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Article abstract

Data for this paper are three poems collected by a convict at a southeast Texas prison farm. The poems are about his past acquaintance, a fellow convict known as Johnny Barone. The first poem was composed as a birthday gift to its subjects, the second by Barone himself, and the third by the prisoner collecting them, who, even though the protagonist still lived, titled it “The Epitaph of Johnny Barone”, completing a trilogy. As a set, these poems represent traditional forms in which prisoners express their attitudes toward crime, punishment, the penal system, the past and the present.

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PRISON FOLK POETRY: THE BARONE TRILOGY¹

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In this essay, I examine the processes by which a typical prison folklore topic, a convict whose reputation has assumed legendary status, undergoes transformations in the hands of different poets so that distinctly different world views emerge. While he was enrolled in my cultural anthropology course offered by the University of Houston at Clear Lake at Ramsey Two, one of the Texas Department of Corrections' (TDC)² maximum security prison farms, Art,³ a white convict, provided three poems about the same individual, a fellow white convict, Johnny Barone, as part of his folklore collection project.

Art received the first poem from an anonymous black convict, whose poem motivated Barone himself to write the second. The student collector composed the third one himself, titling it "The Epitaph of Johnny Barone", even though Barone was still alive and had been released from prison over two years before Art gave me the three poems in the summer of 1985. This collection lets us see how different prisoners, through folk poetry, situate themselves in relation to time, and in doing so invoke contrasting world views. The black poet glorifies Barone as a "bad motherfucker", linking him to past outlaw hero-types from an African-American oral tradition; Barone himself seeks pity in the present, wants others to see him as a product of his society, and pleads to go home to his family; and finally, Art's poem conjures up a future in which Barone, having died, is subject to interpretation by movie directors or storytellers, as the myth that's given expression in the "Trilogy of Johnny Barone" persists through time.⁴ As I

1. My thanks to Roger deV. Renwick, who supervised my dissertation, "Texas Prison Folklore" (University of Texas, 1990), and who generously offered comments and criticisms of an earlier version of this essay that I read at the Annual Meeting of the American Folklore Society in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, October 19, 1989, which I revised and expanded for a dissertation chapter, "Prison Folk Poetry" (1990: 198-213).
2. TDC changed its name as of September 1990, after the Texas State Board of Paroles merged with the Texas Department of Corrections to form a division of the judicial system, identifying the combination as TDCJ (J=Judicial) Institutional Division.
3. Art is not his real name.
4. See John Oliver West's Ph.D. dissertation for a comparative approach to the folklore of the outlaw heroes of the American Southwest, such as Billy the Kid and Jesse James, whose ballads and stories reach "deep in the traditions of the past, especially among Anglo-Saxons" (1964: vi). West

will demonstrate, the first poem attends to a mythic past, the second to a problematic present, and the third to a nostalgic future, all three intensely concerned with the protagonist's relationship to time.

Johnny Barone in the first poem shares an orientation to a past glorifying legends about actual badmen. Art said the poem's author was black, but provided no name, saying only that the poet gave his verses to Barone as a birthday gift. Although the poem recalls famous *white* outlaws and gangsters, it situates the Barone character within an oral tradition reminiscent of the black toast, a narrative poem that its performer (either in prison or in the free world) characteristically recites in a verbally artistic and theatrical manner (Abrahams 1970[1963]: 97).

A SHOE-SHINE TALE

Say old man, these shoes sure need a shine
Do a good job and I'll give you a dime.
Tell me, old man, of the meanest bastard around
'Cause when you're finished I'm going to be[beat?] him down.

The old man scratched his head... and said:

"Remember Jessie James, Machine-gun Kelly, and Al Capone?
Well, they didn't have shit on Johnny Barone.
He wasn't gifted with anything but luck...
Crazy devil and he didn't give a fuck.

"Started out like any other dumb sucker
But ended up to be one bad mother-fucker.
People didn't do shit, but make him mad,
I'd say they turned one good man bad.

