

Silently we went round and round...

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The value of regular exercise is discussed elsewhere in this issue of the *Southwest Journal of Medicine*. Authors Neuber and Buscemi outline a structured series of home exercises that can benefit patients with underlying cardiopulmonary issues such as COPD. Many artists have depicted people participating in varying forms of exercise, but few have been as impactful as the scenes of a prison yard portrayed first in 1872 by Gustave Doré and later copied in 1890 by Vincent Van Gogh.

In the book *London: A Pilgrimage*, William Blanchard Jerrold wrote extensively about life in Victorian London from the city's theatres, its commercial areas, its museums, parks, and zoos, to its more unsavory and poverty-stricken sections, including London's prisons. Gustave Doré's illustrations contain an engraving of prisoners exercising in the Newgate Prison yard.¹

People who find routine exercising a boring activity could empathize with these prisoners. The men shuffle in a clockwise unbroken circle, their hunched postures and downcast faces revealing apathy at its peak. One man in the foreground is perhaps a new prisoner, since he walks more upright; in time he may slouch as do the others. The man behind him stares directly at the viewer, as if asking for sympathy. In contrast, the guard's erect posture and folded arms demonstrate authority. The top hats of the two men standing to the right of the guard suggest that these are gentlemen, perhaps prison inspectors. The small prison yard is surrounded by bleak high stone walls with a few barred windows, adding to a feeling of claustrophobia. Ironically, two small butterflies hover at the top left of the picture; the men are trapped, but the butterflies can escape over the prison walls. The second verse of "I'll Fly Away," a gospel hymn written by Alfred E. Brumley in 1932, reflects this emotion,

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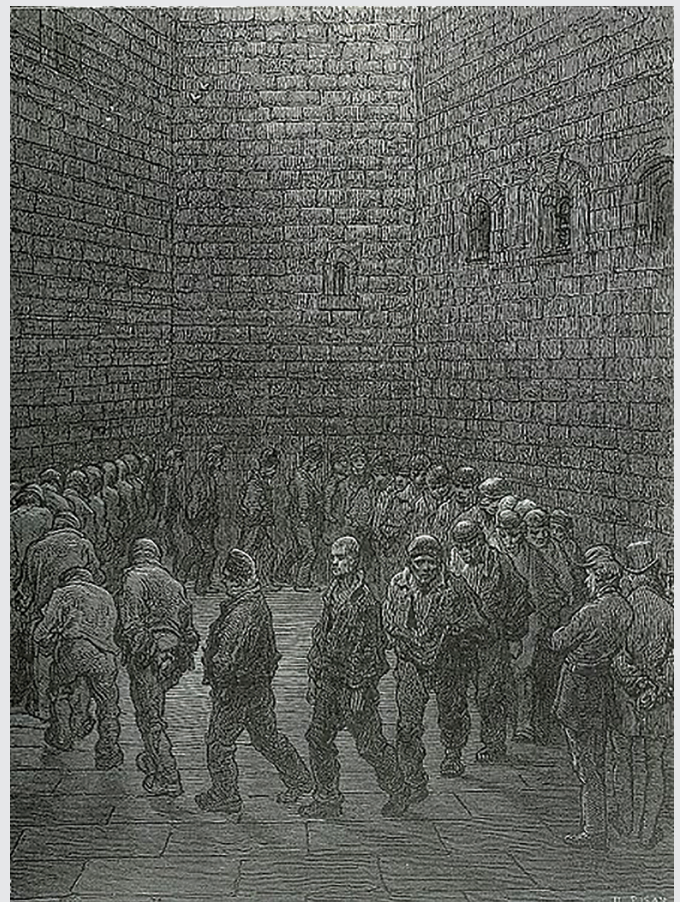


Figure 1. Gustave Doré. "Prisoner Exercise Yard."
From *London: A Pilgrimage*. 1872.

*When the shadows of this life have gone
I'll fly away
Like a bird from prison bars has flown
I'll fly away (I'll fly away)²*

In 1889, the impressionist painter Vincent Van Gogh was admitted to the Saint-Paul asylum in Saint-Remy, a town in southern France, after a series of episodes of mental distress.³ During his year-long stay, he created one of his most famous paintings—"Starry Night." He also copied Doré's engraving in his 1890 oil painting "Prisoners Exercising," also called "Prisoners Round."³

While many of his paintings in southern France are in cheerful colors of blue and green, the blues and greens of “Prisoners Exercising” do not evoke similar feelings. Those colors evoke the “shadows of the lives” of the prisoners as they trudge around the circle. Of interest is the man in the center front; like Van Gogh, this man has red hair. As Van Gogh endures his depressive episodes during his hospitalization, this prisoner endures his own cycle of misery.

The Irish Victorian poet and dramatist Oscar Wilde was familiar with prison life; he himself was incarcerated for two years, first in London’s Newgate Prison, later transferred to Reading Gaol. After his release in 1897, he wrote “The Ballad of Reading Gaol.”⁴ This poem reveals Wilde’s identification with the brutal treatment of the prisoners, including the “prisoners round” illustrated by both Doré and Van Gogh, “I walked, with other souls in pain / Within another ring.” As the prisoners walk “the round” within the small prison yard of Reading Gaol, they look

*With such a wistful eye
Upon that little tent of blue
Which prisoners call the sky*

An unusual connection with Van Gogh’s “Prisoners Exercising” can be found in Stanley Kubrick’s 1971 film “A Clockwork Orange,” according to author Poppy Burton, who asserts that Kubrick was influenced by the imagery of the artist’s depiction of prisoners.⁵ In the film, Alex leads a gang of “droogs” in escapades of senseless violence. After he is caught, he is subjected to a form of aversion therapy, in which he is conditioned to feel sick when he sees scenes of violence. Burton associates Alex’s psychological experiences in this form of “prison” with the mind-numbing experiences of the prisoners in Van Gogh’s painting. As Burton points out, “Although Kubrick once said films could convey emotions and mood in a way that ‘no other art form can hope to tackle,’ Van Gogh’s hand in the scene ultimately added to its impact.”⁵

Certainly, regular exercise can be beneficial, as Neuber and Buscemi attest. The “exercise” afforded Doré’s and Van Gogh’s prisoners, however, may benefit them physically, but the mental toll of being trapped in mindless circling may be stronger.



Figure 2. Vincent Van Gogh. “Prisoners Exercising.” (After Gustave Doré.) 1890. Pushkin Museum. Moscow.

*With slouch and swing around the ring
We trod the Fools’ Parade!
We did not care: we knew we were
The Devil’s Own Brigade:
And shaven head and feet of lead
Make a merry masquerade.*⁴

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