



Philosophical Echoes from the Prison Cell: From Socrates and Boethius to Antonio Gramsci and Toni Negri

Dr Marianna Papastephanou, University of Cyprus. Email: edmari@ucy.ac.cy

"Stone walls do not a prison make,
Nor iron bars a cage;
Minds innocent and quiet take
That for an hermitage".

Richard Lovelace, *To Althea, From Prison* (1642).

Though the study of prison literature has been well-established the philosophical study of texts written by or about imprisoned philosophers is astonishingly undeveloped. This is a regrettable neglect since, from Socrates, Cicero, and Boethius down to Bertrand Russell, Antonio Gramsci and Toni Negri, the history of thought has been marked either by imprisonment or by executions of philosophers. Many works have been written by or about philosophers literally placed in a dys-topos, i.e. the prison cell, either to be later released or executed. An interest in such works not only from the prism of their argumentation but also from the prism of the spatiotemporal framing of their argumentation and the socio-political context of their elaboration heightens philosophical insight and sheds light on the positioning of the philosopher in the world. Philosophy thus emerges, amongst other things, as reflection

on the distance between thought and reality, critical subjectivity and consolidated sociality. The scholars who have joined this workshop (and to whom I am indebted and owe special thanks) investigate some of the intersections of such themes with prison philosophy offering valuable insights into an issue that has so far remained in penumbra.

Though as such the imprisonment of the dissident is a rather invariable, unimaginative and flat social retaliation or a panoptical and, at times, even biopolitical (in Michel Foucault's terms) mechanism of control, it has nevertheless induced imaginative, rich and multi-vocal philosophical responses. Outside the literal incarceration, amongst the related topics that a workshop about prison-philosophical-literature invokes are indicatively:

- the constellation of utopics (the vision in tension with reality), topos (as affirmative relation to the existent), dys-topos (the apparently claustrophobic and nightmarish quality of the cell) and heterotopia (an 'other' topos rather than 'no' topos);
- the intended – and, in this context, somewhat paradoxical – trope of the 'echo' for the voice produced in a closed space where the narcissistic musings of society are not quite reverberated but rather intricately re-examined, re-shuffled or set on trial. In an interesting subversion of the myth of Narcissus and Echo, instead of reproducing the narcissistic voice, the echo challenges the kind of narcissism that is typically generated not in isolation but, on the contrary, in full social participation;
- issues of marginality and exclusion also surface while the echo of the cell articulates a voice that the society often receives as mere noise;

- an exploration of the heroic beyond the romanticization of the dissident or of the reason of her/his incarceration;
- a possible reading of the cell as a retreat from the perspective of feminist utopics and of echo as a gendered voice beyond biological sex;
- the fertilization of philosophy through ‘aversive thinking’ (to use Stanley Cavell’s term)¹;
- philosophical discontent opposing the speed of daily life, slowing it down, coupling thought with a retardation process (to employ Alain Badiou here²) and with the *schole* of the prison temporality;
- the philosopher as public intellectual or a new, more ironic meaning given to the philosopher as a private ironist (Rorty’s term) and to philosophy deployed in a peculiar privacy;
- philosophical thought provocation in provocative times;
- the demands that transvaluation and radical change make upon the self and society;
- and the plasticity of humanity that the plea for a better or perfect world presupposes.

Therefore, apart from the first-sight associations with the imprisoned philosopher and with the philosopher who brings to light the imprisonment of humanity, this workshop explores philosophy as a voice of discontent about the world as it is and as an invocation of the world as it could or should be. Hence, it does not concentrate only

¹ Stanley Cavell, ‘Aversive Thinking: Emersonian Representations in Heidegger and Nietzsche’. *New Literary History* 22, 1 (1991): 129-160.

² Alain Badiou, *Infinite Thought*. Trans. Oliver Feltham and Justin Clemens. (London: Continuum, 2005), p. 38.

on philosophers' response to the social cost that raising such a voice often entails. It also points to ways in which philosophers are themselves shaped by the cell and to ways in which the cell can be re-configured into an interval, an islet, a locus of monologue that unleashes energies often obfuscated by dialogue, a monastic cell whose ascetic quality purifies thought and prepares the self for the philosopher's lifetime internalization of the distance from the existent. Philosophical writings by (or about) imprisoned thinkers raise a broad and rich set of issues that range from illustrating the embodied figure of the public intellectual down to debating philosophy's potential intervention in educating humanity and in shaping the world by offering the learning experiences of a positively meant disorientation, a disruption of a routinized, automatic course of thought.