"Some folks say he's a child of fate
Ask me, he was a goddam mistake.
Used to say, wasn't nothing he couldn't do.
I believe he could've stole the President's shoes.

"Talk any man down real fuckin' quick
Gotta hand it to him, he was slick.
Ugly as hell, but charm any woman to her knees
And make the baddest motherfucker break down and say please.

"Egotistical bastard with a devilish smile
Sorta envied the puke, he sure had style.
Couldn't help but notice the scotch on his breath
And those damn cigars didn't hide the smell of death.

demonstrates in his study that "The outlaw hero of the American Southwest gained his hold on the popular imagination chiefly because of [a] partisan quality" (*Ibid.*: viii). One of his goals is "to show how and why the American people have shaped these men into the hero pattern that recalls Robin Hood" (*Ibid.*: x).

“You’d think he was born with a gun in his hand
 Stubborn bastard once he’d made his stand.
 He could cause more hell in one single day
 Than the whole fucking world, in the month of May.

“Come to this town and raised plenty of hell
 ‘Cause this is where he finally fell.
 Now I can’t say who’s really to blame
 For that old courthouse what went up in flame.

“Drove by one day and tossed me this here coin
 Told me to write him one hell of a poem
 ‘I can’t even write my name’, I said.
 He shouted, ‘Would you rather be dead?’

“Now I never did have much schoolin’
 And I knew for damn sure he wasn’t foolin’
 Yes sir, I wrote this bull... shittin’ jive
 I guess he liked it... I’m still alive.” (Anonymous, *circa* 1970.)

The first poem implicates itself in a wider oral tradition whose heroes are “badman” and “trickster” types who rebel against authority. For many of the qualities that white narrators admire in fellow white bandit heroes like Jesse James, Machine-Gun Kelly, and Al Capone — the ability to evade authorities while robbing trains and banks — the black poet substitutes those of another kind of hero who, trapped in a more circumscribed world, gains his appeal from his ability to transform himself at will. By investing white underworld criminals with traits common in black badmen from the past, the poet measures Barone against a set of values promoting traditional behavior reminiscent of black heroes such as Railroad Bill, who terrorized Florida and Alabama in the 1890s and killed a bigoted white policeman, and of Stackerlee, who responded with a deadly hail of gunfire to Billy Lions’s attempt to trick him out of a hat.⁵ Rather than sharing the Robin-Hood qualities of the “noble robber” whose sense of justice identifies him as a champion of the oppressed and powerless, such black badman figures are more like avengers, who, like Jesse James, also come from the oppressed strata of society, but whose assertion of any power, style, or trickery at all is heroic in a world unresponsive to the needs of blacks. Indeed, the ballads “Stagolee” (Laws I-15) and “Railroad Bill” (Laws I-13) in a southern African-American oral tradition often, as in the above poem, include versions of the boasts that these heroes “sure had style”; they could “talk any man down real fuckin’ quick” and “charm any woman to her knees”. Both of these characters responded to those who opposed them with a display of bravado and recklessness, unafraid of anyone (Hobsbawm 1981[1969]: 34-60; Laws 1964: 252-253; Levine 1977: 413-419; Roberts 1983: 179-190).

5. See John W. Roberts’s excellent discussion, “‘You Done Me Wrong’: The Badman as Outlaw Hero” (1989: 171-219).

Barone also shares similarities with the African-American Shine character, who in several versions of the "Titanic" toast, extremely popular among black prisoners, escapes drowning aboard the luxury liner while rich white women promise him sexual favors if he would save them too.⁶ Even the occupation of the shoe-shine man, who describes to Barone the "meanest bastard around", is similar to Shine's lowly work as a stoker in the boiler-room aboard the Titanic.⁷

To the black poet, Barone is crazy and acts with complete abandon, a theme common not only in traditional African-American outlaw heroes but also with other characters in Texas prison folklore such as Butch Ainsworth, who, according to one tale, chopped off three fingers of his hand with an axe in a display of bravado to the warden and was subsequently made a building tender (i.e., a convict who prison staff place in control of other prisoners). A black narrator of this version of the legend said of the white protagonist at the end of his story: "That Butch was a bad motherfucker" (Burns 1990: 146). Because the Ainsworth character "became the warden's right hand man [head building tender]" (*Ibid.*: 147), the narrator considered the protagonist to be much more powerful than the warden's official assistants, the guards. Similarly, the "Shoe-Shine Tale" poet offers a world view favoring such characteristics.

