'The Best Place in the World': Imaging Urban Prisons in Late Medieval Italy

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Prisons are mostly absent from modern imaginaries of the medieval urban panorama. The oversight is remarkable given the volume of studies on medieval criminality and social marginality, on the one hand, and the close link between the foundation of prisons and the explosion of late-medieval civic architecture, on the other.¹ As new city walls, public squares, and palaces, but also brothels, leper-houses, and hospitals burgeoned across Europe from the twelfth century onward, local regimes began carving out prison spaces as well. In north and central Italy especially, this new ordering of urban space came to reflect the new politics of communal government and its claims over jurisdictional exclusivity in addressing both foreign and internal threats. Prisons were part and parcel of this development, and by the fourteenth century they could be found throughout the region, fully integrated into many walks of urban life, among other marginalizing institutions.

Yet despite offering such a palpable link between centralized power, deviancy, and justice, prisons rarely informed contemporary descriptions of the urban

¹ I am grateful to the organizers and participants of the 'Cities, Texts and Social Networks' sessions at Leeds (2007) for helping me rectify, augment and nuance some ideas that originally appear in G. Geltner, *The Medieval Prison: A Social History* (Princeton, 2008), esp. pp. 82–99. Translations are my own unless otherwise noted. Special thanks to Ivan Panovic for his expert help with medieval Arabic texts.

On medieval marginality see Jean-Claude Schmidt, 'L'histoire des marginaux', in Jacques Le Goff (ed.) *La nouvelle histoire* (Paris, 1978), pp. 277–305; Bronisław Geremek, *The Margins of Society in Late Medieval Paris*, trans. Jean Birrell (Cambridge, 1987); Frank Rexroth, *Das Milieu der Nacht: Obrigkeit und Randgruppen im spätmittelalterlichen London* (Göttingen, 1999); Sharon A. Farmer, *Surviving Poverty in Medieval Paris: Gender, Ideology, and the Daily Lives of the Poor* (Ithaca, 2002); and Geltner, *The Medieval Prison*, pp. 100–9. On medieval incarceration generally see the latter's bibliography, which is to be supplemented by Julie Claustre, *Dans les geôles du roi: L'emprisonnement pour dette à Paris à la fin du moyen-âge* (Paris, 2007). No study or survey of medieval cities that I know draws a link between the development of civic architecture and the creation of prison spaces, with the rare exception of a brief comment by Colin Cunningham, 'For the Honour and Beauty of the City: The Design of Town Halls', in Diana Norman (ed.), *Siena, Florence, and Padua: Art, Society, and Religion, 1280–1400*, 2 vols (New Haven, 1995), vol. 1, pp. 29–53 at 29.

experience. There are several ways to explain this apparent paradox, which inadvertently helped shape modern views of the medieval city. Partly it owes to the unwillingness of learned contemporaries (especially jurists) to admit how widespread the use of penal incarceration had become.² A further factor was that, with few exceptions, municipal prisons were appropriated structures rather than dedicated facilities. The fact that they usually formed wings (as in Siena), towers (Bologna), or basements (Venice) in central government compounds could render them central yet simultaneously invisible to the unknowing eye, whether medieval or modern. By contrast, when prisons were purpose-built, as in the rare cases of Florence and Padua (and later, Venice), they commanded greater attention from contemporary and later observers, and are customarily depicted in early cityscapes.³ However, as this essay argues, there is more to prisons' subdued presence than law, architecture, or even urban planning can explain.

The main problematic of late-medieval urban prisons stemmed from their role in traditional Christian imaginaries. Centuries before Boethius set *On the Consolation of Philosophy* in a prison cell, martyrological narratives imaged incarceration as a process of spiritual purgation, and later apologists embraced this 'sweet inversion' for promoting nascent ascetic practices. With the subsequent waning of persecutions and the disappearance of 'red' or bloody martyrs from the Christian purview,⁴ various writers adopted the language of imprisonment to convey the mystical experience of monastic life. Such writings not only pre-dated but also differed substantially from the Boethian 'Consolation genre', which has been the focus of much modern scholarship on medieval prison literature.⁵ For while Boethius certainly influenced many subsequent authors,

² Geltner, *The Medieval Prison*, pp. 44–54.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 28–33.

⁴ Clare Stancliffe, 'Red, White and Blue Martyrdom', in Rosamond McKitterick, et al. (eds), *Ireland in Early Medieval Europe. Studies in Memory of Kathleen Hughes* (Cambridge, 1983), pp. 21–46.

