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## Metaphor of Prison in Blake's *The French Revolution*

Mami Hibino

Being a poet of contrary state, Blake uses the image of prison to emphasize liberty. In the eighteenth century the image of imprisonment was popular in art and literature. Lorenz Eitner discusses the images of prisons in the Romantic period in his essay "Cages, Prisons, and Captives in Eighteenth-Century Art."<sup>1)</sup> According to him, scenes of incarceration were powerful devices for dramatizing notions of Liberty."<sup>2)</sup> Freedom needs a contrary to define itself and to make its significance suggestively manifest. We could have a better cognition of freedom if viewed through prison bars. Before this century, prisons had only been painted as a background scenery and the place itself had no special meanings. However, along with the emergence of the modern institutions which had their bases in the apparent power structure, the prison had begun to be foregrounded acquiring eminent notion of oppression and liberty. Further in the period of revolutionary ardour, the prison could be the best metaphor for heroism.

Among this popularity of prison imagery, where was Blake's position and what was his originality? The representation of imprisonment in art can be divided roughly into three stages of development through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The first two stages are studied by Eitner, and the third stage is explained by Martin Meisel in "Prisoners Base."<sup>3)</sup>

In the earlier part of the eighteenth century, pictures of criminals tended to be portraits of celebrities, the aim of

which was only to satisfy the curiosity of the population not to induce pity or sympathy for their imprisonment, so that the prison settings played only a minor part in the paintings. The second stage was in the latter half of the century when the emphasis fell upon the pathos of man-made sufferings: the anonymous figure of a solitary prisoner now dominated the scene, intended to evoke solemn empathy as seen in Joseph Wright's painting, *The Captive from Stern* (1774).<sup>4)</sup> Iron bars, chains and stone vaults serve to underline the misfortune of the captive. Finally, the nineteenth-century prison images discussed by Meisel showed the negotiation of imprisonment as architectural fantasy as well as the human anguish of prisoners and their families.<sup>5)</sup> As for the first stage, it is not proper to discuss anything here, for there is no direct relation with Blake. He seems to be related to latter two stages.

As in Eitner's explanation of the prison imagery, Blake's prisoners are anonymous individuals, who represent victims of society. The image of a caged bird in '*Songs of Innocence*' is a touchstone to know exactly which stage of the development Blake belonged to. Blake expresses a boy's lamentation for the wrongs of educational institution moulding a young soul:

How can the bird, that is born for joy,  
 Sit in a cage and sing?  
 How can a child, when fears annoy,  
 But droop his tender wing,  
 And forget his youthful spring?  
 ("The School Boy" in SI, 11. 16-20)

Here the caged bird allusively signifies a child, for he has the "tender wing." The boy speaker's metaphor of the bird in a cage hints that a child's expansive spirit is totally fettered in the prison called school. Written as a juvenile book,

*Songs of Innocence* seems to describe the innocent aspects of childhood, but it already revealed a dark side of children's life which led later to *The Songs of Experience*.

Caged birds were common subjects of paintings and literature throughout the eighteenth century. In the Rococo tradition, they accompanied scenes of sentimental or seductive love: they stand symbolically for "the bitter sweetness of erotic bondage."<sup>6</sup> However, later in the century, children with bird cages were often painted to symbolise a state of imprisoned innocence and its transient security. These images of bird cages and children insinuate that protected innocence is soon taken over by the world outside where danger awaits them.