6. See Abrahams (1970[1963]: 61-85), for an interesting Jungian interpretation of the trickster and the badman in black oral traditions. Abrahams states: "Where the trickster is a perpetual child, the badman is a perpetual adolescent. His is a world of overt rebellion. He commits acts against taboos and mores in full knowledge of what he is doing. In fact he glories in this knowledge of revolt" (p. 65). The Barone character absorbs both types. Later Abrahams, in *Positively Black* (1970), examines more closely the use of stock characters in folklore, demonstrating that "a stereotype will always exhibit the bias of the group that fashions it" (p. 11). Similarly, Bruce Jackson provides a brief discussion of some psychosocial functions of toasts as they occur in "certain kinds of parties, among youths hanging around street corners, [and] among inmates in jails and prisons" (1972a: 123). Drawing data from four key informants who were male addict patients at the Lexington Clinical Research Center, Michael Agar examined two toasts, "Honky Tonk Bud" and "King Heroin", identifying themes and "culture hero" types characteristic of the genre (1971: 175-185). For a comparison and a brief discussion of such culture heroes within toasts that black prisoners performed over thirty years ago, see Dennis Wepman, Ronald B. Newman, and Murray B. Binderman (1976: 1-15). For an earlier portrayal of the "Stackalee" character and his exploits in folksong form, see Botkin (1946: 53-60). William Labov, Paul Cohen, Clarence Robbins, and John Lewis (1973) provide a linguistic treatment of toasts employing the trickster and badman as protagonists in their 1973 article, "Toasts". Additionally, Wepman *et al.* (1976) identify the point of view in which performers typically narrated toasts; much of their own data contained third person points of view, similar to that taken by the shoe-shine man in "A Shoe-Shine Tale". However, David Evans assesses the collections of toasts which folklorists used in characterizing toasts in general and correctly identifies folklorists' failure to print complete texts of the toasts they discuss (1977: 129-148). Evans writes: "Almost all of the informants for toasts have been inmates of prison and drug rehabilitation centers, minors, and people who were too broke to afford liquor and were performing for a stingy folklorist" (1977: 130). Clearly, the Barone trilogy, as other narratives within my collection, offer to the folklorist representations of folklore performances which do not ignore contextual setting.

7. Cf. Abrahams (1970[1963]: 120; 1966: 341-362).

To the shoe-shine man, Barone enhances his traditional brand of heroism: he openly defied legal authority by burning down the courthouse. Moreover, he not only destroyed a receptacle for legitimate authority which houses legal records, but conceivably burned his own birth and death certificates in the process, replacing a documented past with a mythical one. In short, both in its most striking motifs and in its central theme, this poem takes a distinct stance toward time. The orientation is toward the past, when heroes were badmen of larger-than-life status. In addition, the poem's recreation of a storytelling event in its "frame story" device reinforces the ambiance of an older time — when people told tales of legendary and mythical characters rather than, for instance, watched television.

The next poet, who was Barone himself, surrenders the protagonist — himself — to Destiny and Fate, laments the events that led to his imprisonment, and longs for his freedom. He wrote the poem after his black friend presented him "A Shoe-Shine Tale" on his birthday.

THE BALLAD OF JOHNNY BARONE

From the doorway of hell gave birth
The golden age, the vats of earth,
A son, in memory of the D-Day War,
Normandy, the year 1944.

Six-six-fifty-six, be his only guide,
Through the fiery hell he came to ride,
Wild and reckless, to deemed a juvenile,
But growing older, a man of style.

Lead spent was quick to enslave,
A Lubbock man to an early grave,
And with the tongue of fate,
He became a ward of the state.