⁵ See Michael H. Means, *The Consolatio Genre in Medieval English Literature* (Gainsville, 1972); Nadia Margolis, 'The Human Prison: The Metamorphosis of Misery in the Poetry of Christine de Pizan, Charles d'Oreleans, and François Villon', in Guy R. Mermier and Edelgard E. DuBruck (eds), *Fifteenth-Century Studies* (Kalamazoo, Mich, 1978), pp. 185–92; René Menage, 'Deux poètes en prison: Maître Jean Régnier e le prisonnier desconforté de Loches', in *Exclus et systemes d'exclusion dans la litterature et la civilisation médiévales* (Aix-en-Provence, 1978), pp. 239–49; Krystyna Kasprzyk, 'L'expérience de la prison et de l'exil chez quelques poètes de la fin du moyen âge', in Elżbieta Grabska, et al. (eds), *La souffrance au moyen âge (France, XII^e–XV^e s.)* (Warsaw, 1988), pp. 165–79; Julia Boffey, 'Chaucerian Prisoners: The Context of the *Kingis Quair*', in Julia Boffey and Janet Cowen (eds), *Chaucer and Fifteenth-Century Poetry*, (London, 1991), pp. 84–99; Maria Luisa Meneghetti, 'Scrivere in carcere nel medioevo', in *Studi di filologia e letteratura italiani in onore di Maria Picchio Simonelli* (Alessandria, 1992), pp. 185–99; Robert Epstein, 'Prisoners of Reflection: The Fifteenth-Century Poetry of Exile and Imprisonment', *Exemplaria*, 15 (2003): 157–98;

early asceticism forged a unique discursive bond between monasticism, the experience of purgation, and abject imprisonment.⁶ Indeed, with what Jacques Le Goff dubbed the 'spatialization of Purgatory' from the late twelfth century on, Christian authors began harkening back to this association by fashioning Purgatory as God's great prison.⁷

This long chapter in the literary history of the prison ended in the century that followed the so-called birth of Purgatory. For, if the shift from the prison as place to the prison as metaphor is evident by Late Antiquity, then by the late thirteenth century the institution had come full circle as the creation of municipal prisons reacquainted contemporaries with a palpable experience. No longer were inmates and prisons abstract terms from a mythologized past, but an immediate, daily presence. After centuries during which incarceration served mostly as a trope for martyrdom and ascetic discipline, how did contemporary authors respond to this old-new institution, whose inmates were no longer innocent victims or aspiring holy men, but rather debtors and, increasingly, convicted criminals? In truth, most of them left prisons outside the urban landscape. The few who *did* decide to treat prisons as subjects are the focus of this paper.⁸

Late-medieval literary and artistic treatments of prisons were few but diverse, especially compared with the streamlined approach of earlier periods. To be sure, some still employed a familiar carceral discourse, in which the prison was construed as the locus of spiritual purgation and the inmate as an upwardly mobile individual, poised to capture heaven. Yet it was becoming increasingly common, in and beyond Italy, to find authors who approached urban prison spaces and the experience of incarceration in new ways. As the sections of this chapter underscore, these approaches fall into two main groups. The first shifted carceral language from purgatorial to infernal suffering. The second sought the

Joanna Summers, *Late-Medieval Prison Writing and the Politics of Autobiography* (Oxford, 2004); and Linne R. Mooney and Mary-Jo Arn (eds), *The Kingis Quair and Other Prison Poems* (Kalamazoo, Mich., 2005), pp. 1–12. Numerous works of prison poetry survive from Muslim Spain, where they operated as a petitionary device as well as an exercise in self-consolation. See Rasha 'Abdallāh al-Khaṭīb, *Tajriba al-Sijn fī al-Shi'r al-Andalusī* (Abu Dhabi, 1999).

⁶ Gregorio Penco, 'Monasterium – Carcer', *Studia Monastica*, 8 (1966): 133–43; Jean Leclercq, 'Le cloître est-il une prison?', *Revue d'ascétique et de mystique*, 47 (1971): 407–20; Joan M. Ferrante, 'Images of the Cloister – Haven or Prison', *Mediaevalia*, 12 (1989 for 1986): 57–66.

⁷ Jacques Le Goff, *The Birth of Purgatory*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago, 1984), pp. 130–234. On the use of monasteries as prisons for both ecclesiastics and laymen, see G. Geltner, 'Detrusio: Penal Cloistering in the Middle Ages', *Revue bénédictine*, 118 (2008): 89–108.

⁸ So far as I know, the texts discussed in this essay comprise the full dossier of published Italian prison-related literature that predates 1500. The notes offer a full coverage of parallel materials for England and Spain.

abandonment of netherworldly imagery altogether in descriptions of prisons. Thus the first group appropriated a traditional discourse to fit new audiences and expectations, while the second chose its complete rejection under similar circumstances. Jointly, they point to a fragmentation of a traditional carceral conceptualization.

That alternative interpretations of incarceration begin to emerge in the late thirteenth century is no accident. By then, prisons had become essential cogs in the machinery of justice throughout and beyond Italy. *Literati*, like less articulate members of society, were responding to the appearance of the prison in the urban landscape as a physical, penal, and administrative space, with its implicit and explicit claims over the ordering of daily life. This is not to argue that prisons were construed solely in terms of contemporary politics and urban morphology. Indeed, many of the texts considered below are deeply engaged in broader literary, epistemological, and religious-metaphysical debates about the meaning and place of the prison. Yet the relative neglect of these texts as critiques of urban order and contemporary penal politics requires redress.