Blake's poem "The School Boy" is stunningly similar to the painting of Louis Gabriel Blanchet's, *The Age of Innocence* (1731), where children are straight forwardly imprisoned in a cage where birds have been (Fig. 1). In this picture all the childish freedoms, such as behaving like a spoiled child on the lap of young motherly figure, thrusting a hand into a honeypot without reserve, and devouring fruit slyly, are metaphorically restrained. Although children's faces look happy, the iron grids behind them shockingly suggest that they are actually incarcerated, and especially one of the children is shown cuffed and fettered. There is similar undercurrent of childhood captivity between this picture and Blake's other poems; the chimney sweeper in *Innocence* looks happy after his friend's encouragement yet his situation in "coffins of black" never changes: the little black boy was consoled by his tender mother but the adult's consolation is nothing other than to admit subjugation: the chimney sweeper in *Songs of Experience* is seemingly happy and smiling but he is enslaved by "a Heaven of our misery." Childhood captivity thus strongly expresses that society

moulds human nature from the beginning of their life. At this stage of paintings, caged birds are replaced by imprisoned children.

It took not so long before the caged child induced the notion of enslaved humanity. By the end of the eighteenth century, oppressive authoritative power had begun to concern itself with prison policy, and people came to realize themselves imprisoned by exclusively privileged society. In the iconography of revolutionary propaganda, the released bird perching on the top of the cage stood for Liberty. As the image of caged birds in art began to acquire ideological meaning, Blake's image of imprisoned childhood in *Songs of Innocence* extends to prison imagery in later prophetic books.

The poem *The French Revolution* was written in 1790's and belongs chronologically to the period of transition when prison image acquired new and intense signification of liberty and oppression. As a poem of the revolution, it describes prisons which played very dramatic part of the revolutionary events. Blake presents seven prisoners in seven cells. It is said that there were, in fact, seven prisoners at the moment of the demolition of the Bastille, but the names which Blake gives to each cell are imaginative. Furthermore, he gives detailed or rather suggestive accounts of each prisoners in cells. Idiosyncrasy of this sort tells many things that Blake means by using prison images. Prisons in the poem reflect actual ones in the middle of prison reform, but Blake by turning reality into imagination reveals what he thinks as restraints to man and woman in society. To scrutinize representation of prison leads us to understand the essence of the poet's notion of liberty.

All of the prisoners are related politically to the status quo. When "Darkness of old times" (FR, 17), that is the

ancient regime, like a sufferer breathing his last "utters loud despair" (FR, 18), France's "grey towers groan, and the Bastille trembles" (FR, 18). The personification highlights the prophetic moment of bursting of a new age and the prison comes first of its influence. This is because the institution had been tranquilized until State was endangered. That is, the inmates are all strongly connected with the polity: they are state prisoners, who threaten a nation. Blake describes them as the convicted such as a prophet, a nobleman, a rebel, a prostitute, an agitator, a friend of one of the king's attendants and a madman.

Blake does not depict debtor prisoners that were very common in the eighteenth century. In fact, the Bastille had been used as a state prison since built as a fortress in the fourteenth century. However, at the time of the demolition, no important prisoners were confined there. There were seven prisoners, as Blake makes them seven in his poem, and four of them were forgers, one was mentally ill being suspected as a spy, one was also mad who attempted to assassinate the king, and the seventh was the Comte de Solages whose family secretly arranged him to be arrested for incest.<sup>7)</sup> Citizens in Paris were not informed of the inmates, yet the Bastille to them were representation of unbearable despotism so that they attacked the institution. To Blake as well, the place conveyed a meaning of evil regime where threats to the status quo were subjugated. A close scrutiny reveals more historicity and its metaphorical interpretation in Blake's explanation of the prison.

Blake named the first prison "Horror", where a man manacled were chained down to the wall and,

In his soul was the serpent coiled round his heart, hid  
from the light, as in a cleft rock;  
And the man was confined for a writing prophetic.

(FR, 28-29)

The prisoner here is not only physically chained, but his soul is also shackled with mind-forged "manacles." In fact, the Bastille had an air of mystery and it was believed to have a dreaded dungeon where some wretches were chained. Blake might have this knowledge, but brings this further to signify mental aspect of imprisonment. A prophet is usually considered to be a threat to the status quo because he predicts something fatal to the present society. Now this man is suppressed so that he is spiritually weakened by authority which is embodied by "the serpent", which usually means established church in Blake. In addition, he is hid from real power of reason, for he is concealed from the light. Blake, convinced himself as writing prophetic, should have projected his fate in this prisoner. It is probable that Blake's sympathy for the prophet made this cell to be called "Horror", for Blake should have some fear for writing prophetic poetry.

