

Twenty-four Books from the Royal Library selected by Charles Lock, Professor of English Literature, University of Copenhagen

It's a cliché to associate literature with freedom. Here in Copenhagen Hamlet's antic provocation, 'Denmark's a prison', resonates quietly as the bass-note of my diurnal doings, not uncheerfully chiming against my own name. Library buildings variously lead me to think of warehouses, lighthouses, cathedrals, palaces, prisons: strange prisons whose every inmate is a means of escape. So in selecting twenty-four titles I make a theme of imprisonment. I ignore those obviously within my subject; the following are books that (with a few exceptions), I might seldom consult in the course of my professorial duties, but which I would not think of being without.

Imprisoned within the Body

In [Shakespeare's *Richard II*](#) (Act II, Scene i) John of Gaunt reassures himself that his words, those of a dying man, will carry weight with the King:

O, but they say the tongues of dying men
Enforce attention like deep harmony:
Where words are scarce, they are seldom spent in vain,
For they breathe truth that breathe their words in pain.

How much more weighty must be the words written by one suffering from a wasting sickness that leaves the writer without muscles to hold a pen. [Jean-Dominique Bauby's *The Diving-Bell and the Butterfly* \(*Le Scaphandre et le Papillon*: 1997\)](#) itself marks a triumphant release from 'locked-in syndrome'. We cannot know whether a more brilliant mind has suffered bodily imprisonment than that of [Stephen Hawking, but *A Brief History of Time*](#) will long endure as evidence of brilliance making its escape. (By contrast, few now read [Christy Brown's *My Left Foot*](#) (1954) though it's a rare title that thus declares the means by which the book was written.) In recent years we have witnessed the lectures of Tony Judt (1948-2010), paralysed from the neck down by Lou Gehrig's disease [Ill Fares the Land](#) (2010) gathers some of those lectures in a polemic of exceptional force, exceptional both for the pained words and the physiological and mechanical devisings of their utterance. (Various lectures and interviews with Tony Judt can be seen on YouTube.)

Franz Rosenzweig (1886-1929) published in 1921 [Der Stern der Erlösung](#), a philosophical meditation of ever unfathomed riches. By the end of 1922 his paralysis was such that he had lost the ability to write, and yet he continued to do so for the remaining seven years of his life. The General Electric Company had by 1923 devised a typewriter which required minimal muscular effort to depress the keys: perhaps about as much as on a keyboard, or a little more than the mere touch required to operate a screenboard. At first Rosenzweig was able to operate the machine by himself, but later on he had to point out the characters with his left hand, which was supported in a sling, while his head had to be held steady in an iron clamp such as was used for portraits in early photography. Under these conditions he continued to write, and to revise [The Star of Redemption](#) for its second edition, published posthumously in 1930.

Numerous writers have been blind, and blindness has traditionally been thought conducive to the imagination, as with Homer; there is nothing conjectural about the blindness of Milton, whose *Paradise Lost* was set down by dictation. A book actually written by a blind person is rare, and few as lengthy and scholarly as those by W. H. Prescott (1796-1859). His most famous works, [The History of the Conquest of Mexico \(1843\)](#) and [The History of the Conquest of Peru \(1847\)](#) fill some twelve hundred closely printed pages in the Modern Library volume. On p. 729 Prescott explains, in the preface to the *Conquest of Peru*, how he wrote: on a sheet of paper held in a shallow box across which strings were stretched to guide the hand along the writing line. This was an adaptation of the 'noctograph' for 'night-writing', patented in 1806, that he had purchased in London c. 1820. James Holman (1785-1857), 'The Blind Traveller', and author by noctograph, was a contemporary; the international acclaim for Jason Roberts' biography, *A Sense of the World: How a blind man became history's greatest traveler* (2006), has brought Holman back to our awareness. Prescott remains a neglected figure, though few who know his work would dispute his status as the most important historian in the English language since Edward Gibbon. (*The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776-89) remains famous, though mostly as the title of a book that very few have read.)

To be both blind and deaf, as was Helen Keller from the age of two, and yet to learn to write is for the able-bodied and amply-sensed a matter of perpetual bewildering. *The Story of My Life* (1903) will always have precedence in the order of books written against the physiological odds, as Helen Keller and her teacher Anne Sullivan should always remain in the forefront of our wonder.