Philosophy thus emerges from such writings as a lived experience and an existential choice beyond its frequent reduction to a mere profession or to a protected, armchair preoccupation. Or, philosophy personified in prison textuality such as Boethius's and set as an interlocutor becomes the recipient of the philosopher's relentless questioning and self-reflective challenge where boundaries – discursive as well as extra linguistic – are in-scribed, de-scribed, and trans-scribed. As Joel Relihan (in this workshop) explains, ultimately, the philosopher and philosophy negotiate and at the same time parody prose and poetry, thought and politics, life and death. And, as Heidi White, in her paper, discusses Boethius along with Job, rather than simply being boundary discourses the religious and the philosophical also appear to merge or intersect in important ways. Or, philosophy welcomed by the imprisoned African intellectuals and acted out as *ubuntu* (as Mecke Nagel shows in her paper for this workshop) escapes the chains of West-imposed boundaries such as the analytic and the continental that exclude African philosophy from the disciplinary spectrum. In kicking over such

traces, philosophy embraces new possibilities of becoming through different sensibilities. Or, philosophical openness to another thought, another persuasion, along with the pacifist commitments of the philosopher, leads Russell to reading in the cell a philosophical text (Husserl's *Logische Untersuchungen*) in a then banned language and of an incriminated origin (German) at the given time (WW1). Ironically, the cell and not the university office or the lecture room was the place where a dissident Russell could cross more freely and peacefully philosophical boundaries and let his philosophical outlook be influenced (perhaps even shaped, despite his well-known criticisms of idealism) by a textuality otherwise withdrawn from the public sphere. As Andreas Vrahimis in this workshop has shown, the crossing of a divide between continental and analytic philosophy that was being formed and was destined to have a long future before it was simultaneously performed and deferred, debated and unaccomplished in a context that led the main protagonists, i.e., the poet T. E. Hulme and the philosopher Russell, either to death at war or to imprisonment respectively. Yet, though Russell took with him a copy of Husserl's book to review it in prison, and read it, the review was never written, let alone aired, with concatenated effects on the crossing of the divide between Anglophone and Germanic philosophy. Significant thus has been not only what has been written in the prison space, but also what has remained an unfulfilled project conceived just before imprisonment and attempted within the prison's limits, barred by some cause that will remain unknown, and doomed to constitute only a counter-factual possibility that was then not pursued.

The thinker in prison experiences a spatiality that is heterogeneous to ordinary relative rootedness in space, since it breaks with the quotidian lived perception of movement, limit, and constantly re-visited locality. The heterogeneous spatiality of the cell evoking isolation and ruptured social bonding is often (though not always) effected by

the asynchronous intellectual temporality of the thinker and her/his world. In simpler words, the philosopher thinks somewhat outside (perhaps ahead of) the given time that frames the thinking of her/his fellow citizens. The subject has already surrendered to the kind of rupture of temporal social synchronization that eventually leads to the heterogeneous spatiality of the cell. The philosopher explores alternative possibilities of thinking about, acting in and organizing life and society. Some of those different idealities and practices trigger the vehement reaction of the society that has been philosophically challenged: the case of Socrates is the most emblematic and commemorated. But even when the incarceration of the recalcitrant philosophers does not lead to their death, that is, in less dramatic instances than those of Socrates or Boethius, the rupture of the smooth flow of time-in-society and in-freedom that the cell symbolizes mobilizes ever novel philosophical transformations and produces multiple effects. In Thoreau's case, the extremely brief experience of the dystopian heterotopia of the prison, i.e., the 'other' world that the cell constitutes within the world, is felt by the thinker as the appropriate retreat for those who, in a slave owning society challenge the institutions of property and taxation. A most influential text, *On Civil Disobedience*³ was thus born of a break with the then existing reality the retaliation of which was channeled through the quite predictable and unimaginative measure of incarceration. The performativity of one's convictions passes through actual conviction and echoes, as Paul Standish in this workshop suggests, a deeper ontological-anthropological condition.