INFERNALIZING THE PRISON

In a vision composed around 1318 by the minor Parmese author Giovanni da Nono, an angel takes Egidius, the legendary king and founder of Padua, on a virtual tour of the city's 'future' landscape. No city will be 'better and nobler, far and wide', he promised the king, celebrating Padua's fourteenth-century glory: gated walls, bustling markets, and magnificent *palazzi*. Passing through the podestà's palace, the guide paused to indicate with pride 'a terrible, fetid place, called Basta, where men will be placed who owe money to others, and almost all the criminals'. It was not the only prison space Padua could boast:

One of the buildings to the West will be called the New Prison, and it will be very strong. This buildings will be divided into three parts. The first will contain men who owe money to others or to the commune of Padua for fines or taxes. And this part can be likened to Limbo. In the second will be those who have committed crimes, and this can be equated to Purgatory. In the third will be placed homicides, thieves, plunderers, and other criminals, after their offences are made known to the Podestà. And this third, dark part, where no light will ever penetrate, you could truly compare to Hell.⁹

⁹ 'Unum palaciorum, quod est occidentem versus, Novus Carcer dicetur, qui fortissimus erit. Hoc palacium in tres dividetur partes. In prima parte ponentur homines, qui penes alios erunt obligati pecunia, aut qui Communi Padue erunt obligati pro aliquibus dampnis pecuniariis, aut propter ipsius redditus. Et hec pars Lymbo poterit assimilari. In secunda parte ponentur hii qui aliqua facient maleficia et hec pars Purgatorio poterit equiparari. In tertia parte ponentur homicide latrones denredatores et ceteri malefactores. nostauam notestati de illorum delictis erit

The passage combines several interpretations of the prison as place. By specifically connecting Padua's New Prison and the afterlife, the author describes distinct regimes for debtors, minor offenders, and major criminals. The accuracy of the account is a given irrelevancy, for da Nono was writing in a particular genre, namely the *Laudes civitatum*.¹⁰ Thus, he had no qualms about appropriating the vocabulary of divine justice to celebrate a regime's achievements, whether or not it fit nicely with penal realities. Since the justness of divine retribution was unequivocal, any secular system that sought to imitate it had to be praiseworthy. Accordingly, in this idealized account the municipal prison embodies Paduan justice in a way that emphasises its attributes as a perfect civic model.

The breadth of netherworldly allusions in da Nono's vision offers a unique vantage point for examining other descriptions of medieval urban prisons, which tended to limit themselves to one 'department' of the afterlife. For instance, given the longstanding association of incarceration and purgation, Purgatory, which by the thirteenth century had achieved a coherent logic and firm doctrinal standing, served as an obvious model for meting out earthly justice, and features in other prison-related poetry. Lamenting his fate in the Sienese prison, the burlesque poet Burchiello (1404–49) sought to kindle his readers' pity, so they 'may offer prayers to the almighty Creator / To restore our freedom soon'.¹¹ And in a letter from 1395 to a potential benefactor, a veteran inmate in Florence described himself as 'living in misery, perhaps purging the sin of many'.¹²

Both Burchiello's ironic allusion to the officials as interventionist gods and the Florentine inmate's genuine plea for support relied on the notion that release depends above all on other men's actions, not God's. Most importantly, in both cases the referenced model of the social economy was clearly that of Purgatory. As one fourteenth-century author, Paolo da Certaldo, put it:

Imagine that you are in prison, abandoned by relatives and friends, with no one ever coming to see you; and someone whom you do not know comes to visit you, and takes you out of prison. What would you make of it? It is the

manifestum. Et hanc terciam partem tenebrosam, in qua nulla lux unquam apparebit, Inferno vere poteris assimilare', Giovanni Fabris, 'La Cronaca di Giovanni da Nono', *Bollettino del Museo Civico di Padova*, n.s., 10 (1932): 1–33 at 12–13. Excerpted translation available in Trevor Dean (ed. and trans.), *The Towns of Italy in the Later Middle Ages* (Manchester, 2000), pp. 19–21.

¹⁰ See J.K. Hyde, 'Medieval Descriptions of Cities', *Bulletin of The John Rylands Library*, 48 (1966): 308–40; Gina Fasoli, 'La coscienza civica nelle "Laudes civitatum"', in *La coscienza cittadina nei comuni italiani del Duecento* (Todi, 1972), pp. 9–44.

¹¹ 'a porger prieghi al sommo Creatore / che nostra libertà tosto ci renda', Curzio Mazzi, *Il Burchiello. Saggio di studi sulla sua vita e sulla sua poesia* (Bologna, 1879), pp. 70–71.