Once in jail he came to know,
Of his wife and best friend Joe,
She told his sons that he was dead,
Married Joe and shared his bed.

Given handcuffs, he rode as host,
On the famous "Great White Ghost",
Big Fifty he was soon to be,
In a desolate place called TDC.

Branded twenty-six, thirty-nine, thirty-eight,
And mentally chained to a tremendous weight,
The "Convict's Shadow" — and he became
Brothers united in a future of shame.

Bars of loneliness that surround the place,
 Were seen so clearly upon his face,
 For in his eyes all could see,
 All he wanted was to be free. (Johnny Barone *circa* 1970.)

Even though Barone found the black prisoner's poem appealing enough to inspire his own, he shifts the time-orientation to his then-present situation, serving time. A very different interpretation of Barone becomes evident as he writes in the last two lines: "For in his eyes all could see/All he wanted was to be free". Whereas the anonymous poem aligns him with past folk heroes, Barone himself avoids this characterization,⁸ shifting emphasis instead to the injustices done him by the people to whom he was the closest and whom he trusted most: "Once in jail he came to know/Of his wife and best friend Joe/She told his sons that he was dead/Married Joe and shared his bed". In short, he depicts the family unit as fragmented, justifying his "appeal to pity". Barone's attempt is to sentimentalize his then-current lot in life, rather than to romanticize himself by association with famous outlaws as the first poet does.

It is interesting to note that the behavior of Barone's best friend mirrors that of the traditional character Jody in black toasts and songs that Bruce Jackson collected during the 1960s at various TDC units (Jackson 1967a; 1967b; 1972b: 169-176; 1974: 95-96). After reciting a toast about "Jody the Grinder", an informant told Jackson: "See, when G. I. Joe was overseas, Joe (or 'Jody') the Grinder moved in with his wife" (Jackson 1972b: 95). Roger Abrahams also collected such toasts, and wrote: "Whether Jody as a character was invented by inhabitants of the prisons or the army, he is a man who is home sleeping with your wife" (1970[1963]: 169).⁹ Similarly, in his article, "What Happened to Jody", Bruce Jackson observed that "life in an army during wartime and life in prison anytime" share a concern with "who is doing what, with, and to the woman one left at home" (1967b: 387). 'Jody', Jackson points out, is "a contraction of 'Joe the', and 'Grinder' — a metaphor in folk use for a certain kind of coital movement" (*Ibid.*).

Rather than appropriate the value system that sees the acts of "one bad mother-fucker" to be a model of behavior adaptable to real-life situations, Barone adopts a stance that he hopes will lead to his eventual release from prison; he makes a disclaimer that he was, in the black poet's words, a "[c]razy devil" who "didn't give a fuck". He focuses instead on the chaos surrounding his conception. His birth and consequent life of crime stem from a sexual liaison that appears to

8. "Jody" is an abbreviation for "Joe the Grinder", a character who figures prominently in African-American folklore. For the African-American work-songs describing Jody's activities that Jackson collected at the Ellis Unit, another TDC prison farm, from 1965-1966, see Bruce Jackson (1972b: 169-176).

9. Since my data come from a male prison only, I refer to its occupants accordingly.

have been a result of “the D-Day war”. His criminality was a condition he acquired at birth. It is this imagery with which Barone begins his poem, and which leads to his “wild and reckless” ways until he is “deemed a juvenile”, that immediately contrasts with the first poem.

To Barone, the impersonal forces of the state now dictate and guide his life. For example, “six-six-fifty six” may refer to the identification number of the bus which transports prisoners from the county jail to the state prison, or from one state unit to another. The numbers may also be the product of a scribal error, and actually refer to the sign of the beast in the New Testament book of Revelations. The beast in those passages symbolizes the Antichrist, the final opponent of Christ. On the other hand, if they are not a mistake, then these numbers probably refer to some kind of identification a state or federal agency assigned him, making them “his only guide”, and once again determining his destiny over which he has no control, only a “future of shame” that has been imposed on him by other forces, individuals, and institutions since his birth. The text uses numbers again in stanza six and reinforces the idea that impersonal numbers the state assigns Barone necessarily dictate his future. Either meaning could serve in highlighting the author’s orientation toward time. Whether he forfeits his soul to the devil or is the subject of the state, he has recognized the nightmare facing everyone in the twentieth century — that of “living as a nameless number in a society of numbers”.¹⁰

