



Bentham's Panopticon and Dumont's *Panoptique*

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BENTHAM'S PANOPTICON AND DUMONT'S

PANOPTIQUE

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Introduction

The Panopticon, or Inspection-House - the great circular building made up of many cells arranged around a central observation tower, from which one warden could supervise numerous inmates simultaneously - is in some senses an embodiment, albeit a rather paradoxical one, of the inventive imagination of Jeremy Bentham.² It is widely known and commonly associated with his name, although it was originally his brother Samuel's invention. Samuel Bentham was responsible for the construction of a Panopticon in Russia in 1806, and saw its foundations 'just peeping up above the ground' before he left the country; whereas Jeremy Bentham never saw a Panopticon, although it is frequently perceived as a concrete manifestation of his philosophy.³ The inspection principle working in two ways at once - the warder keeps the inmates under constant inspection, and the public are free to inspect the warder at any time - emphasises the Benthamic hallmarks of openness and accountability; and the rehabilitative aspect of the Panopticon penitentiary draws on and develops Bentham's favourite themes of reform and improvement of the human condition. The huge scale of the project, with a wealth of detail to be considered and provided for, gave free rein to Bentham's peculiar genius. The all-seeing Inspection-House, a building which in reality few ever saw, is nonetheless remarkably well-known and has had an enduring impact.⁴ One can perhaps see a legacy of Bentham's creation in such modern inventions as the security camera, which provides surveillance around the clock, and the language laboratory, in which a variation of the system of 'conversation tubes' - which Bentham planned to connect each cell with the inspector's lodge - enables a

¹ Previously published in Basque in Jeremy Bentham, *Panoptikoa*, Donostia, 2002, pp. 25-36.

² For a detailed description of the Panopticon, see J. Semple, *Bentham's Prison*, Oxford, 1993.

³ See *The Correspondence of Jeremy Bentham*, vii, ed. J.R. Dinwiddy, Oxford, 1988 (*The Collected Works of Jeremy Bentham*), p. 373. Hereafter *Correspondence (CW)*.

single teacher to listen in at any time to any one of a number of students, without the student's knowledge.

The Origin of the Panopticon

In 1813, after more than twenty years of effort, Jeremy Bentham finally had to abandon his plans for the construction of a Panopticon penitentiary in London.⁵ The concept of the Panopticon, however, had its genesis many years earlier and many hundreds of miles away, at Cricheff, in Russia. Jeremy Bentham's brother, Samuel, went to Russia in 1780, where he worked for several years for Prince Potemkin, the favourite of Catherine the Great. In 1784, Samuel arrived at Potemkin's estate at Cricheff, to be employed primarily as a shipbuilder.⁶ The main function of the estate was to supply the naval fleet on the Black Sea, but besides the manufactories associated with the shipyard, there were many other industries at Cricheff - glass-making, steel-making, tanning, distilling, and brewing. Samuel Bentham, with very few competent assistants, soon took responsibility for the overall supervision of the estate, which had a large workforce of Russian peasants. It was at this time that Samuel Bentham, an inventor and engineer of genius, devised the Panopticon, to be constructed on the principle of central inspection, as a means of facilitating the supervision of large numbers of workers.

In 1786, Jeremy Bentham paid an extended visit to his brother at Cricheff, and became enthused by the Panopticon scheme; particularly, inspired partly by an announcement in the press that a new house of correction was planned in Middlesex, he perceived that the Inspection-House could serve as a penitentiary.⁷ Indeed, from its inception the building was conceived as adaptable to many purposes - for example, as a school, hospital, factory or prison. While in Russia, Jeremy Bentham wrote a series of twenty-one 'Panopticon Letters', elaborating the idea, which were sent to England. Jeremy Bentham returned to London in 1788, and Samuel followed in 1790. Once they were back in London, they spent many years working together on the scheme. Samuel Bentham's contribution was the invention of machinery to be housed in the

⁴ Most notably expressed in M. Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, Paris, 1975, trans. A. Sheridan, Harmondsworth, 1985.

⁵ The saga of Bentham's attempt to persuade the British government to build a Panopticon penitentiary is recounted in detail in Semple, *Bentham's Prison*.

⁶ For a full account of Samuel Bentham's career in Russia, see I.R. Christie, *The Bentham's in Russia, 1780-1791*, Oxford & Providence, 1993.