¹² Ser Lapo Mazzei, *Lettere di un notaro a un mercante del secolo XIV con altre lettere e documenti*, ed. Cesare Guasti, 2 vols. (Florence, 1880), vol. 1, p. 345.

same concerning the abandoned souls [in Purgatory], and he who prays or has prayers said for them.¹³

The passage explains Purgatory's procedure in terms of the prison experience. By the same token, however, alluding to the afterlife offers a commentary on prison life: a prisoner who lacks external support, that is, whose outside contacts have failed him, is likely damned; conversely, if one can secure external aid, he might obtain interim relief and perhaps even regain his freedom.

As da Nono's text illustrates, interpretations of the prison also drew on infernal imagery, not only on Purgatory. The difference between the two realms cannot be overstated, as contemporaries were well aware, for neither intercession nor purgation was available to the residents of Hell. Thus, to liken a prison to Hell is to make a radically different statement about the nature and goals of incarceration. Yet it is precisely such statements which first appear in this period. Place-names testify to this budding approach: as in Padua, so in Verona, one of the prison wards was called 'the Inferno'; the Flint Tower, at the Tower of London, was fondly nicknamed 'Lytle Hell'; and by 1310 'Helle' was also the name of the king's debtors' prison at Westminster.¹⁴ In the most comprehensive medieval literary treatment of the netherworld, Dante's *Comedy*, Virgil describes Hell as a 'dark prison' (*carcere cieco*; *Purgatorio* XXII.103); and Cato, accosting Dante and Virgil in Purgatory, wonders,

Who are you, who have fled
The eternal prison against the dark stream?
Who guided you, who was your lantern,
Leaving the deep night
Which always darkens the infernal valley?¹⁵

Finally, infernal imagery virtually dominates Zuanni Manenti's Dantesque journey through the Venetian justice system, the *Specchio de la Giustitia* (1541).

¹³ 'Pensa, se to fossi in pregione e fossi abbandonato da parenti e amici e mai a te non venisse persona, e uno che ti non sapessi chi e'si fosse ti venisse a vicitare e traesseti di pregione, quello che te ne parebbe: così è de l'anime abbandonate, chi priega o fa pregare per loro', *Libro di buoni costumi*, ed. Alfredo Schiaffini (Florence, 1945), pp. 101–2.

¹⁴ Rodolfo Laschi, 'Pene e carceri nella storia di Verona', *Atti del Reale Istituto Veneto di Scienze, lettere ed arti*, 64 (1904–5): 13–93 at 46; Richard Davey, *The Tower of London* (London, 1910), p. 40; Margaret Hastings, *The Court of Common Pleas in Fifteenth Century England* (Ithaca, 1947), pp. 143–44.

¹⁵ 'Chi siete voi che contro al cieco fiume / fuggita avete la pregione etterna?...Chi v'ha guidati, o che vi fu lucerna, / uscendo fuor de la profonda notte / che sempre nera fa la valle inferna?', *Purgatorio*, I. 40–42. Translation adapted from *Purgatorio*, trans. Jean Hollander and Robert Hollander (New York, 2003).

Indeed, a third of this obscure poem is dedicated to an exploration of local prisons, under the title '*Inferno del mondo*'. It begins:

I am going to the dark prisons
To see the unhappy malefactors
Who suffer harsh pains for their vices.
I am going to the place of fetors,
Among the tormented, and the foul Inferno,
Where men suffer pains and great tortures.¹⁶

Manenti's propaganda and that of da Nono's, with which we began this section, share basic goals and themes. For in Venice, too, the cells are dark, gloomy, foul, and filled with tormented voices and bitter weeping. There is likewise a variety of inmates: debtors and thieves, but also violent criminals. Yet the Venetian prison's internal disorganization discloses no criminal or even social hierarchy. Perhaps, unlike Dante, Manenti believed in an egalitarian Hell.

These examples illustrate a new association between Hell and the prison, a link that survived well into our times. Throughout the past centuries prison reformers, scholars, journalists, and public intellectuals have made ample use of infernal allusions when criticizing modern facilities especially by recourse to their (imagined) medieval counterparts. Yet what many of these observers share is the misunderstanding that, while medieval prisons were wont to be earthly Hells, their successors are earthly Purgatories. That is, they assume that the prison's trajectory runs from gruesome dungeons to enlightened, rehabilitative institutions; any counter-example only serves to underscore a present-day aberration.¹⁷ Historians, sociologists, penologists, and others have shown this to be a false trajectory. The relevant point here is that equating the prison with Hell in the Middle Ages (and later) was a significant *departure* from a traditional carceral discourse, which for centuries focused on prisons as places of earthly purgation.

¹⁶ 'Io me ne vo, nè le Pregion oscure / Per veder gli'nfelici Malfattori / Che per lor vitii portan pene dure. / Io me ne vo in loco de feteri / Tra molti tormentati, et crudo Inferno / Nel cui patiscono pen'è [sic] gran martori. / Tanto amar, che poco piu è l'eterno; / E'tal, che ne l'intrar con la mia scorta / Gli dissi, omei, che luce non discerno', Zuane [=Giovanni] Manenti, *Opera nuova in versi volgare, intitulata specchio de la giustizia* (Venice, 1541), unnumbered folios.