The second cell "Darkness" contains the weak, who is

Pinioned down to the stone floor, his strong bones  
scarce covered with sinews; the iron rings  
Were forged smaller as the flesh decayed. (FR, 30-31)

Here is the example of the enfeebled, who is "weak enough to be restrained" (MHH, 31) and "being restrained it by degrees becomes passive, till it is only the shadow of desire" (MHH 33-34). This man has lost his ambition since he should have been a nobleman:

A mask of iron on his face hid the lineaments  
Of ancient Kings, and the frown of the eternal lion was  
hid from the oppressed earth. (FR, 31-32)

Blake applies a gruesome rumour of the time. The Bastille had a sinister reputation for confining a man in the iron

mask, which was used to conceal the identity of the prisoner.<sup>8)</sup> Here, the nobility is equal to the kingly state, that is a threat to the polity because society needs only one sole king. The man in the iron mask here has a character of the "eternal lion" which is another king of the animal. The "eternal lion" is someone strong and yet good to the weak, for Blake depicts in the poem "Night" that in the eternity "the lion's ruddy eyes/ Shall flow with tears of gold,/ And pitying the tender cries" ("Night" in SI, 33-35). The poet means that the possibility of righteous king is obliterated in "Darkness."

The third tower "Bloody" expresses the cruelty of a torture. There "a skeleton yellow remained in its chains on its couch" (FR, 33). This man rejected to "sign papers of abhorrence" (FR, 34). All these three prisons "Horror", "Darkness" and "Bloody" confine state prisoners, and this intensifies the meaning of the prison as a representation of intolerable regime. From the following, fourth prison names function a little differently.

In the den named *Religion*, a loathsome sick woman,  
 bound down  
 To a bed of straw; the seven diseases of earth, like birds  
 of prey, stood on the couch,  
 And fed on the body. She refused to be whore to the  
 Minister, and with knife smote him. (FR, 35-37)

This woman has a sign of St. Agnes, who is an early Christian saint and virgin martyr. She was wooed by the young son of the prefect of Rome and answered him that she was already espoused to Jesus Christ. The young man, finding her resolution unchangeably firm, criminated her to the governor as a Christian. Persuading her to convert her religion in vain, the governor began to threaten her by torture. He menaced her to confine in a brothel so that her virginity would be insulted by young licentious men of Rome.

She responded him saying, "you may stain your sword with my blood, but you will never be able to profane my body, consecrated to Christ." The governor, infuriated, sent her to the brothel but a miracle spurned all brutal men from her. Finally, she was beheaded by him?<sup>9)</sup>

The woman in prison named "Religion" is similar in the sense that both refused to be prostitutes for the sake of the government and they were punished because of the refusal. St. Agnes was executed because she tried to protect her religion from the Roman belief. This is not because she was bounded by her religion. Another more authoritative institution, that is State, enforced her to abandon her belief. So, her punishment was not caused by her bigotry. Alluding the episode of St. Agnes, Blake reveals the close relationship of State and its established religion. The woman's fate is under a control of State and religion, which decide her either to be a virgin or to be a whore:

Prisons are built with stones of Law, brothels with  
bricks of Religion ("Proverbs of Hell" in MHH, plate 8)

Blake, here and in describing the woman confined in "Religion", suggests that religion is a cause of prostitution, as shown in the woman who refused to be a whore to the Minister. She represents the woman in general, whose sexuality is controlled by religion. If the church did not distinguish desires with a marriage sanction and without one, prostitution could not exist. Desires which are frustrated by religion find their outlet in prostitution. The woman is a victim of such system. The female prisoner is symbolically bound down to the miserable bed, which is undesired sexuality and, the biblical seven diseases, which means "many" or "ecumenical", devour her body. Blake expressed such advantageous abuse of established religion in the proverb: "As the caterpillar chooses the fairest leaves to lay her eggs on, so

the priest lays his curse on the fairest joys" (MHH, 55).

