the while the burning lime

Eats flesh and bone away,

It eats the brittle bone by night,

It eats soft flesh by day,

It eats the flesh and bone by turns

But eats the heart alway.

The metre here is steady, but then so will be the reader’s pulse and feeling, and this is the point.

As you know, the ballad form was famously appropriated and adapted by the Romantics, Wordsworth and Coleridge, who saw in its demotic origins, an analeptic for the overly classical modes of poetry of their immediate forebears. As Kirstie Blair shows, both Coleridge and Wordsworth were aware, uncomfortably in William’s case, of the function of rhythm as so integral to a poem’s sensation and therefore meaning.

Metrical rhythm is increasingly and closely understood in terms of the heart or pulse as the nineteenth century progresses. Blair: ‘Engagement with the pulse in nineteenth-century physiology and pathology, and the perceived connections between writing poetry and particular forms of disordered pulse and circulation, meant that the analogy of pulse and rhythm was taken very seriously by doctors and investigators of the heartbeat as well as by poets.’ (73) At the beginning of that century, Blair argues, poetry would be familiar with the arguments of Coleridge and Wordsworth: SLIDE

1. WW – metre with its regularity tempers the passion that the poetry simultaneously awakes (Preface to LB)
2. Coleridge – rhythm originates out of ‘the balance in the mind effected by that spontaneous effort which strives to hold in check the workings of passion’ (Biog Lit 1817) (KB 77); later in BL, Coleridge writes that ‘as every passion has its proper pulse, so will it likewise have its characteristic modes of expression.’

Thus, Blair says, ‘ ‘pulse’ seems to become analogous to rhythm, and poetry and the body are again linked through the physical sense of the word ‘passion’. (78) Coleridge still later writes that ‘metre itself implies passion, ie. a state of excitement’ in both the poet and the reader, as the presence of one indicates the presence of the other. Which seems to cement that link. Blair further outlines how, by the 1830s, the belief that poetry could indeed change the heartbeat/pulse went hand-in-hand with the understanding of the heart as itself variable in its rhythm, changes which were out of a response to stimuli. To summarize Blair’s argument, by this time and onwards, metre and form open up, adopt a flexibility that moves poetry further away from fixed metrical patterning to the extent that rhythm is elevated to the status of being an expressive tool. (This is a very crude summary of Blair’s elegant chapter, for which I apologize.)

To cite one more poet/theorist of the period, Coventry Patmore (again via Blair), whose understanding I am seizing upon – for Wilde’s poem: in his Essay on English Metrical Law (1850s, then revised in the 1880s), Blair notes that Patmore:

1. states that ‘the language should always seem to *feel*, though not to *suffer from* the bonds of verse’ (emphasis in original)
2. that metrical expression is ‘sensible’ – in the 18th century definition of bodily sensibility (feeling), and consisting of ‘an instinct’ rather than an ‘artifice’ (KB 87)
3. lastly, in relation to my reading of the BofRG, ‘alterations in rhythm have an emotional effect: ‘*Such change is as real a mode of expressing emotions as words themselves are of expressing thought’. (88)*

These tenets as it were, return us to a notion of a possible universal sense of rhythm, which is important to the sensation that this poem, I argue, seeks to elicit in its readers, that of disturbance. <15 mins> There are more than a few examples of the sort I have given here, and they seem to cluster particularly in Section 3, the section in which the entire prison ‘suffers’ supernatural terrors as they are spawned out of their dreadful empathy with the condemned man. This is typical, and describes the moment of the hangman’s arrival:

He did not pass in purple pomp,

Nor ride a moon-white steed.

Three yards of cord, and a sliding board

Are all the gallows’ need:

So with rope of shame the Herald came

To do the secret deed.

The culprit here is ‘So’ which transforms that first foot awkwardly, and apparently needlessly, from neat iamb (with *rope* | of *shame*) to an unconvincing anapest – So with *rope* | of *shame* – unconvincing because the natural stress wants to fall on ‘So’; but the succeeding ‘with rope of shame’ reveal that stress to be forced and silly. The effect however is to force the reader’s sense of the rope, and the shame; and without ‘So’ the stanza marches neatly, and in orderly fashion, to the scaffold. This is what Wilde’s poem cries out against. In its small way, that ‘So’ insists on a breaking of stride, as those other moments of arrhythmia do; and together they work on the reader as if to halt or pause some dreadful machinery.

A final note: I have said that the poem is one of feeling, of sensibility, but by the time Wilde wrote this, feeling and sensibility were increasingly perceived to unmasculine, and dangerous if exhibited by. . . men. Wilde’s poem, as Gagnier records, was for its first reviewers, indicative in its concerns and imagery of softness, hysteria and weakness, feverish and unmanly (RG 171), and too obviously afraid of death. Is it too fanciful to imagine those earnest reviewers, as their hearts stop and sputter and their reassuringly imperial iambs falter, recoiling in horror at the irregularity of both Wilde and his poem? 18 mins

1. ‘What is “Sensational” About the “Sensation Novel”’, *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 37 (1) 1982 (pp. 1-28), p. 1 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. ‘Introduction’, *Companion to Sensation Fiction*, ed. Pamela K Gilbert (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), p. 2 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *Idylls of the Marketplace: Oscar Wilde and the Victorian Public*. (Aldershot: Scolar Press/Gower Pub., 1987), p. 173 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. ‘Introduction’, *Oscar Wilde, Plays, Prose, Writings and Poems*. (London: Everyman’s Library, Alfred Knopf, 1991), p. xxvi [↑](#footnote-ref-4)