A most moving book written recently from within an uncooperating body is the final work of the most challenging English novelist of the past fifty years, Christine Brooke-Rose (1923-2012). [Life, End of](#) was published in 2006 and describes, vividly, mortifyingly, the pain of writing in advanced old age, and of remembering with added pain the former ease of writing, as of living.

Imprisoned by the State

Of books written in prison there is no shortage. Boethius (476-526) composed the [Consolation of Philosophy](#) in prison, though the reason for his imprisonment remains obscure. This must rank as the exemplary instance of prison writing, itself offering an allegory of the power of thought to transcend all limitations.

Most books written in prison are the work of those we would call prisoners of conscience. One exception was Sir Thomas Malory (died 1471) who seems to have been imprisoned not as a political opponent (common enough in the fifteenth century) but as a criminal. There, during the 1460s, he compiled *Le Morte d'Arthur*, the single richest source of Arthurian legend in English. [The Works of Thomas Malory](#) edited in three volumes by Eugène Vinaver (1947, 2nd ed. 1972) is curious testament to the workings of guilt and punishment as well as a sublime achievement in narrative prose. This edition is also a fitting monument to one of the great philological scholars of the twentieth century, Eugène Vinaver (1899-1979), himself a Russian emigré.

The past century has occasioned much prison literature, some of a very high order. In the Soviet Union two must suffice: Nadezhda Mandelstam (1899-1980) tells in [Hope against Hope](#) (1970) of her struggle in the late 1920s and 1930s to protect her husband and to alleviate his sufferings after his arrest; it also unfolds the astonishing task she set herself – so as to leave no incriminating evidence on paper – of committing to memory what we now know as the poetry of Osip Mandelstam.

Andrey Sinyavsky (1925-97) was imprisoned in 1966 for what he had written under the name Abram Tertz. In 1973 his prison writings were published as [A Voice from the Chorus](#), a book that records not only the thoughts of an intellectual but those of his fellow-prisoners with very different voices and views.

From the Nazi period there are more prison writings than a life sentence of reading might encompass, so I will name only three: Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-45) whose [Letters and Papers from Prison](#) were published in English in 1953 and, as much as anything else, I suspect, contributed to the restoring of Germany's standing among the nations. [An Interrupted Life: The Diaries of Etty Hillesum 1941-43](#) is no less inspiring as a document of horrors to be endured without loss of what most matters. And from Denmark I include Kim Malthe-Bruun (1923-45), whose letters I have known since my schooldays though it was only recently that I was invited (no obligation) into Vestre Fængsel: [Heroic heart: The diary and letters of Kim Malthe-Bruun 1941-1945](#) (1966).

Also writing under the constraint of Nazism were four figures who are central to my life as a student of literature. Walter Benjamin (1892-1940) was never imprisoned, though he took his life on the Franco-Spanish border in 1940 rather than risk capture and its consequences. His essays exemplify the work of thinking not in spite of circumstances but through them; the pressures of the everyday are never denied, always reckoned with. The magnificent four-volume set of his [Selected Writings](#) (Harvard) is indispensable.

A friend of Benjamin's, Hannah Arendt (1906-75) left Germany in 1933; after being briefly interned in occupied France she escaped to the USA in 1941 to become a most profound and accomplished writer in English. Of all her books the one I would single out is [Men in Dark Times](#) (1968), an honouring of those among her contemporaries who may not have survived unscathed but did remain uncompromised; among others, there are essays on Benjamin, Karl Jaspers and Hermann Broch, and among them is an essay devoted to a woman: Isak Dinesen.

For the student of western literature two works of scholarship seem to tower over all others by virtue of the range and depth of their learning: [European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages](#) (1948) by Ernst Robert Curtius and [Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature](#) (1946) by Erich Auerbach. It remains a perennial tormenting enigma that the nation that could nurture scholarship such as theirs should also have yielded its bleakest antithesis. Curtius described the circumstances in which he wrote his book as 'inner exile'. Auerbach in an epilogue to *Mimesis* explains that it was written between 1942 and 1945 in Istanbul where he had very little access to the relevant scholarship, and that this might have been what enabled the book to be written -- though he does apologize for the absence of footnotes.