There is an irony in another biblical word "smite." It was God who smote all the first born in Egypt (EX 12: 29) but in Blake's poem it is the woman who smote the Minister with knife. So, the roles of religious authority and the convicted are reversed. Revealing the nature of alliance between State and the convicted are reversed. Revealing the nature of alliance between State and religion, Blake is, at the same time, undermining the authority by alluding the conversion by the very victim of the system. To prevent this rebellion is the function of the authoritative institution, and the name "Religion" affirms the very morality in the name of which this blasphemous act should be deterred. The established religion creates prostitution, and if the victim rebels the authority, it is the very institution that obstructs it. In other words, Religion is the deterrence to blasphemy.

Blake's symbolic labelling of the prison suggests that he recognized prison as authoritative architecture intended to amend people who are unsuited to society. He realized that the architecture of the authoritarian institution had a moral significance to the prisoner and the viewer.

The old prison architecture had no meaning in itself, since most eighteenth century prisons were not purpose-built. Offenders were kept in towers, in cells attached to city walls, and in places built for other reasons. Very few buildings that were intended to be prisons during this period, like York Prison, even resembled mansions.

The penal reform of the latter part of the century had the clear aim of amending the criminal mind. Ordinary buildings were no longer suitable as prisons, for they represented nothing of the human mind. As a result of the impulse to reform prisons, prison exteriors were revised although the inside remained as before. Prisons had to be

outwardly fearsome, awe-inspiring and intimidating. Until the eighteenth century, architecture had a role to symbolize certain aspects of human nature, but, from the late eighteenth century, architecture began to be considered as a function to shape experience and to form or change human character.<sup>10)</sup> Deterrence became the chief purpose of prison architecture; its appearance was intended to forestall the repetition of crimes and to be aesthetically unpleasant in order to differentiate prisons from ordinary life. Prisons must look vicious to suggest a corresponding interior.

The impact which Piranesi's *Carceri d'Invenzione*, or *Imaginary Prisons* had on the imagination of this period was very strong. Everlasting staircases leading nowhere within huge vault under which the tiny figures of prisoners are dotted is intended to be awe-inspiring.

This concept was introduced into actual prison architecture. George Dance, who was in Italy when Piranesi published *Carceri* and is thought to have been influenced by him, designed the new Newgate Prison in 1769, whose massive stone built appearance is oppressive and suggests a tomb for the living"<sup>11)</sup> (Fig. 2). A prison design for Aix-en Provence by Charles-Nicolas Ledoux has the appearance of a mausoleum and its semi-subterranean entrance appears almost like a gate to the nether world (Fig. 3). Etienne-Louis Boullée's design for the *Palace of Justice* (c. 1785) is symbolic: his idea is to bury the prison underneath the Palace expressing the crushing of Vice under the power of Justice. Thus, the reform attributed moral science to architecture.

The function of the prison as the instigator of moral virtue is eminent in the fifth prison in Blake's poem:

In the tower named *Order*, an old man, whose white beard covered the stone floor like weeds

On the margin of the sea, shrivelled up by heat of day  
 and cold of night; his den was short  
 And narrow as a grave dug for a child, with spiders'  
 webs wove, and with slime  
 Of ancient horrors, covered, for snakes and scorpions  
 are his companions; harmless they breathe  
 His sorrowful breath: he, by conscience urged, in the  
 city of Paris raised a pulpit,  
 And taught wonders to darkened souls. (FR, 38-43)

