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## READING IN CRIMINOLOGY FOR PLEASURE AND PERSPECTIVE

RUTH ELINOR WILSON\*

A favorite story among students new to criminology points out that whereas in 1932 a man owning a bottle of whiskey was a criminal, and his brother in possession of a twenty-dollar gold piece was a respected citizen, a year later their positions were exactly reversed. This anecdote can be used to illustrate a much broader lesson from Beccaria, who said, "Whoever reads, with a philosophic eye, the history of nations, and their laws, will generally find that the ideas of virtue and vice, of a good and bad citizen, change with the revolution of the ages. . . . He will frequently observe, that the passions and vices of one age, are the foundations of the morality of the following."<sup>1</sup>

Unfortunately, while such an illustration is useful, one does not often find students who, after having heard it, search out and read Beccaria's "Essay on Crimes and Punishments," even though the failure to do so only increases their tendency to think of themselves as the first, the pioneer, criminologists. Their point of reference remains the 20th century; they do not see themselves as part of a timeless chain of effort to deal with a problem basic in humanity. They often cannot see, from the reading they have done up to the present, their own place in the history of reform, anti-punitiveness, and humanitarianism. Yet, when assignments are limited to textbooks which are mere surveys of these great movements, much of the color, idealism, and valor of the individual guiding-spirits of each age is lost, and so is the interest of the student.

\* The author received her A.B. in Criminology from the University of California (Berkeley) in 1950. She is the wife of Orlando W. Wilson, Superintendent of Police in Chicago. The current article results from Mrs. Wilson's observations of students who had never learned to read beyond their textbook assignments. Although such additional reading should be commonplace long before college, Mrs. Wilson believes that some compensatory steps are possible, under the proper guidance, at the college level.—EDITOR.

<sup>1</sup> BECCARIA, AN ESSAY ON CRIMES AND PUNISHMENTS, printed by E. Hodson, Cross-Street, Hatton Garden, for J. Bone, No. 180, Corner of Fetter Lane, Fleet Street, London, 1801. Although in the past copies of Beccaria have not been easily available, the Bobbs-Merrill Co., Indianapolis, has announced it has a new edition in preparation (1962).

The tendency of modern university curricula toward over-specialization has brought another kind of isolation to students in professional schools, with the result that year by year, more and more groups of people are voluntarily splitting away from those with which they share no common interests. It is becoming more and more difficult for individuals and organizations to understand and appreciate the points of view of their fellows.

The fact remains, however, that students of criminology are working with behavior and personality problems that cannot be studied apart from psychology, sociology, anthropology, and social welfare disciplines. Every person engaged in any phase whatever of law enforcement must be acquainted with motivations, behavior, needs, and achievements of large segments and cross-sections of the population. He should know something of the development of standards and achievements in his own and other professions, something of the development of social and cultural patterns in this country, and of the same factors in parent countries in which our population had its source.

Obviously, students of criminology cannot be expected to pursue lengthy and difficult courses in each of the above fields. They are being trained for practical work in law enforcement, in correctional institutions, and in criminalistics laboratories, and at least two years of intensive upper-division work are necessary to achieve even an adequate level of proficiency. The first two years in college are usually given over to generalized subjects, but all too frequently these are merely a continuation of high-school studies. As with candidates in other professional schools, the majority of criminology students will have no great drive towards the arts and cannot be expected to have done much searching for stimulation through literature.

Nevertheless, it appears that some step should be taken to provide these young students with a broader background than they can now develop through technical courses. There is no better way than through literature related to their major field of interest. If young students are allowed to

graduate without the enriching experience of acquaintance with the literature illustrative of their subject, the loss will reflect itself in intolerance and a narrowness of associative ideas which will inevitably affect the individual himself, as well as the community and the nation.