That disclaimer is matched in a work of untold consequence in modern philosophy, [De l'Existence à l'existent](#) (1947), by Emmanuel Levinas who writes in the preface that 'These studies begun before the war were continued and written down for the most part in captivity. The Stalag is invoked here not as a guarantee of profundity nor as a claim to indulgence, but as an explanation for the absence of any consideration of those philosophical works published, with so much impact, between 1940 and 1945.'

Out of similar circumstances emerged, improbably, the most searching and far-reaching of all etymological dictionaries of the English language, and -- unusually since the day of Dr Johnson -- one compiled by a single lexicographer, Ernest Klein (1899-1983). First published in 1967, the work had been undertaken in the belief that etymology could best demonstrate the interrelatedness of all languages and thus of all peoples: Ernest Klein, [A Comprehensive Etymological Dictionary of the English Language](#) (Elsevier 1967).

In the English-speaking world prisons are not unknown: Ken Saro-Wiwa (1941-95) was executed in a Nigerian gaol in 1995; while waiting, inside, he had written two books, *A Month and a Day: a Detention Diary* (1995) and a novel, [Lemona's Tale](#) (1996). In Canada Rudy Wiebe collaborated with an imprisoned member of the First Nations, Yvonne Johnson; together they wrote [Stolen Life: the Journey of a Cree Woman](#) (1998). These books are touchstones by which to register some of our present iniquities.

Imprisoned within history

Lastly, some books by those 'captives of time' who cannot but attend to 'the noise of time' (in Mandelstam's phrase), those who thought hard to reconcile their sense of subjectivity with their placement in time and space, history and location. Foremost among these is Saint Augustine whose [Confessions](#) (c. 400) must be the most perplexing and inexplicable book in the western tradition. He was the first to recognize his own condition as 'modern'; little wonder that Jean-François Lyotard, author of *La condition postmoderne* (1979) should have spent the rest of his days studying Augustine.

[The Education of Henry Adams](#) (1918) is a third-person autobiography that articulates the belatedness of the subject in our epoch. Adams (1838-1918) as few others brings out the implications of belatedness, for the subject, reflecting, scholarly, intellectual, all but overwhelmed by the duties imposed by history.

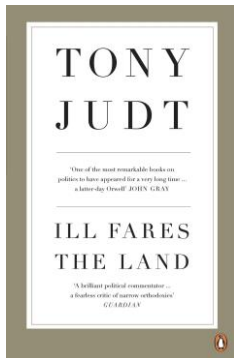
There's not much fiction among my twenty-four chosen works, so let me take as a most unjustly neglected novel of the past hundred years the twelve-volume fictional autobiography by Dorothy M. Richardson (1873-1957), [Pilgrimage](#) (1915-38). A sensitivity to the quotidian has seldom been so subtly elaborated.

And for poetry (its reading the work of all my days), I'll select, in the centenary of the beginning of the First World War, an epic written years later that more convincingly than any other tells of being in the trenches: David Jones, [In Parenthesis](#) (1937). The Royal Library is very fortunate to have a signed copy, bearing a dedication in the author's hand to his friend the Welsh poet Aneurin Talfan Davies (1909-80).

Finally: Kierkegaard, whom Shakespeare had absolved of any need to define the constrictions he felt in Denmark. I used to read Kierkegaard extensively, and intensively, much more so before I found myself sharing his cage. If there's one work that might be exemplary it would be 'The Seducer's Diary', though I'd choose to read it not as an excerpt but in its full and proper context, within [Either/Or](#) (1843), in the Hong translation of 1987. There's one constraining force from which even a book can hardly liberate us, and 'The Seducer's Diary' knows it well: 'Hide from myself, I cannot.'

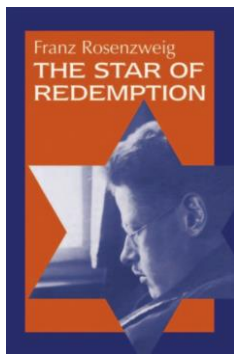
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Imprisoned within the Body



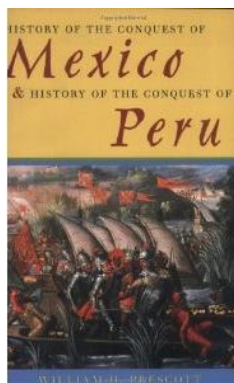
[Tony Judt, *Ill Fares the Land*](#)

(Various lectures and interviews with [Tony Judt](#) can be seen on [YouTube](#).)