The poet further heightens the notion of deterministic forces shaping his character by manipulating time, claiming Barone in this poem was “soon to be fifty”; because the poet, who is in his mid-thirties, describes himself in his poem as much older, he is perhaps intensifying his persona’s appeal to pity. In short, casting himself as a victim rather than victimizer, Barone joins the ranks of the oppressed, understanding that imprisonment is inevitable for those who fall victim to society, who become social outcasts. The poem is a product of Barone’s active participation in a well-established tradition: it portrays an individual who fails to take responsibility for his crime, placing the blame on external forces, such as antagonists who, without apparent provocation, would make him angry.

This is a Barone clearly unlike the one that the black poet describes. He assesses his situation and acts upon a very real set of conditions in the here and now. But realistically the freedom Barone longs for he can find only through death, as the final poem of the trilogy asserts in bringing closure to the preceding two.

10. In his study of black and white authors, H. Bruce Franklin characterizes the development of genres in prison, stressing the writings of long-term prisoners who identified themselves as a class — whose autobiographies of careers in crime were largely about prison life (1978: 140). Regarding the use of numbers, he wrote: “As the categories of slave laborers provided in 1865 by Article 13 of the Constitution, they [prisoners] began to express a sense of being branded as outcasts... a dehumanization that [was] summed up for them in the practice of assigning numbers to convicts to substitute for their names” (*Ibid.*).

The third poet — Art, the student collector himself — writes an epitaph for Johnny Barone, implying that neither he nor Barone can survive any longer in a world where conditions in prison are so bad that they are constantly under federal investigation.¹¹ Art buries the past that the first poet dramatically invoked:

THE EPITAPH OF JOHNNY BARONE

Met a feller once, used to put down rhymes
 Yeah, he'd grab words outta the air and put them in line.
 I sure wish ya'll could meet him sometime
 Only thing wrong though — he died.

Feller wrote 'bout him once
 What was called, "The Ballad of Johnny Barone"
 'Bout a dying breed of man
 That, I'm sorry to say, is gone.

He was a damn good feller what stayed all alone
 Hell of a guy, that Johnny Barone
 Yeah, I wish ya'll could've met him — 'cep he's gone
 And I reckon' it's for him I'm writin' this poem.

Someday folks'll make picture shows 'bout his life
 And others — well, they'll tell his tales
 'Bout how he lived a life of sin
 'Till he wound up in a Texas jail.

Hell of a thing, now that I'm dying
 And ol' Johnny's gone
 That this old con's left to put down these few last lines
 As the epitaph of Johnny Barone. (Art, May 1979.)

While Barone was concerned with the present in his own poem, Art looks toward the future, glorifying death in the form of an *epitaph* of Johnny Barone. Unable to cope in a world whose inhabitants are making his breed almost extinct, Barone leaves behind an "old con" to "put down these few last lines". Again, the author was actually quite young — at the time in his early thirties, the same age as Barone — but by identifying himself as one of Barone's peers, he depicts himself as close to the older, middle-aged figure Barone describes in his own poem. Indeed, the author/collector declares that he is the only one left to keep Barone's memory alive for future use. He, like the authors before, adopts a specific world view as he symbolically alleviates Barone's suffering through the imagined death of the protagonist. This poem ushers Barone out of existence,

11. See Steve J. Martin and Sheldon Ekland-Olson's *Texas Prisons: The Walls Came Tumbling Down* (1987), in which they provide a history of the litigation surrounding questionable TDC practices.

while his memory, the collector predicts, may stay alive through "picture shows 'bout his life" and in the mouths of those who will "tell his tales".