¹⁷ See Brian Bailey, *Hellholes. An Account of History's Most Notorious Prisons* (London, 1995), p. 1; George Ives, *A History of Penal Methods. Criminals, Witches, Lunatics* (London, 1914), pp. 171-72; Gideon Sjoberg, *The Preindustrial City: Past and Present* (Glencoe, Ill., 1960), p. 248; Hans Toch, *Living in Prison. The Ecology of Survival* (New York, 1977), p. 8; Edward Zamble and Frank J. Porporino, *Coping, Behavior and Adaptation in Prison Inmates* (New York, 1988), p. 21.

SECULARIZING THE PRISON

While references to Hell, Purgatory, or both were common in medieval descriptions of prisons, some authors chose to break from this tradition altogether. Indeed, several extant texts either avoid referring to the hereafter or otherwise mock the alleged spiritual benefits or pains of incarceration. 'Having turned it round and round / In my mind', declared the Florentine poet Dino di Tura, 'I have conclusively concluded, / That the prison is the best place in the world'. The entertaining satire that follows develops this "utopian" view:

In August one lives here like a prince,
For it is never cold in that season,
Since the wind from the North keeps away:
It never rains late, or, for that matter, on time,
[Not even] if you remain for a thousand weeks;
If you wish to see it, you still have time:
If you hunger, there is bread for a lifetime;
Thirsty? Here there is drink;
If one enters today and dies, he will be out tomorrow.¹⁸

Di Tura was actually incarcerated in 1343, an occasion which may have led to the poem's composition. It reports the embezzlement of alms by the warden and the prison's oppressive conditions: cold, hunger, darkness, and general neglect. The suffering it portrays, however, bears no relation to penance, nor is it couched in infernal or purgatorial terms. Di Tura's prison, in short, appears to be a very worldly place, with an attendant 'brotherly love' among the inmates:

How is it going? I ask a chained man.
He responds: You should be here!
That is, life seemed good to him.
He wished us – or better yet, me – to have
That great joy;
He would rather have placed me in his shoes.¹⁹

¹⁸ 'Avendo io girato a tondo a tondo / Col cervello, ho conchiuso in conclusione, / Che in le prigionie è il meglio star del Mondo'; 'Ci è uno star da Principi l' Agosto, / Perchè non ci è mai freddo di quel tempo, / Giacchè la tramontana sta discosto: / Non ci piove giammai tardi, o per tempo, / Se voi ci steste mille settimane; / Se 'l volete veder, voi siete a tempo: / Se avete fame, a vita si dà il pane; / Se avete sete, quì si dà da bere; / Se un c'entra oggi, e ci muor, n' esce domane', Domenico M. Manni, *Le veglie piacevoli*, 2nd ed., 8 vols. (Florence, 1815–16), vol. 2, pp. 38–54.

¹⁹ 'Come va? dissi a un, ch' era in catene. / Esso rispose: così steste voi! / Cioè, che gli pareva di star bene. / Voleva far provare ancor a noi, / O dirò meglio, a me, quel gran contento, / E fin messo m' avria ne' piedi suoi', Ibid.

From a broader regional perspective, di Tura's approach was new but not unique. In his purportedly autobiographical *Complaint of a Prisoner in the Fleet*, penned in 1363, George Ashby focuses on the material and psychological deprivations of his captivity, a punishment inflicted upon him 'geynst ryght and reason'. In contrast to many other poems constituting the so-called *Consolatio* genre in medieval poetry, Ashby either fails or is unwilling to dislodge himself from a physical and legal situation and embark on a cleansing spiritual, psychological, or even intellectual journey. And although he alludes to punishment generally as a positive lesson in the pilgrimage of life, he nonetheless draws some harsh conclusions about the prison itself. Ashby's literary mode differs widely from that of di Tura, but the vision of prison is rather similar:

Pryson propurly ys a sepulture
Of lyvyng men with strong lokkes thereon,
Fortyfyed without any rupture,
Of synners a gret castigacion,
Of feythfull frened a probacion,
Of fre libreté a sharp abstinence,
Lackyng volunté for theyre dew penaunce.²⁰

The language is of non-eschatological death, stressing physical suffering, social isolation, and legal deprivation – all without any purgatorial benefits. There is likewise no likening of the prison to an earthly inferno. Here too, the netherworld is absent even from the poem's background.

But to return to satire: a later author, Francesco Berni (1497/8–1535), composed a poem *In Praise of Debt*, whose main subject was the Florentine prison of Le Stinche. It begins:

O, glorious Stinche of Florence;
Celestial place, divine place,
Worthy of a hundred thousand reverences...
There is nothing better than staying behind a wall,
Comfortably at rest, sleeping with eyes shut,
Safe in body and soul.²¹

Referring to the prison's 'divine' character accentuates the author's dystopian view of it, as does his assertion of comfort and tranquility. Berni also moves freely between irony and sarcasm when describing the inmates' conditions:

²⁰ Mooney and Arn (eds), *The Kingis Quair*, p. 163 (vv. 344–50).