This man is namely entombed in "Order." The den resembling a grave has a similar role with Dance's Newgate Prison, that is a tomb for the living. Blake does not depict outside appearance of the cell, but he instead reveals the inside, where forgotten old agitator is breathing uncannily with some creeping creatures. State built a tomb for the agitator reckoning he was dead, but he is alive. It is as if Blake would mean that the remains of old complaints still exists underneath the calm surface of "Order" and that it may burst forth sooner or later. Blake's prisons are not architecturally described, but if prisons of this period had not have distinct moral aspect, he would not have named the cell as "Order". Just as Boullée's Palace of Justice stamps on the deviant, Blake's fifth prison "Order" tightly immures a political agitator who would bring disorder into society. It is because of a threat to "Order" that the prisoner was arrested so that he must be crushed under "Order." The name that Blake gives to this cell thus expresses moral science under which the prisoner is detained. In this sense, Blake's prison reflects the time of the prison reform. As the prison of "Religion" confined the woman, "Order" incarcerating a seed of disorder has explicit purpose of deterrence of revolt.

However, Blake's prison depiction does not only transfer political significance of his time: it reveals more important

aspect of human anguish.

In the den named *Destiny* a strong man sat,  
 His feet and hands cut off, and his eyes blinded; round  
     his middle a chain and a band  
 Fastened into the wall; fancy gave him to see an image  
     of despair in his den,  
 Eternally rushing round, like a man on his hands and  
     knees, day and night without rest:  
 He was friend to the favourite. (FR, 43-47)

The picture of the prisoner seems to evoke human agony so that people can realize the nature of the human-inflicted sufferings: cruelty of the punishment and the desperate state of the prisoner is here conspicuous. Some misfortune had made the man, once befriended to the king's attendant, experience most humiliating mutilation. However, it becomes clear here that the poet's reproach against the confinement is not simply directed to the polity that condemned him. By labelling a prison "Destiny," Blake ironically suggests that the man who restricts himself by fatality tends to become immobilized by despair. He might have been a "strong man" whose life failed by chance, but once he reckons everything as his destiny, he cannot help but being disabled and lose sight of his prospect. Only despair leads him vainly to uneasy life. So, this agony is caused after all by narrow-mindedness of the prisoner himself.

The same principle applies to the other prisoners. If the woman in the prison of "Religion" restricts herself in the concept of femininity insisted by the established religion, she should be bound by her sexuality and she could not but to choose either to be a virgin or a whore. If the man in the cell "Order" hides his honest opinion because of the order of society, he would be just a displeasurable grumbler. So, he is "slimy" (see "slime" in line 40) that is servile, hypocritical

creature. He is the one in the proverb: "He who desires but acts not breeds pestilence" (MHH "The Proverbs of Hell", 5). Here seems to be Blake's implication by describing in a complicated way: we are doubly imprisoned by the political ideology and spiritual restriction so that unless we deliver ourselves from this double bondage we should not be liberated in a true sense.

In this respect, the seventh prison is most complicated and interesting example. The prisoner was condemned because of "a letter of advice to a King" (FR, 51) and he "pined for liberty" (FR, 48-9). In a sense, this man represents the whole citizens of Paris in the revolutionary period: they had complaints to the King and they longed for liberty. The man once washed away his superstition by the rational deism of the Enlightenment is now confined in the prison named "Tower of God", which is the highest and the most consecrated place of all. Enlightenment enabled man arrogantly enough to believe themselves almost equal to a god, and as a result, they lost their imaginative universe and gained instead mechanistic universe that Newton's theory advocated:

his reason decayed, and the world of attraction in his  
bosom

Centered, and the rushing of chaos overwhelmed his dark  
soul. (FR, 49-50)

Blake here ironically alludes that corruption of reason invites Newton's world of attraction, which turn out to be a void. What people believed as rational was not truly rational according to Blake, and the theory of measure, weight, and science brought inorganic universe. Newton's theory gave him an impression of limitation, "the same dull round, even of a universe, would soon become a mill with complicated wheels," (*There is no Natural Religion* [second series] 1788).