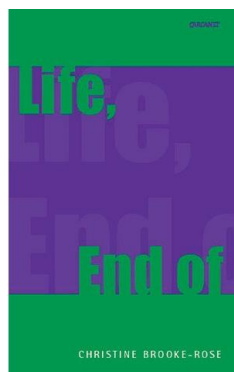


Franz Rosenzweig

[Der Stern der Erlösung / *The Star of Redemption*](#)

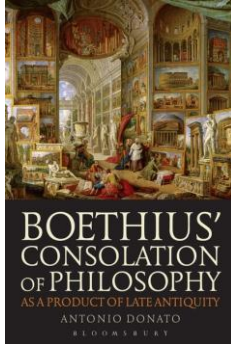


[W. H. Prescott, *The History of the Conquest of Mexico* \(1843\) and *The History of the Conquest of Peru* \(1847\)](#)

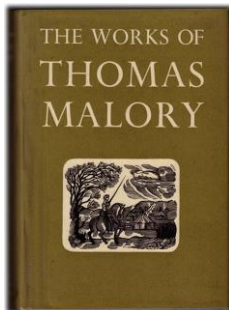


[Christine Brooke-Rose, *Life, End of*](#)

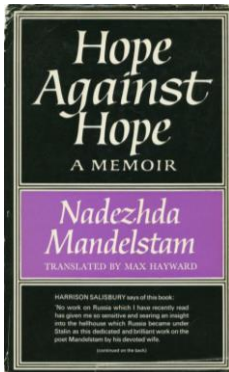
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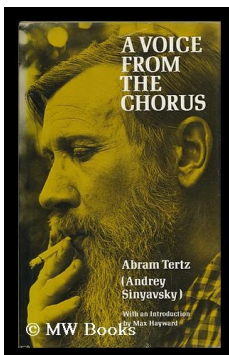
Boethius, *Consolation of Philosophy*



The Works of Thomas Malory edited by Eugene Vinaver

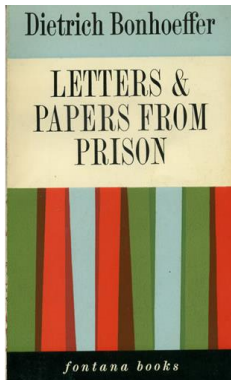


Nadezhda Mandelstam, *Hope against Hope*

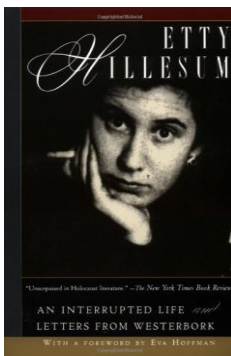


Andrey Sinyavsky, *A Voice from the Chorus*

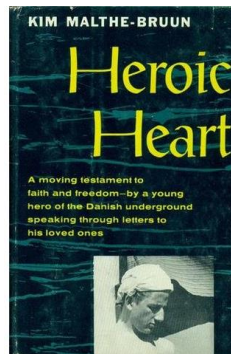
Imprisoned by the State, continued



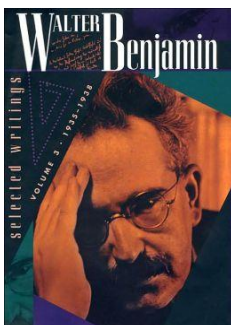
[Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*](#)



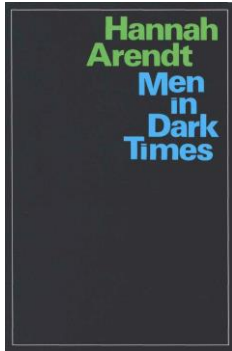
[*An Interrupted Life: The Diaries of Ety Hillesum 1941-43*](#)