²¹ 'O gloriose Stinche di Firenze; / Luogo celestial, luogo divino, / Degno di centomila riverenze...Non sò piu bel che star drento à un muro / Quietò agiatò, dormendo à chiusi occhi, / Et del corpo et dell' anima sicuro', *Il primo libro del l'opere Burlesche di M. Francesco Berni* (Florence, 1552), fols. 52r–53r.

You hold men there like hens in a coop;
 You give them their dishes in public,
 Just as is done with lions.
 Being there, one finally reaches
 That state which Aristotle described:
 Sensation ceases, and only the mind works.²²

These verses juxtapose the inmates' beastly conditions with the state of supreme cognition that allegedly follows from them. No wonder that the prisoners' main industry, according to Berni, consisted of preparing escapes. The image of inmates labouring to run away offers not only a literal undermining of the institution, but also exposes the social conundrum of prison life: prisoners join forces only in order to disperse. Berni's repeated nods to the real pains of imprisonment, much like di Tura's and Ashby's, are devoid of penitential content or pious netherworldly allusions.

A famous parallel to Berni's work was composed by Jacopone da Todi, a renegade Franciscan and a celebrated vernacular poet of the late thirteenth century. Strictly speaking, Jacopone's lamentations about his own incarceration fall outside the scope of this essay, since he was a friar, and as such was jailed in a traditional episcopal or monastic prison, not a new municipal one, which has been our focus so far. Still, it is perhaps even more telling that a description of prison life by a member of the church consciously distances itself from the ascetic imaginary of the prison. Jacopone, like other contemporary and later authors, does not describe the experience of incarceration as a purgatorial, penitential, or even spiritual exercise. In his view, squalor is squalor and pain is pain. They lead nowhere:

My prison, underground, opens on a latrine
 Whose odour is not quite the fragrance of musk.
 No one is allowed to speak to me, except for one attendant,
 And he has to report every word that I utter.
 I am fettered like a falcon,
 And my chains clank as I move about –
 The attendant outside my lodgings
 Can hear me practicing my new dance steps.
 When I'm lying down, if I turn over
 My legs get all tangled up in the chains.
 There's a basket dangling from the wall,
 High enough to be beyond the reach of rats;
 It holds, I suppose, five pieces of bread,

²² 'Voi gli tenete in stia come i capponi; / Mandate il piatto lor pubblicamente, / Non altrimenti che si fà à lioni. / Com'uno è quivi, è giunto finalmente / A quello stato ch' Aristotil pose, / Che'l senso cessa, e sol opira la mente', Ibid., fol. 53r.

Bread left over from the day before,
 With an onion to add a little flavour.
 Now there's a fine pack for a hobo!..
 They bring some soup and dump it into a pail,
 And when they lower it down to me
 I drink and wet my lungs,
 After slicing enough bread to satisfy a baby pig.
 How's that for an ascetic, a new Saint Hilarion?²³

As in the previous works surveyed in this section, here too the author frames prison life in very worldly terms by focusing on the experience of incarceration. Yet in this case the verses are consciously, rather than implicitly, juxtaposed with a traditional discourse through an ingenious final stroke that exposes the latter's shortcomings for a treatment of present realities. Reduced to a beastly state, the poet can only '[w]allow, wallow in this pigsty, while they fatten you up – / Come Christmas, there'll not be enough lard on me to cut off a slice!' Once again, the ascetic, penitential perception of incarceration is undermined by its experience.

Prison poetry tends to employ and speak through an inmate persona, a rather congenial strategy to convey the predicament of incarceration. In contrast to Ashby, however, the Italian poets cited above adopted a satirical rather than tragic or pathetic voice, and this choice may be linked to the discarding of netherworldly imagery. It is plausible, for instance, that the authors feared that by alluding to the hereafter with pathos they would temper their critique of the prison's administration and, by extension, of the local regime. After all, it is precisely by likening the inmates' state to the tormented souls in Purgatory, or to those of the damned in Hell, that both da Nono and Manenti sought to bolster their cities' justice systems. By the same token, confirming that the magistrates are 'giving them Hell,' would undermine the inmate-narrator's own critique. Thus, by employing irony, di Tura, Berni, and even da Todi drew away from the tragic mode and infernal imagery characteristic of prison descriptions in civic propaganda, although theirs was not an exclusive strategy, as Ashby's lament attests.²⁴

²³ Jacopone da Todi, *Laude* 55, trans. Serge and Elizabeth Hughes (London, 1982), pp. 174–77. And see Ronald Herzman and Weston Kennison, 'Jacopone da Todi: The Aesthetics of Imprisonment', *Franziskanische Studien*, 72 (1990): 248–56.