This is a loss of liberty of imagination. The revolutionary multitude should act according to more flexible principle, which produces prolific universe instead of inorganic one so that people could release themselves from rational arrogance of the "Tower of God."

Thus, Blake expanded the notion of imprisonment to the spiritual sphere. It is not enough just to ameliorate the polity: the revolution should not be completed unless we emancipate ourselves spiritually. Strictly speaking, the revolution hardly begin,

Till man raise his darkened limbs out of the caves of  
night, hie eyes and his heart Expand. (FR, 218-219)<sup>12)</sup>

Abbe de Sieyès, who represents republican ideology, gives a speech in interesting sequence. After people release themselves from blindness and expand their visions as well as their mind, then,

Her nobles shall hear and shall weep, and put off  
The red robe of terror, the crown of oppression, the  
shoes of contempt, and unbuckle  
The girdle of war from the desolate earth. (FR, 221-23)

To Blake, spiritual revolution comes first. Since arms are not necessary for the mental fight, Blake's heroic poem describes no battlement. As this essay has been analysing, it is now clear that the prisoners are actually citizens not only in Paris but people in general in his days. Blake realizes that the citizen including himself have been imprisoned by State authority, so that the King nervously said, "The prisoner have burst their dens, Let us hide; let us hide in the dust" (FR, 77-8). Blake here suggests that the energy of prisoners explodes spontaneously from the inside, while historically the prison was attacked by mob from outside. The prisoner accordingly means all the citizen in the world, who

had been under the restraint of "mind-forged manacles."

The prison was very material for heroism in the eighteenth century.<sup>13)</sup> *The French Revolution* shows the sign of the poet's great epic urgency although unfortunately unfinished as only a piece of heroic verse. The hero of the revolution, of course, is these prisoners who would break forth their dens of spiritual imprisonment.

### Abbreviations

FR *The French Revolution*

MHH *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*

SI *Songs of Innocence*

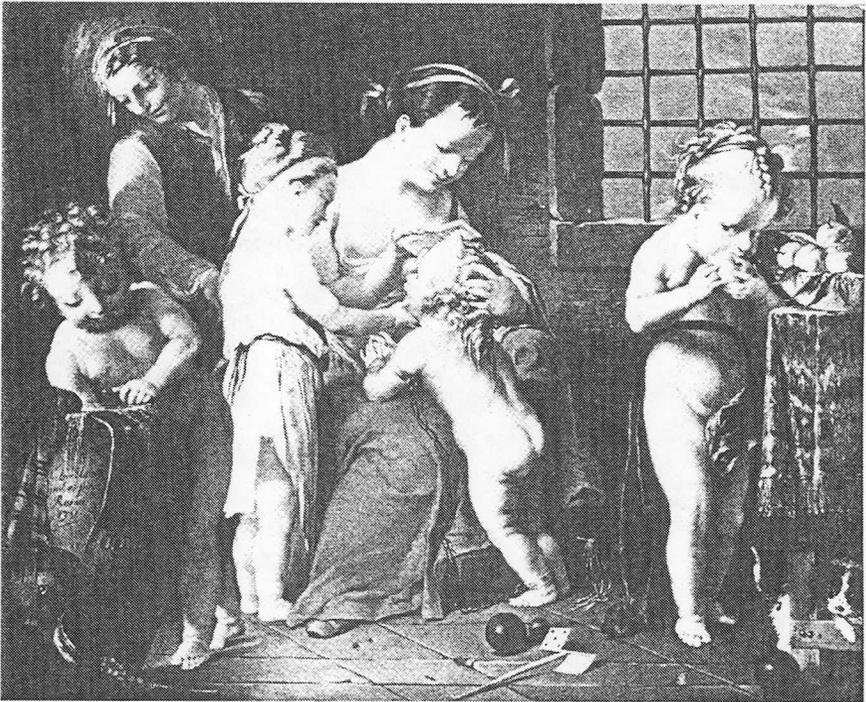
### Notes

All quotations from Blake's poetry refer to *Blake: The Complete Poems*, edited by W.H. Stevenson (London and New York: Longman, 1971), and their line numbers are marked in the parenthesis in the text.