There are two possible ways of meeting the problem at the college or university level. One is to organize a "great books" course, for which the student would read in their entirety those works that deal more or less directly with the universal problems of criminality and the methods of its treatment. (Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment* and Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables* come to mind immediately—there are many others.) There are several drawbacks to such a plan, one being that many students whose interest in literature is negligible will simply rebel when faced with assignments of thousands of pages of unfamiliar and, they fear, difficult reading. After all, one does not develop a liking for the work of any author if one feels there is pressure to do so; its appeal must come as one's own discovery. Also, since the aim of such a course is to strengthen his ethical sense as well as to provide him pleasure, it would be deplorable to place a criminology student in a situation which might tempt him to use another's book review!

The second plan is to relate specific readings to specific courses. Sometimes this reading consists merely of certain chapters from famous books. For example, students in the detection of deception can be referred to *Crime and Punishment* for one of the most beautiful descriptions in literature of the interplay between the psychological processes of suspect and interrogator. These passages abound with such observations as these of the detective, Porfiry:

"But you must observe this, my dear Rodion Romanovitch, the general case, the case for which all legal forms and rules are intended, for which they are calculated and laid down in books, does not exist at all, for the reason that every case, every crime for instance, so soon as it actually occurs, at once becomes a thoroughly special case and sometimes a case unlike any that's gone before. Very comic cases of that sort sometimes occur. If I leave one man quite alone, if I don't touch him and don't worry him, but let him know or at least suspect every moment that I know all about it and am watching him day and night, and if he is in contin-

ual suspicion and terror, he'll be bound to lose his head. He'll come of himself, or maybe do something which will make it as plain as twice two are four—it's delightful. It may be so with a simple peasant but with one of our sort, an intelligent man cultivated on a certain side, it's a dead certainty! . . . Through a law of nature he can't escape me if he had anywhere to go. Have you seen a butterfly around a candle? That's how he will keep circling and circling around me. Freedom will lose its attractions. He'll begin to brood, he'll weave a tangle around himself, he'll worry himself to death! What's more he will provide me with a mathematical proof, if only I give him a long enough interval . . . and he'll keep circling round me, getting nearer and nearer and then—flop! He'll fly straight into my mouth and I'll swallow him, and that will be very amusing . . . You don't believe me?"<sup>2</sup>

The virtue of such reading lies in the fact that once having read a few absorbing chapters, the student is apt to want to know more, and he may very well find that he cannot wait to read the entire novel. At the same time, he has learned a great deal about the reaction of the intelligent, introspective, rationalizing, and "cold-blooded" murderer when faced by an interrogator of the same caliber, and he has been taught some universal principles of interrogation.

Similarly, the professor who must convey the fallacies of early penal systems to a large class of potential administrators and officers may find that it is not enough to assign the relevant chapters in, let us say, Barnes' and Teeters' *New Horizons in Criminology*.<sup>3</sup> This text-book is popular, it is well illustrated and very readable, but precisely because it covers so much ground it is apt to give the young student a false impression that he knows "all about" the background of present day correctional philosophy. The book should be a starting point, but very few students seem to make use of its fine bibliography as a guide to leisure-time reading. Such outside readings can give significant meaning to surveys of any social progression, and the failure to use them collaterally can lead to such misunderstandings as the following: The older editions of Barnes' and Teeters' book refer fleetingly to Charles Dickens'

<sup>2</sup> DOSTOYEVSKY, CRIME AND PUNISHMENT (Modern Library).

<sup>3</sup> BARNES & TEETERS, NEW HORIZONS IN CRIMINOLOGY (3d rev. ed. 1960).

attitude toward the Eastern Pennsylvania Penitentiary and describe it as being expressed in "vitriolic and terrible" terms, in his book *American Notes*.<sup>4</sup> Now, "vitriolic" and "terrible" can mean different things to different people, and by themselves they probably conjure up in the reader's mind an event or a reaction referring to himself. How much more powerful (and how much more lasting the impression) is this:

"In the outskirts, stands a great prison, called the Eastern Penitentiary: conducted on a plan peculiar to the state of Pennsylvania. The system here is rigid, strict, and hopeless *solitary confinement*. I believe it, in its effects, to be cruel and wrong. In its intention, I am well convinced that it is kind, humane, and meant for reformation; but I am persuaded that those who devised this system of Prison Discipline, and those benevolent gentlemen who carry it into execution, do not know what they are doing. I believe that very few men are capable of estimating the immense amount of torture and agony which this dreadful punishment, prolonged for years, inflicts upon the sufferers; and in guessing at it myself, and in reasoning from what I have seen written upon their faces, and what to my certain knowledge they feel within, I am only the more convinced that there is a depth of terrible endurance in it which none but the sufferers themselves can fathom, and which no man has a right to inflict upon his fellow creatures. I hold this slow and daily tampering with the mysteries of the brain, to be immeasurably worse than any torture of the body; and because its ghastly signs and tokens are not so palpable to the eye and sense of touch as scars upon the flesh; because its wounds are not upon the surface, and it extorts few cries that human ears can hear; therefore I the more denounce it, as a secret punishment which slumbering humanity is not roused up to stay."

Dickens follows this introduction with several case histories and an analysis of the dangers inherent in such extreme punishment, and he concludes with a plea for "abandoning a mode of punishment attended by so little hope or promise, and fraught, beyond dispute, with such a host of evils." If the student will then go back and read the whole of this short study of social conditions

in the United States of a hundred years ago, he may find that he has gained an entirely new insight into regional methods of dealing with crime, as well as into attitudes in America which proved to be the forerunners of present-day "white-collar" crime. (See, for example, the comments in Chapter 18 on "smart" dealing.) He will also find, incidentally, that the traditional resentment of Americans towards Dickens' description of our ways is not without justification. Dickens saw much of good here and took pains to praise the "progressiveness" of many of our institutions, but his mastery of vivid, detailed, and realistic pictures of coarseness and rude manners has helped to obscure his more objective observations.

Granted that *American Notes* may not belong in the category of great literature, it may still prove to be the student's introduction to some of Dickens' works that have become classics. Each of his novels vividly portrays some social condition of his time that related to problems of criminality in greater or lesser degree, and many of them are fervent pleas for improvement in diagnosis and treatment of delinquency of both children and adults. His ideas in many instances are as practical and applicable today as in the last century. Much can be learned about the man himself and of his contributions to criminology by reading such a book as *The Heart of Charles Dickens*,<sup>5</sup> a collection of his letters. Included are several describing a sincere and heart-warming effort to apply the mark system of MacConochie to the rehabilitation of "fallen women." Dickens understood the difficulties of such a plan, and his letters reveal a sense of realism mingled with humanitarian idealism that would do credit to the most progressive prison administrator today.

One might also refer to the writing of Sydney Smith (one biographer calls him "The Smith of Smiths"),<sup>6</sup> another of the early 19th century reformers whose work helped to achieve greater changes in the administration of justice in England than had ever taken place in one generation before. Smith has been accused of favoring harsh and cruel punishments, such as the treadmill, in prison discipline. Yet, it is impossible to read any of the Reverend Smith's articles on criminal justice without becoming aware of his very genuine concern for the individual prisoner, and of his

<sup>4</sup> DICKENS, PICTURES FROM ITALY AND AMERICAN NOTES 283 (1867).

<sup>5</sup> EDGAR JOHNSON, THE HEART OF CHARLES DICKENS (1952).

<sup>6</sup> PEARSON, THE SMITH OF SMITHS (1934).

determination to correct the evils of English penal institutions. He writes movingly and powerfully: "Alarmists such as we have described have no particular wish that prisons should be dirty, gaolers cruel, or prisoners wretched; they care little about such matters either way; but all their malice and meanness is called up into action when they see secrets brought to light and abuses giving way before the diffusion of intelligence and the aroused feelings of justice and compassion. As for us, we have neither love of change nor fear of it, but a love of what is just and wise, as far as we are able to find it out."<sup>7</sup> He spares the feelings of no one who through his carelessness or thoughtlessness may have contributed to a shameful situation in the handling of criminals.