²⁴ According to al-Khaṭīb, *Tajriba al-Sijn*, pp. 122–29, Andalusian prison poets strategically stress the unbearable state of their captivity in order to promote their release, humbling themselves before the imprisoning ruler, magistrate, and at times even the jailer himself. Exceptional were authors such as Abū 'Abdullāh Muḥammad ibn Rashīq al-Qal'i, who employed sarcasm in the face of deprivation: 'I've got no new worries to tell you about / The more time torments me, the happier I am. / Do you think I'd be aiding

There were, however, other motivations for separating the prison from the afterlife, such as promoting charity. An emphasis on alleviating human suffering, rather than justifying it in terms of divine justice, is evident in a famous description of late medieval prison life, penned by the Swiss Dominican Felix Fabri. Passing through Venice en route to the Holy Land in 1484, he observed that:

[T]he malefactors' prisons, located under the palace's promenade, have a view of the public square, illuminated by open windows which are blocked by iron bars. Through these windows the inmates can look out, stretch their hands and converse with the nearby crowd. And if they are poor, they can ask for alms from passersby. In one prison I saw more than forty poor inmates walking around, crying for mercy. In another I saw imprisoned artisans seated at their workbenches and earning salaries despite their condition. In another cell I saw wealthy merchants playing dice and chess, their women standing outside the gates with their servants and slaves, talking to their husbands. In one private cell I saw a certain old Jew, incarcerated for debt, who had hanged himself

....²⁵

Fabri's view of the Venetian prisons differs widely from the accounts we have encountered so far in this section. Unlike Manenti's later description of the very same compound, Fabri's depicts the inmates as neatly classified into suitable wards. Unlike in da Nono's portrayal of the Paduan prison, the Venetian culprits are grouped according to their socio-economic status, not the gravity of their offenses. And unlike di Tura, Ashby, and Berni, Fabri describes conditions that are quite tolerable – all the more reason to avoid allusions to Hell or Purgatory, a strategy which Fabri maintains even later when decrying the dreadful state of prisons in his native land. Given that the netherworld was part of contemporaries'

eternity / By being grieved at what it does to hurt me? / Adversaries come, then they go away; / Once the pains vanish, it's as if I hadn't been hurt at all', p. 122.

²⁵ *'Carceres enim reorum sub deambulatorio palatii sunt contra publicam plateam respectum habentes, patentibus fenestris lucidi, quae ferreis cancellis sunt clausae, per quas captivi respicere possunt et manus extendere et cum astantibus colloquium habere, et si sunt pauperes, eleemosynam a transeuntibus petere possunt. Vidi in uno carcere ultra XL pauperes transeuntes inclamantes pro misericordia. In alio vidi sedentes machanicos captivos, qui manibus nihilo minus laborabant in suis artibus et denarios lucrabantur. In alio carcere vidi divites negotiatores inclusos, qui simul ludebant in alea et scacho, et domicellae uxores eorum cum ancillis et servis ante cancellos stabant colloquentes eis. In alio singulari inclusorio vidi Judaeum quendam senem, captivum ratione debitorum, qui se ipsum in custodia strangulavit...[Custodes] multos etiam captivos cum industria minus caute custodiunt et aufugiendi opportunitatem tribuunt, praesertim cum partem adversam crudeliorem justo sentiunt...Verum, qui pro enormibus excessibus, qui morte plectendi sunt, in carceribus detinentur arctioribus, tolerabilibus tamen', Fratrisc Felicis Fabri Evagatorium in Terrae Sanctae, Arabiae et Egypti Peregrinationem, ed. Cunradus Dietericus Hassler, 3 vols (Stuttgart, 1843–49), vol. 2, pp. 409–10.*

horizons of expectations, Fabri's choice of keeping to a civic, secular register, was probably conscious, and shaped by his intended audience.²⁶ As a religious reformer, Fabri focused on the Venetians' piety as a way to kindle charity among his flock. For him, the humane treatment of prisoners was a worthy goal, a goal that perhaps warranted embellishment.

To recap, from the late thirteenth century on a diversity of interpretations came to characterize literary treatments of the urban prison and the experience of incarceration. Some authors contemplated the notion that inmate suffering was a cleansing experience, and in this sense the ancient link between incarceration and purgation persisted. However, as various authors stressed by adopting a view of prisons as earthly infernos, there was no consensus over the purgatorial qualities of imprisonment. Still others denied the spiritual value of prison pains altogether, an attitude found beyond convicted culprits (or their literary personae), as Felix Fabri's narrative suggests. But while Fabri saw in describing a benevolent prison regime an educational opportunity, poets such as di Tura, Ashby, and Berni took a more cynical view of prison life: to them, incarceration was not a process inspired by ascetic practices, but simply one that represented an extension of civic society. The prison experience intentionally signified nothing beyond the world: if the city could not be couched in terms of an earthly Paradise, neither could the local prison exemplify an earthly Purgatory or Hell.