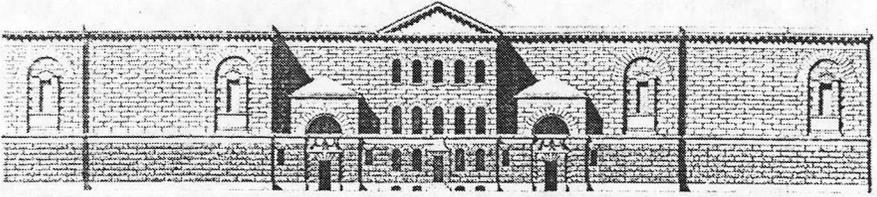
- 1) Lorenz Eitner, "Cages, Prisons, and Captives in Eighteenth-Century Art" in *Images of Romanticism: Verbal and Visual Affinities* ed Karl Kroeber and William Walling (New Heaven and London: Yale University Press, 1978) pp. 13-38.
- 2) Ibid. p.14.
- 3) Martin Meisel, "Prisoners Base" in *Realizations: Narrative, Pictorial, and Theatrical Arts in Nineteenth-Century England* (Princeton University Press, 1983).
- 4) Eitner, p. 34.
- 5) Meisel, p. 285.
- 6) Eitner, p.15.
- 7) Christopher Hibbert, *The French Revolution* (London: Penguin Books, 1980) p. 72.
- 8) Ibid. P. 71.
- 9) *Butler's Lives of the Saints* ed. rev. by Herbert Thurston. S.J. and Donald Attwarter, Volume I (London: Burns and Oates, 1956) pp. 133-137.
- 10) Robin Evans, *The Fabrication of Virtue: English Prison Architecture*

1750-1840 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), p. 47.

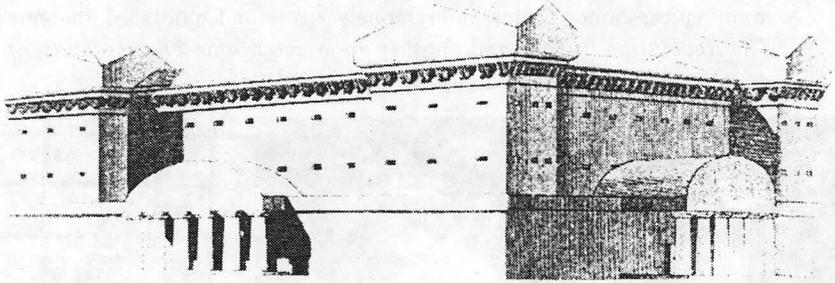
- 11) Eitner, p. 28.
- 12) Longman version reads as "cares of night" instead of "caves of night." The present author takes "caves" since other important editions such as David Erdman's, Geoffrey Keynes's and G.E. Bentley's all read the word as "caves." The word must be "caves" because Blake suggests Platonic cave here.
- 13) Because of the restriction of the space, I didn't mention epic possibility of the poem in detail. However, it is highly probable that Blake meant to write heroic poetry out of the revolutionary events. There are many words which are influenced by Milton and several epic similes are dispersed in the poem. Above all, epics proliferated uniquely in England during the period 1790-1825. To name some of many epics, James Ogden anonymously wrote and published the epic *The Revolution* in 1790, and another anonymous epic *The Revolution; or Britain Delivered* was issued in 1791.



1. Louis Gabriel Blanchet, *The Age of Innocence*



2. George Dance, *Newgate Prison*



3. C.N. Ledoux, *Prison for Aix en Provence*