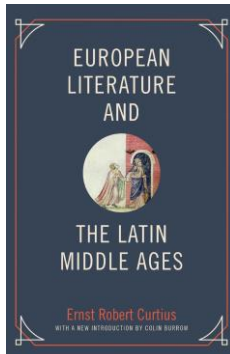
[*Heroic heart: The diary and letters of Kim Malthe-Bruun 1941-1945*](#)



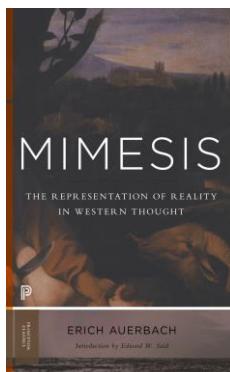
[Walter Benjamin *Selected Writings*](#)



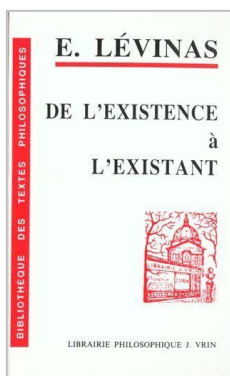
Hannah Arendt, *Men in Dark Times*



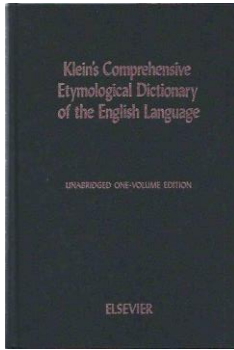
Ernst Robert Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*



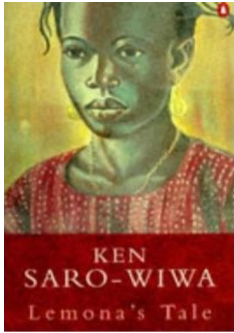
Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*



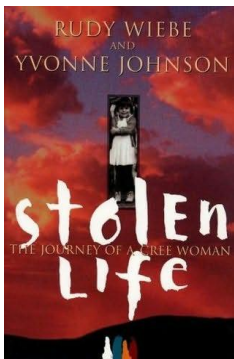
Emmanuel Levinas, *De l'Existence à l'existent*



[Ernest Klein, *A Comprehensive Etymological Dictionary of the English Language*](#)

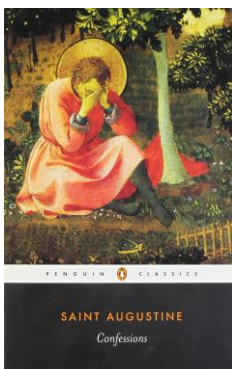


[Ken Saro-Wiwa, *Lemona's Tale*](#)

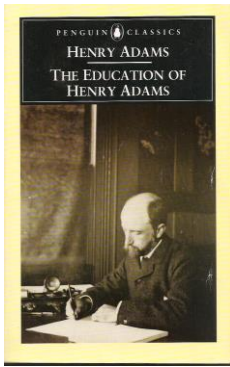


[Yvonne Johnson and Rudy Wiebe, *Stolen Life: the Journey of a Cree Woman*](#)

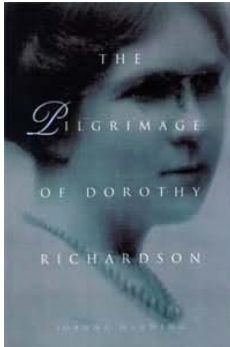
Imprisoned within history



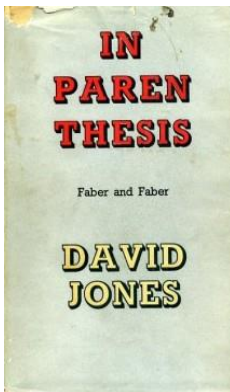
[Augustine, *Confessions*](#)



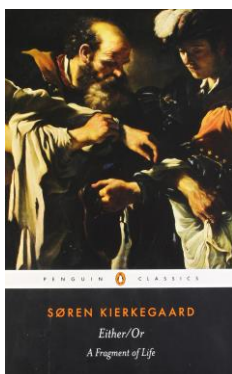
[Henry Adams, *The Education of Henry Adams*](#)



[Dorothy M. Richardson, *Pilgrimage*](#)



[David Jones, *In Parenthesis*](#)



[Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*](#)

