

Bonnie and Clyde, Schopenhauer, and the Paradox and Problem of Innocence

Paul Pickering

Paul Pickering is the author of seven novels, Wild About Harry, Perfect English, The Blue Gate of Babylon, Charlie Peace, The Leopard's Wife, Over the Rainbow and Elephant. The Blue Gate of Babylon was a New York Times notable book of the year, who dubbed it 'superior literature'. Often compared to Graham Greene and Evelyn Waugh, Pickering was chosen as one of the top ten young British novelists by bookseller WH Smith and has been long-listed for the Booker Prize three times. Educated at the Royal Masonic Schools and the University of Leicester, he has a PhD in Creative Writing from Bath Spa University where he is a Visiting Fellow, presented his doctoral thesis to the Bulgakov Society in Moscow, recently completed a Hawthornden Fellowship Residency on Lake Como and is a member of the Folio Prize Academy. The novelist J.G. Ballard said Pickering's work is 'truly subversive'. As well as short stories and poetry, he has written plays, film scripts and columns for The Times and Sunday Times. He lives in London and the Pyrenees. A major theme of his novel Elephant, published by Salt in 2021, is innocence.



Fig 1. Faye Dunaway and Warren Beatty in *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967).
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In the 1967 gangster road movie *Bonnie and Clyde*, the often-horrific events of the real-life story are cut with ingenuous humour and sheer innocence. In the bleak landscape of dust bowl America, we are rooting for Faye Dunaway and Warren Beatty from the start, even though we know their love is doomed and they will die in a summary execution in a car riddled with bullets. The historic couple themselves knew this, as Bonnie Parker wrote in a poem: 'It's death to Bonnie and Clyde'. Yet we come out of the cinema, or off Netflix, convinced the couple are innocent, if not heroic. As Albert Camus says in *The Rebel*: 'Every act of rebellion reveals a nostalgia for innocence and an appeal to the essence of being'.¹

One of the things the film, inspired by French existentialist new wave cinema, illustrates is that present-day legal systems have not caught up with philosophical thinking, in the same way the hapless police cars pursue the bank-robbing duo to state lines. Innocence has never been just a passive result of justice when guilt is not found, but a subjective phoenix-like state of childlike being.

Camus' thinking owes much to Arthur Schopenhauer's book, *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung*: the world as will and representation.² For Schopenhauer, as with Bonnie and Clyde, existence is meaningless except for our river of wantings (*Wille*) and what we individually and subjectively make of them. In *Bonnie and Clyde's* case, this is their tender love affair and increasingly catastrophic robberies.

1 Albert Camus, *The Rebel* (first published 1951, Vintage 1991) 54.
2 Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation* (first published 1819, Dover Publications 1958).

Schopenhauer in turn was inspired by the poet Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, especially his *Faust*, where Goethe inverts morality, the true innocent, Gretchen, goes to the gallows, and even the devil Mephistopheles cannot be sure of his outcomes: 'That power I serve, which wills forever evil, yet does forever good'.³ In its humanism the Enlightenment turned everything upside down, but not the law.

The Faust legend partially derives from the story of Eve and the garden of Eden, where Eve eats of the Tree of Knowledge, and discovers not just sin and the fig-leaf bikini, but free will. This wickedness, paradoxically, led to science, individual reasoning, democracy, the public meeting, and its natural corollary, the jury trial.

But the law itself has not embraced either existentialist thinking or, say, the Marxist-inspired structuralism of Michel Foucault, who said we should applaud criminals for keeping the justice system in work. The courts prefer instead to stress guilt, traceable to Eve's original sin, and dress up in spooky 17th-century costumes to reinforce the point. The call is for ever tougher sentences, yet there is little evidence these would have any effect on crime.⁴ In Clyde Barrow's case they certainly did not, and he even cut off one of his toes to get released early. In the UK, the legal system has a Ruritanian monarchy at its head and is proud of ancient feudal rituals and traditions; in Kafkaesque court documents, it is always R or Rex against the supposedly innocent accused.

No former prisoner I have met will admit fully to his crime, even if he has pleaded guilty. The very act of thinking makes us feel like Gods, even if we know nothing of Descartes and *cogito ergo sum*. Possibly the beauty of the world and looking out at the helter-skelter wantings of Schopenhauer's *Wille* make us feel innocent again, whatever we have done, but the law does not take this into consideration.

There is this innocent joy of life and appreciation of art, in particular music and language, in the character of Alex in Anthony Burgess's *A Clockwork Orange*, so much so that the reader is sickened by his reprogramming at the hands of the state. 'Oh it was gorgeousness and gorgeosity made flesh. The trombones crunched redgold under my bed, and behind my gulliver the trumpets three-wise silverflamed, and there by the door the timps rolling through my guts and out again crunched like candy thunder... I was in such bliss, my brothers'.⁵ Burgess saw the book as a sermon on free will.

Jean Genet, in *The Thief's Journal*,⁶ likens convicts to flowers, and his demi-monde is inverted in a way that underscores Schopenhauer's ideas and those of Jean-Paul Sartre, to whom the book is dedicated. In Genet's jails and mean streets, as Mick Jagger sings in 'Sympathy for the Devil', written after reading Mikhail Bulgakov's *Faust*-inspired *Master and Margarita*,⁷ 'All the cops are criminals, and all the sinners saints'.

To view the legal system as a zero-sum game, where innocence is defined or denied 'objectively' in a brief timeframe by a court, or by the police, can have consequences. When the law comes into contact with the 'street', occasionally the reaction can show just

how philosophically out of step on innocence we have become. The 'outlaw' Mark Duggan, of Irish Afro-Caribbean descent, was shot by police on 4 August 2011 after the police had decided he was guilty, but the more humanist 'street' thought otherwise and, helped by mobile phone connections, there were days of nationwide rioting and a bill of 100 million pounds.⁸ Messing with subjective perceptions of innocence can be costly as well as fatal.

Wearing a hijab in Iran is a mark of chastity and obedience. But the killing of Mahsa Amini by the morality police for not wearing one correctly also sparked riots, led by fifteen-year-old girls who are Eve-like in their rebellion and innocence.

Paradoxically, rehabilitation of serious offenders could be improved by using, not denying, this mantle of presumed innocence and accepting violent rebellion as part of being human. The Law Society has tried to modernise with publications like 'Law in the Emerging Bio Age' and the linked 'postcards from the next normal', but seems to shy away from a modern philosophical rethink of jurisprudence.⁹

In the picture from the film, Bonnie Parker is wearing a chaste head covering, but she also, wisely, has her finger on a trigger of her Colt Detective Special .38 revolver.

3 Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Faust* (first published 1808/1832, Macmillan 1965) passages 1335-6.

4 See Daniel S Nagin, Francis T Cullen, and Cheryl Lero Jonson, 'Imprisonment and Reoffending' (2009) 38(1) *Crime and Justice* 115-200.

5 Anthony Burgess, *A Clockwork Orange* (Heinemann 1962) 28.

6 Jean Genet, *The Thief's Journal* (Penguin 1967) 1.

7 Mikhail Bulgakov, *The Master and Margarita* (Vintage 1967).

8 Paul Lewis, 'All hell broke loose': Oxford graduate held at gunpoint by police' *Guardian* (London, 7 August 2011) <<https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2008/jul/09/ukcrime.ukguns>> accessed 10 September 2022.

9 Wendy Schultz and Trish O'Flynn, 'Law in the Emerging Bio Age' (*The Law Society*, August 2022) <<https://www.lawsociety.org.uk/topics/research/law-in-the-emerging-bio-age>> accessed 11 October 2022.