⁷ *Correspondence (CW)*, iii. ed. I. R. Christie, London, 1971, p. 509n.

Panopticon, such as a huge walking-wheel, which would provide both useful occupation and necessary exercise for the inmates. The brothers converted part of their house into a workshop for the construction of models of these machines. Although the Panopticon building had been devised in an industrial context, Jeremy Bentham continued to concentrate on its potential as a penitentiary, and began what was to be a long campaign to interest the British government in the design. In 1796 Samuel Bentham took the post of Inspector-General of Naval Works and therefore had less time to devote to the Panopticon scheme; Jeremy Bentham's dedication to the project, however, continued for many more years. Ultimately the scheme was to fail, and although Jeremy Bentham did receive compensation from the government when his proposal to construct and manage a Panopticon in London was finally rejected, his disappointment at the failure of the elaborate and idiosyncratic project, in which he had invested so much time and labour, was great.

The Panopticon writings

In December 1786, while in Russia, Jeremy Bentham (as noted above) sent a series of Letters 'on the plan and uses of a newly-imagined kind of building called an Inspection-house' to his father Jeremiah Bentham in London, with instructions for their publication.⁸ Bentham's father did not, however, take up the commission to prepare the Letters for publication, nor did Bentham's friend George Wilson, who had been approached to the same end.⁹ Perhaps both Jeremiah Bentham and Wilson felt that the 'frivolous and somewhat superficial'.¹⁰ Letters were as yet unfit for publication. It was not until 1790 that any further progress was made towards the publication of the Panopticon Letters. The Chancellor of the Irish Exchequer, Sir John Parnell, became interested in the Panopticon, and began to make arrangements for the Letters to be printed in Dublin. At Parnell's prompting, Bentham surveyed the Letters for publication, several years after their composition, and realised that they needed substantial revision. Thus it was that he set to work on the Postscripts, to fill in the gaps, and these Postscripts became very much longer than the original Letters. The titles of the Postscripts also signal that Bentham was concentrating on the potential of the Panopticon as a penitentiary house, rather than on any of its other possible

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 509-12.

⁹ See Semple, *Bentham's Prison*, p. 100.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 99.

functions.¹¹ The Letters and the Postscripts, accompanied by three illustrative plates, were printed in Dublin and London in 1791,¹² and this is the edition often referred to as the first ‘publication’, although Bentham himself said that the work ‘though printed, has never been made public here’ (i.e. in London),¹³ and later scholars agree that the work was not ‘published in the usual sense of the term’.¹⁴

Also in 1791, Bentham approached the French with his Panopticon scheme, as a proposed replacement for the Bicêtre prison. He sent a copy of the printed work to Garran de Coulon, a member of the National Assembly, along with an ‘extract of it in French’,¹⁵ entitled *Panoptique*, prepared by Étienne Dumont, Bentham’s Swiss translator and editor. By order of the National Assembly, Dumont’s *Panoptique* was printed and distributed to the members of the Assembly.¹⁶ Plans to build a Panopticon at Paris, however, also came to nothing.

Dumont’s first collaboration with Bentham was in 1788-9, when Bentham wrote, in French, several essays relating to the political upheaval in France, and Dumont corrected and polished Bentham’s French.¹⁷ Over the years, Dumont was to produce five editions of Bentham’s works.¹⁸ Dumont’s editions were not simple translations, but rather ‘recensions’ - that is, reworked versions which, while preserving the essence of Bentham’s texts, were shorter and more concise, were encumbered with less detail, and were written in simpler yet often more elegant language. Through the medium of his recensions Dumont played a significant part in the dissemination and popularisation of Bentham and his works in Europe: there were second editions of some of Dumont’s texts, and they were also translated into Spanish, Portuguese, Italian, German and Swedish. During Bentham’s lifetime, the French versions of his

¹¹ See n. 11 below.

¹² *Panopticon: or, the Inspection-House. Containing the Idea of a new Principle of Construction applicable to any Sort of Establishment, in which Persons of any Description are to be kept under Inspection; Panopticon: Postscript; Part I: containing further Particulars and Alterations relative to the Plan of Construction originally proposed; principally adapted to the Purpose of a Panopticon Penitentiary-House, and Panopticon Postscript; Part II: containing a Plan of Management for a Panopticon Penitentiary-House*, Dublin (reprinted London), 1791.