Prison, this third poet laments, presently contains very few of the traditional Barone type characters and will be less and less accommodating to such "a dying breed of man". Indeed, much of the data that students turned in to me indicate that gang-related violence is quickly diminishing the power that convicts, such as the Barone or Ainsworth type of characters, once enjoyed. Gangs have pushed aside the old building tenders (even though some building tenders became gang leaders) and Barone-like characters, upsetting the status quo. The third poem is an epitaph to not only Johnny Barone, but also to a traditional way of life inside prison, a way whose departure an "aging" convict laments as he looks into the future and sees a shortage of criminals with the sort of personalities he once knew.

The orientation of this third poem embraces a future that holds no promises for the protagonist's parole, something with which the author himself identifies. Because the poet must know that he will probably die a prisoner, he can justify his own existence only by equating himself with Barone and others like him, who are worthy of memorials after death. Although Barone actually is alive and now out of prison, the poet/collector changes all of this. Not only did Barone *stay* in prison, but he *died* there, a position the third poet shares vicariously. In short, this poem may be prophetic toward his *own* future in prison.

Time is a theme ubiquitous in prison culture, not just in poetry, but in other traditional expressive forms as well, such as folk speech, folk art, and folk narratives. In fact, the word for incarceration itself, for the whole experience of prison, is "time": imprisonment is called "doing time" or "serving time". The word features in many other epithets common in everyday jail speech: if an inmate adapts well to prison life, he serves "easy time", if he resists incarceration he serves "hard time". The amount deducted from a prisoner's sentence for each month served is "good time", as opposed to "flat time", in which there are no deductions for real time served. When prisoners end a work period it is "hat time", when they eat it is "chow-time", and when they go to sleep it is "rack time". As a prisoner approaches the day he is about to re-enter the free world, he is said to be serving "short time". There is also an extensive esoteric jargon which does not employ the word "time" but which has temporal referents, such as "nickel" (five-year sentence), "five and a dime" (fifteen year sentence), "turn out" (arrive at work on time), "stuck out" (arriving to a work place late), and so forth.

Time is an integral concept even in the institutionalized world view of the prison authorities. For instance, there is an explicit arithmetic governing how long before prisoners are eligible for parole. The most good time a prisoner may accumulate, a time-category that staff designate as "Line-Class I", is twenty days for each month served. Those in the "Line-Class II" category receive only ten extra days deducted from their sentence for each month served, and those in the

“Line-Class III” category earn no good time and therefore serve flat time. If a prisoner is serving a sentence for an aggravated offense, such as armed robbery, one-fourth of his sentence must pass before he may apply for a parole hearing, but this mandatory time before parole consideration includes his accumulated good time. However, if, after gaining an early release by the parole board, he breaks a parole violation that sends him back to prison, he loses all of the good time he earned before release. Theoretically, all prisoners may become eligible for parole consideration, though a few never get it. To them, good time does not mean as much as it does to those who feel they still have a future of freedom. Long-timers who expect to spend more than five years may even become pathologically fixated on the subject of time, as did a black folk artist who made drawings while incarcerated in TDC during the 1960s that consistently included a clock motif.¹²

Generally, prisoners’ concepts of chronological time are directly related to how long a sentence they must serve before they are eligible for parole. Grady Hilman, a Texas poet and prison arts programmer, recently told me that prisoners who are serving up to eighteen months before release are more likely to maintain their links to the outside world than those who won’t be up for parole for at least five years; members of the latter group shape their sense of time accordingly, knowing things will not only be different outside of prison upon their release, but aware also of the risk that they themselves will have changed. Folktales may illustrate this point: for instance, a prison joke says that after spending several