Under the plan of related specific readings, the professor of criminology will have available an almost endless list of intriguing short stories and novels. He can begin with Poe and Wilkie Collins, for example, or he can go back to the 18th century for his material and ask his students to read *Tom Jones*, by Henry Fielding. This early novel of conflict with its melodramatic resolution has charmed thousands of readers for 200 years. It can be read for pure surface enjoyment of ribald humour and satire and almost fantastically involved plot, or it may be read as a commentary on conditions in England, both political and socio-religious, which brought about the strong reaction of 19th century Victorianism.

If the professor wishes to lead his students gently to this assignment, he may find it helpful to stimulate their interest in the period by introducing them to the famous Beau Nash of Bath. Nash is the classic example of the "born gambler" and his "Dissuasive Against Gaming" written in his old age, is certainly one which should be known to students of law enforcement in this era. Beau Nash had seen every side of gambling and had known both its triumphs and humiliations, and his conclusions were these:

"Thus gaming is the source of poverty, and still worse, the parent of infamy and vice. It is an inlet to debauchery, for the money thus acquired is but little valued. Every gamester is a rake, and his morals worse than his mystery.

<sup>7</sup> BULLETT, SYDNEY SMITH (London 1951). This book includes Smith's essay on *Prisons and Prisoner's Counsel*, from which the quotation was taken, as well as *Spring Guns and Man Traps, The Suppression of Vice*, and several others equally pertinent.

It is his interest to be exemplary in every scene of debauchery, his prey is to be courted with every guilty pleasure; but these are to be changed, repeated and embellished in order to employ his imagination, while his reason is kept asleep. . . . And when a man has parted with his money like a fool, he generally sends his conscience after it like a villain, and the nearer he is to the brink of destruction, the fonder does he grow of ruin."<sup>8</sup>

Nash was a contemporary of Ralph Allen, who became the model for Fielding's Squire Allworthy of *Tom Jones*, and who was as stable and wholesome in his behavior as Nash was erratic. Fielding's acquaintance with them both helped him to portray the status of gambler and victim vividly and dramatically. If the student also knows something of their lives before reading the novel, his appreciation of Fielding will be enhanced. More than that, he will begin to see the need for the creation by Fielding of the Bow Street Magistrates and the Runners; he will see that in the midst of chaotic social conditions there are always men of vision who work steadfastly and with devotion to improve the lot of individuals and the society within which they function.

In passing, one might mention such men as William Blake, whose beautiful short poem, "The Little Black Boy" (1789) could surely be read with profit in a class concerned with race relations. A reading such as this takes no more than two or three minutes, but its value in orienting young students to the past is incalculable. Whole new worlds of insight may open through emotional experiences such as reading poetry, but at the very least the student is made alert to the fact that his own reaction, whatever it may be, to minority groups is not new, and that guilt and conflict and compassion are not limited to the present.

It is impossible to list all the dozens of books from which one may choose in carrying out such a plan as has been outlined. What is important is not *the* book—what is important is that they be books of lasting value and that these lead the student to still others. Beccaria himself summed up their value:

"Hence we see the use of printing, which alone makes the public, and not a few individuals, the guardians and defenders of the laws. It is

<sup>8</sup> SITWELL, BATH 95 (London 1932).

this art, which, by diffusing literature, has gradually dissipated the gloomy spirit of cabal and intrigue. To this art it is owing, that the atrocious crimes of our ancestors, who were alternately slaves and tyrants, are become less frequent. They who are acquainted with the history of the two or three last centuries, may observe, how from the lap of luxury and effeminacy, have sprung the most tender virtues, humanity, benevolence, and toleration of human errors.<sup>9</sup>

Teachers can make from their own reading experiences excellent choices, but the challenge

<sup>9</sup> *Op. cit. supra* note 1, at 18.

lies in presenting these to students in such a way that they voluntarily accept them. The relationship of the current reading to the current subject under study should be clear, the contributions of the great workers of the past must be evaluated while leaving to the student the opportunity of discovering for himself the value of individual effort and dedication to social ideals, and above all, this reading should foster the potential joy and interest in literature which is in all of us, so that these students can pass on to their successors the willingness and capacity to "read, with a philosophic eye, the history of nations, and their laws . . ."