¹³ *Correspondence (CW)*, iv, ed. A.T. Milne, London, 1981, p. 342.

¹⁴ Semple, *Bentham’s Prison*, p. 13n.

¹⁵ *Correspondence (CW)* iv. p. 342.

¹⁶ *Panoptique, Imprimé par ordre de l’Assemblée Nationale*, Paris, 1791.

¹⁷ For these essays, see *Rights, Representation, and Reform: Nonsense upon Stilts and other writings on the French Revolution*, ed. P. Schofield, C. Pease-Watkin and C. Blamires, Oxford, 2002 (CW).

¹⁸ *Traité de législation civile et pénale*, 3 vols., Paris, 1802; *Théorie des peines et des récompenses*, 2 vols., London, 1811; *Tactique des assemblées législatives*, 2 vols., Geneva and Paris, 1816; *Traité des preuves judiciaires*, 2 vols., Paris, 1823, and *De l’organisation judiciaire, et de la codification*, Paris, 1828.

works had more success and a wider readership than the English originals, and for many readers, a knowledge of Bentham was gained through the Dumont texts. The first of Dumont's recensions, *Traité de législation civile et pénale*, included *Panoptique* (iii. 209-72); and this was the first commercial publication of the French text. Due to the success of *Traité de législation* the French text *Panoptique* was much more widely read and better known than the English original.

The Dumont Text

What then is the relationship between Bentham's text and Dumont's? The nature of an adaptation makes it difficult to answer the question precisely, but it is possible to make a few general points, and to look at a few specific examples.

On reading Dumont's *Panoptique* two important points must be borne in mind. The first is that the text is not a straightforward translation of Bentham's work; Dumont's recensions, as already noted, do not simply reproduce Bentham's words dressed 'in a French jacket' as Bentham once put it, but rather adapt and recast them in a new form.¹⁹ The second important point is that Dumont has abridged Bentham's text quite considerably. Dumont's recensions are always shorter than the originals, and this is particularly noticeable in the case of *Panoptique*. So while the French text gives a sample, as it were, of the themes and details of Bentham's Panopticon writings, to gain a full understanding of Bentham's conception, one must eventually refer to the original text. That said, however, the Dumont text captures many of the main points of the English text, and presents them in a perhaps more accessible form.

Bentham's two lengthy Postscripts are each more than twice as long as the whole series of twenty-one Letters. The Letters were composed in a foreign country where Bentham did not have access to many books or other reference material; they were written in haste, and if not repented, then at least reviewed and supplemented, at leisure. A glance at the titles of the Letters will show the scope of Bentham's thoughts on the Panopticon at this first stage of its development: the subjects covered include, of course, the physical structure of the building; the basic outlines of Bentham's proposed scheme of management; considerations of economy and security; and such lesser details as choice of trade for inmates and what provision should be made for prisoners once freed. Certainly all the major elements of the Panopticon scheme,

¹⁹ *Correspondence (CW)*, iv. p. 30.

which combines ingenious architecture with an innovative system of management, are present in the Letters, although the details are not worked out at great length. Although there are many topics which appear both in the Letters and in the Postscripts, it is in the Postscripts that the ideas are elaborated and all details hammered out fully. Postscript I is predominantly concerned with architectural and technical detail. For example, Section XIX is concerned with materials; Bentham recommends either brick or iron, rather than wood, to obviate the risk of fire. The wisdom of this recommendation was to be proved in 1818 when the Russian Panopticon, built from wood in the absence of other materials, was in fact destroyed by fire.²⁰ Postscript II is concerned with an elaboration of the system of management.