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12. See Lynn Adele’s master’s thesis, “Frank Jones: The Psychology and Belief System of a Black Folk Artist” (1987), and her catalog for a travelling exhibit, *Black History/Black Visions: The Visionary Image in Texas* (1989). In 1935, Frank Jones cared for a child whose alcoholic mother had abandoned her. In 1941, the mother, returning from a six-year absence, demanded her daughter back. Jones refused to relinquish the child; the mother retaliated by accusing him of kidnapping and rape. Jones was convicted and sentenced to two to five years in prison, two of which he spent in the Red River County Jail before transferring to a state prison, from which he was soon paroled. A few years later, after marrying a woman who had two grown sons, Jones was again arrested, tried, and convicted, this time of murder, when police discovered his next-door neighbor, a woman who had helped raise him, robbed and murdered, a crime in which his stepsons implicated him to authorities. Jones received a twenty-five year sentence, nine of which he served before his parole; by then he was sixty years old. But for a third time he lost his status as a parolee — became in prison lingo a “three-time loser” — when a malicious neighbor instructed a cleaning girl, whom Jones had hired prior to getting re-married, to get into Jones’s bed while he was sleeping, whereupon the neighbor reported to the police that a rape was occurring. As a parole violator, Jones had to return to prison to serve out his life sentence. By 1964, he began drawing pictures, which he called “devil houses”, that Adele asserts depict “architectural structures cut in cross-section to reveal a variety of figures contained within” (1989: 42). Grinning figures hovering above floors and hanging from ceilings Jones said were spirits that he had encountered throughout his life as a result of the veil with which, his mother once told him, he had been born (Ibid.: 41). Jones believed that the clock in the large tower at the Red River County Court House, where he had spent two years in the 1940s, was haunted and contained spirits, as did, he also believed, the large clock in the inner yard of Huntsville’s main prison unit, “The Walls”. Jones claimed the clocks in his drawings sometimes represented such “haints”, as he called them.

years behind bars, a newly-freed prisoner hops up in a barber's chair for his first freeworld haircut. When the inquiring barber asks his customer if he has ever done time, the ex-convict nervously replies "No!" When the nosey barber asks him what kind of haircut he wants, the customer unwittingly reveals his past by lapsing into prison slang peculiar to work in the fields: "Side line the sides, flat weed the top, catch up tight, and don't leave a comeback."¹³

Prisoners who serve several years face tremendous difficulty in eventually adjusting to the free world. Ones who see little or no hope for parole are those, of course, who must make even greater adjustments to the idea of freedom lost and must seek their comforts from whatever means and resources the prison offers them. These last two categories comprise the prisoners housed in Ramsey Two: recidivists are its main occupants, most of whom served time in other TDC units before transferring to "Two Farm". They can do either "hard" time or "easy" time, depending on how they adjust. Ultimately, what all these concerns with time in "The Trilogy of Johnny Barone" suggest is a concern with change and especially with the different rates and kinds of change between prison on the one hand and the society of the outside world on the other. This is what underlies the shared anxiety with, but dissimilar manifestation of, time in these three poems.

Indeed, an emotional change is what a prisoner doing only a few years might fear the least; his concerns lie with his family, friends and perhaps lover who assist him in re-integrating into free society. For all practical purposes, he is the same man upon his release as he was when he first entered prison. Those prisoners who fear that prison will change them for the worse are long-timers; they also realize that the free world will be least accommodating to them.

Art historians identify a clock motif in over half of his drawings, and use the clock as an indicator for his stylistic development. What began as empty circles resembling clocks at the top of his drawings developed into more apparent clocks that could be read; later in his career, clocks became objects with what Adele identified as "multiple hands and appendages that spin off and orbit around them", as if time is uncontrollable (*Ibid.*). Ironically, as Jones acquired money for his work, he purchased a watch. Indeed, Jones's later artistic stage marked the end of his life, as his health deteriorated from cirrhosis of the liver and his requests for parole brought him continued denial from the parole board (*Ibid.*: 46). One of his outside friends who appeared to be assisting him in obtaining parole candidly admitted that he feared Jones might discontinue his artistic career upon release. Jones, nevertheless, refused to give up hope for a pardon or parole. Even when his drawings gained national recognition and his work in prison bought him all the luxuries a prisoner might want, he nevertheless hoped one day he might again be a free man.