For some thinkers (e.g. Negri, Stiegler) the 'why' of the imprisonment may not stand out as a philosophical stake – at least not in the sense that this could be said about

³ H. D. Thoreau. "Civil Disobedience", in: *Walden and Civil Disobedience* (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1983).

Socrates, Boethius, Thoreau or Gramsci. And even when it comes to Negri and Stiegler that the reason of their imprisonment can be separated from the category of philosophical relevance that we have just discerned does not mean that the reason is of the same nature in their cases. But, what is important is that the experience of incarceration proved to be a philosophically formative one for both. For Negri,⁴ the prison gives rise to thoughts about the solitude of the revolutionary subject and internal freedom. For Stiegler, paradoxically lived and thought out as *epoche* or even a no- *topos*, as a suspension of the world, a bracketing of unreflective rootedness in social space, the prison cell becomes the *topos* and the cause of philosophical becoming, the making of a philosopher. As Stiegler himself explains⁵ (and Anna Kouppanou accounts in her contribution to this workshop), his experience in prison, and his ‘chance to consider this world as does a fish flying, above its element – an elementary milieu totally constituted by supplements, where the element, in other words, is *always lacking*’, paved the way for the following discovery. From the intimacy of his cell Stiegler began discovering his notions and forming his philosophy. In this way, he began to take part in the *hypomnesic* nature of the world.

Much has already been indicated about how philosophy re-emerges in the discursive space that the closure/closeness of the cell has historically opened up. Philosophy as consolation, solace and treatise on happiness, transcendence and worldliness, is the only companionable presence in Boethius’s solitude. As a subtext, philosophy provides the justification for the worthwhile and beautiful risk for the sake of justice that Socrates is willing to undertake. Echoing the uncompromising commitment to

⁴ Toni Negri, *Exil*. Trad. François Rosso et Anne Querrien (Éditions Mille et Une Nuit, 1998).

⁵ Bernard Stiegler. “How I Became a Philosopher”. In: *Acting Out* (ed. Werner Hamacher, trans. David Barison, Daniel Ross, and Patrick Crogan) (pp. 1-37) (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009).

action that is conscious of its historico-political import, Gramsci's philosophy⁶ defends the idiom of an 'impassioned sarcasm' that does not recoil in horror when the dangers of social homeostatic reaction become evident or felt.

Yet, much more will be left aside – given the length limits of this inaugural text, inaugural in its intention to introduce a so far non-thematized topic and to initiate a new direction in research rather than exhaust its scope. Hugo Grotius, Marquis de Sade, Wittgenstein (who, while in war prison, wrote notes which he later used in his *Tractatus*) are only some of the philosophers whose prison textuality has not been addressed either here or in the workshop.⁷

Finally, another philosophical text written in prison, one that has not been discussed either here or in the workshop, must, at least, be mentioned now in these conclusive comments. Marginal and largely bypassed in mainstream philosophy, the *Memoirs* of Marie-Jeanne Philippon, known as Madame Roland, is a text about politics and about the place of women in the public sphere of the nascent nation-states. It is mentioned here neither in a supplementary sense (so that the workshop or the present account appear more complete and inclusive) nor as a mere absence in, and lacuna of, the workshop that, in being mentioned, shows awareness of limits or of possible angles from which this approach might be critiqued as neglectful. On the contrary, its mention is recruited here in the conclusive comments precisely to attest to the inconclusive character of the workshop, and to the fact that the whole endeavour is to be continued. In its exemplarity, it is also mentioned because it illustrates yet another broadening of space that the prison cell had paradoxically pointed to. Writing in the

⁶ Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*. Ed and trans Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (N. York: International Publishers, 1971).

⁷ Likewise, the related though reverse topic of philosophy about imprisonment, penal logics, etc has also been left out here.

closed space of the prison and influenced by Plutarch, Voltaire and Rousseau amongst others, Madame Roland envisioned *inter alia* the kind of enlargement of the public space that would accommodate the female philosopher. On the way to execution, Madame Roland exclaimed a trans-historical truth, both philosophical and spectral to philosophy, one that lies behind many instances of incarceration and/or execution of philosophers as well as behind instances of philosophers falling into the worst complicities for a cause or an ideology: O Liberté que de crimes on commet en ton nom! [Oh, Liberty, what crimes are committed in thy name!]