When considering Dumont's recension, what is most striking is that he has based his text almost entirely on Postscript II. A comparison of Dumont's titles with Bentham's quickly reveals that with the exception of 'Avantages essentiels de ce plan', which is adapted from Letter VI, the bulk of Dumont's text is based on Postscript II. Dumont's titles echo the titles of ten of the sixteen sections of Postscript II, although he has actually used material from more than ten sections, as he has sometimes conflated more than one of Bentham's sections. For example, Dumont's section 'De la Propreté et de la Santé' draws not only on Bentham's section XI, 'Health and Cleanliness' but also on sections X, 'Airing and Exercise', and XIII, 'Distribution of Time'. It is impossible to know whether Bentham or Dumont made the decision about which parts of the Panopticon writings should be used in the French recension, but it is clear that the Benthams perceived Postscript II to be of more general interest than the technical Postscript I. Writing in July 1791, Samuel Bentham advised Baron St Helens not to look, if he looked at the work at all, at Postscript I, which 'contains nothing but dry details, relative to the mode of construction'.²¹ In 1793 Jeremy Bentham sent a copy of the work to Baron Loughborough, and in his accompanying letter he wrote:

If it were possible at this time for your Lordship to bestow a glance on a subject of such inferior importance, it might rather to be on the third

²⁰ See *The Correspondence of Jeremy Bentham*, vol. ix, ed. S. Conway, Oxford, 1989, p. 193.

²¹ *Correspondence (CW)*, iv. p. 320.

volume which relates to the plan of management than to the 1st and second which refer to a plan of construction.²²

The reasons Bentham gave for favouring the third part were firstly, that the architectural details were difficult to understand without reference to a model of the building, and secondly, that the plan had since been improved upon. Thus we see that Bentham himself considered that the second Postscript was the most accessible and general part of the work, and it is probably for this reason that Dumont concentrated on Postscript II in the preparation of his recension.

How then has Dumont changed Bentham's text? The most obvious difference is one of length, as mentioned above. The content of Bentham's Postscript I has been distilled into a few pages in the Dumont text.²³ This is a most severe abridgement, and there is obviously a great wealth of detail relative to the construction of the Panopticon in Postscript I which has been omitted. Dumont acknowledges this when he says 'L'Ouvrage anglois entre dans tous les détails nécessaires pour la construction du Panoptique. L'Auteur s'est livré à des recherches infinies'.²⁴ Dumont justifies the exclusion of most of Postscript I by saying 'Cette partie de l'Ouvrage n'est pas susceptible d'un extrait suivi. Ce n'est point sur ces détails qu'on doit juger le plan du Panoptique',²⁵ and he proceeds to mention in brief a few of the points discussed in Postscript I.²⁶

Much of the second part of Dumont's text, based on Postscript II, is a fairly close translation of Bentham's text. Nonetheless it is still an abridgement. Some whole sections of Postscript II are omitted - for example, Section VIII, on the subject of bedding - and other sections are conflated, as has been mentioned already. One way in which Dumont effects the abridgement is by cutting down on the details or examples in Bentham's text. For instance, Bentham's Section IX, 'Health and Cleanliness', begins with a list of eleven points to be observed relative to health; in the French text, this list is reduced to six points. Another method Dumont uses to shorten the text is to simplify the structure of the composition. Bentham often uses a 'question and answer' structure to present his arguments, and he does this in

²² *Ibid.*, 419.

²³ 'Construction du Panoptique' and 'Détails sur le Panoptique', *Traité de législation*, iii. 212-13, 217-23.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 217.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 218.

Postscript II, Section V, which opens with a list of five questions on the subject of Employment. Bentham then proceeds to answer his questions in turn. In the equivalent passage in the French text, Dumont dispenses with the ‘question and answer’ format, with the result that the text is both simpler and shorter.²⁷ Indeed, in the Preface to another of his recensions of Bentham, Dumont specifically explains why he has abandoned the question and answer structure:

[Bentham] procède par questions et par réponses. cette forme de catéchisme. a l’inconvénient de couper tous les sujets en petites parties, et d’éteindre l’intérêt par le défaut de liaison. j’ai pris le parti d’abandonner ces questions et ces réponses, et d’y substituer la marche unie du discours.’²⁸

Thus it is clear that Dumont thought he was improving Bentham’s texts by simplifying the structure of their composition; whether this is true in the case of the present text, the reader must decide. What is certain is that Dumont’s *Panoptique* provides the non-specialist reader with a clear, concise and very readable abstract of Bentham’s original Panopticon writings.



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²⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 218-23.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 244-6.

²⁸ Dumont’s Preface to ‘Tactique des assemblées politiques délibérantes’, *Political Tactics*, ed. M. James, C. Blamires and C. Pease-Watkin, Oxford, 1999, p. 10 (CW).