13. This is an abbreviated version of a joke that Jackson provided in his article, "Prison Folklore" (1965: 327). The joke hinges on its characters' familiarity with commands all prisoners hear while flatweeding (working with hoes) in a field: "side line", working up one side of a row; "flat weed", getting everything out of the field; "catch up tight", work closely together; "don't leave a comeback", get everything out of the row. Most prisoners in the "Line-Class II" time-earning category form hoe squads, whose first man, usually the best worker, is "lead row", and whose next best worker is usually the "tail row", located at the end of the squad, while the man directly behind the "lead row" is the "push row". Guards put the slowest ones in between, expecting them to keep up the pace the two end workers set (Jackson 1972b: 313).

For the author of the second poem, the real Johnny Barone, a support group presumably existed and offered him some consolation upon his release. During his incarceration, he never gave up hope that one day he would emerge from “the convict’s shadow” and resume his pre-prison life. Rooted in the here-and-now, Barone’s poem deals with the exigencies of the pains of imprisonment by participating in an expressive tradition accessible to the author; moreover, after he has succeeded in severing ties with his “brothers united in a future of shame”, his emerging from under the “convict’s shadow” a free man is consistent with his poem’s theme, that there are forces beyond his control that can just as easily encourage and promote the chances for parole revocation. Indeed, if Barone models himself after another Texas convict personality captured in prison folklore, the ex-building tender Ainsworth, who achieved parole after serving nine years, he will resume his criminal career and risk returning, losing all good time. On the other hand, we know from the first poet’s orientation toward time that the Barone figure, who was “born with a gun in his hand”, like outlaw figures from the past, resists change and subordination; Barone would rather face harsh consequences and punishment than succumb to forces beyond his control, since he was a “stubborn bastard once he’d made his stand”.¹⁴

All prisoners concur that serving “hard time” or “easy time” depends on how the individual adapts to prison culture, the essentials of which are encapsulated in a set of values and beliefs known as “the convict code”,¹⁵ a topic about which several students wrote extensively as part of their class assignments. Upon brief examination of his record, I learned that Art will never be up for parole. Accordingly, for Art and other convicts like him, there is no future outside of prison. Just as the black poet resurrects heroes of a past era who allied themselves with supernatural forces to combat their sworn enemies, Art creates an imaginary death for the protagonist, projecting his own fear of dying behind bars. Art is obviously concerned about the future, but it is a future that he will never experience in the free world.

The final, tragic world view is Art’s; it is perhaps the most important reason these poems emerge as a set. Memorializing the Barone character by writing his epitaph, Art capitalizes on a fictitious past while knowing he has forfeited his future — he is among the walking dead. He has been in prison several years and will probably never be a short-timer. Instead, he joins his memories of

14. This poem depicts a world view in which time stands still, an almost mythical time. It represents a kind of Anglo-American ballad type which G. Malcolm Laws refers to as type E, ballads about criminals and outlaws, although Laws classifies ballads of African Americans, including those of Railroad Bill and Stagolee, who share strong qualities, as I have demonstrated, with the Barone character, in a separate category (I).

15. The “convict code” is an informal set of unwritten rules that discourages prisoners from informing, or “snitching”, to staff about one another’s illegitimate activities, and prohibits them from interfering in one another’s affairs.

raconteurs he has heard in prison who have performed their own ballads and songs and who have composed their own poems with his own experiences, “an old con” who imagines movie directors will capture on celluloid his “few last words” about a fellow convict, underscoring the closure that he himself gives, not only to the first two poems, but to his and Johnny Barone’s transformation from life to death in prison.

To summarize, each poet reflects a world view that manifests a concern about the experiences of doing time according to whether he glorifies outlaws from the past, always ready to defend his reputation for making “the baddest motherfucker break down and say please”; yearns for freedom in the present, while blaming everybody but himself for his troubles; or fears a non-accommodating future that is eager to sweep away those older residents who may have benefited from the now-outlawed cock-of-the-walk building tender system. In these three poems, it is the acute anxiety about change that underlies the shared concern with, but dissimilar manifestations of, the idea of time, as the “Trilogy of Johnny Barone” feeds from and into one of the most ubiquitous expressive forms among Texas prisoners, prison folk poetry.