These diverse perspectives coexisted, at times rather closely. Consider the following prison images, both fourteenth-century works executed by Giusto de Menabuoi in the Chapel of SS. Philip and James in the Paduan basilica of Il Santo.²⁷ The first depicts Saint James the Great freeing 'an unjustly imprisoned merchant' (fig. 12.1).²⁸ The prison tower, in this case the locus of a miracle, is prominent, and its design based on the private aristocratic edifices in which a family's enemies or debtors could be held captive prior to the communes' rise. Note how the liberating saint tilts the entire structure, an action gesturing equally toward the building's formidability and its weakness in the face of divine

²⁶ See Kathryn Beebe, 'Felix Fabri and his Audiences: The Pilgrimage Writings of a Dominican Preacher in Late-Medieval Germany' (Unpublished D.Phil. thesis, Oxford University, 2007), especially chapter three.

²⁷ A recent interpretation of the art and architecture of Il Santo is Louise Bourdua, *The Franciscans and Art Patronage in Late Medieval Italy* (Cambridge, 2004), pp. 89–147.

²⁸ On jail-breaking saints, see František Graus, 'Die Gewalt bei den Anfängen des Feudalismus und die 'Gefangenenbefreiungen' der merowingischen Hagiographie', *Jahrbuch für Wirtschaftsgeschichte*, 1 (1961): 61–156; and František Graus, *Volk, Herrscher und Heiliger im Reich der Merowinger. Studien zur Hagiographie der Merowingerzeit* (Prague, 1965). Cf. Edward James, "'Beati pacifici': Bishops and the Law", in John Bossy (ed.), *Disputes and Settlements. Law and Human Relations in the West*, (Cambridge, 1983), pp. 34–36 and 41–43; and Annette Wiesheu, 'Bischof und Gefängnis. Zur Interpretation der Kerkerbefreiungswunder in der merowingischen Hagiographie', *Historisches Zeitschrift*, 121 (2001): 1–23.

intervention. Present interpretations of medieval jail-breaking hagiography vary greatly, yet there is little doubt that it was incarceration itself and the edifice in which it took place that were being maligned. Regardless of its target, this critique stemmed from a long tradition of Christian martyrology, architecturally couched in terms of later communal propaganda.

The second prison appears directly across the very same chapel. It features in a cityscape of Padua (fig. 12.2), which forms part of the same pictorial cycle as the first image, celebrating the life of the Blessed Luca Belludi, a *socius* of the Franciscan Saint Antony (d. 1231; canonized 1232) and a focal point of a local cult. Antony, the cathedral's titular saint, shows the city – already in its fourteenth-century form – to Luca in a vision. The illuminated box in the figure below encloses the city's prison tucked behind the Palazzo della Ragione, Padua's official centre of government. Half-obsured due to the painting's perspective, the local prison was a nearly unique, purpose-built edifice. And like its Florentine counterpart, Le Stinche (founded around 1300), it would feature in the city's graphic depictions and literary descriptions for centuries to come.²⁹ In other words, unlike the site of divine justice served by the first prison, this (historical) structure is woven into the city's administrative and physical fabric. It is a constituent of Padua's beauty and perfection as an ensemble, not a place to be purposely obscured. Thus juxtaposed, literally across a tall side-chapel, the two images mark the distance travelled by the prison in the medieval imaginary, from a "sweetly-inverted" locus of holiness, to the site of urban civic justice.

These frescos, along with the literary treatments discussed above, illustrate that, whatever their disposition, medieval observers visualized and described contemporary prisons in ways that harkened back to early Christian imaginaries. At the same time, and notwithstanding their variety, the extant works suggest that municipal prisons, while surely not 'the best place in the world', were also not places of shame, 'black flowers of civilization' (to use Nathaniel Hawthorne's phrase)³⁰ to be eradicated or simply camouflaged as downtown hotels or office buildings.³¹ Rather, prisons became another public site for celebrating or protesting against a regime, for promoting charity, and for negotiating or challenging social order. True, prison descriptions were few and far between – a fact partially responsible for modern scholars' ignorance about the degree to which prisons were part of the late-medieval urban experience. Yet the institution's nearly total disappearance from modern presentations of the medieval urban panorama perhaps reveals more about present-day aspirations for sterilized cities than about medieval urban imaginaries and experiences.

²⁹ See Angelo Portenari, *Della Felicità di Padova* (Padua, 1623), pp. 102–3.

³⁰ Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* (New York, 1992 [1906]), p. 50.

³¹ Mike Davis, *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future of Los Angeles* (New York, 1992), pp. 253–7.

Fig. 12.1 Saint James the Great freeing 'an unjustly imprisoned merchant', Giusto de Menabuoi, Chapel of SS. Philip and James, Il Santo, Padua (photo: author)

Fig. 12.2 Cityscape of Padua, Giusto de Menabuoi, Chapel of SS. Philip and James, Il Santo, Padua. The depiction of the prison is in the darkened rectangle. (photo: author)