

## Introduction

You become a dissident when you first cross the line from doublethink and fear, and begin to say openly what you believe. The transition from hiding your thoughts to speaking them is a moment of tremendous relief and liberation. For the first time you achieve an inner freedom in which there is no discord between what you think, say and do. . . . As the pressure from the regime grows, you come to understand how terrified it is of your independence and how desperate it is to recapture the space you have conquered from it—your own mind. . . . In prison however, you realize most clearly a basic truth of life: that people do not want any life by any means, but rather a life of freedom, even if it is obtained at great personal cost. This is true of individuals, societies and nations. Paradoxically, it is in prison, behind bars and concrete walls, that one gains a level of moral clarity and simplicity that is impossible to achieve in almost any other situation.

—*Natan Sharansky, The Times, Friday, 10 December 2010, p. 37*

For centuries the experiences of European intellectuals in prisons of various kinds stimulated them to reconsider aspects of the human condition in their responses to personal crises, and Europe's turbulent history of wars, persecution, and revolution. While these writers' circumstances and contemporary attitudes to prisoners have varied greatly, similar forms, themes, and functions tend to recur in their prison writing. The structure of this book, juxtaposing different pairs of writers across national and period boundaries, from late antiquity to the late twentieth century, gives form to this aspect of its argument. Yet, while individuals have reacted to pain, loneliness, fear, and violence in similar ways, the external history of penal practice and state-organized mass persecution has changed the ethics, politics, and reception of prison writing. This is particularly owing to the unprecedented industrial scale of murder and slave labor in twentieth-century prison camps, the impact of totalitarianism, mass communication, and a wider appreciation of human rights based on religious ethics and ideals of

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justice and equity. These changes require and receive full historical contextualization for each case study offered here, including those from earlier periods, and explain the slight bias toward writers in history's new "age of hatred."<sup>1</sup>

Even though the experience of different centuries and regimes varies greatly and there is no single category of space implied—all the subjects of this book suffered involuntary confinement in different conditions—being a prisoner or captive in any period means being cut off and kept apart from the continuities of normal life, however that was defined. As this book demonstrates, dialogue of various kinds becomes an essential tactic. The need for contact with normality and the outside world is so strong because it enables one to continue to recognize oneself. Introspection and lyric forms of writing associated with subjectivity, and self-impression as textual representation of an idea of selfhood, also predominate. Prisoners of state or political dissidents, prisoners of conscience, and confined victims of intolerance and hatred often feel a special need to maintain and defend their integrity and that core of convictions for which they have been imprisoned. Resistance may sometimes enhance chances of survival, but this is seldom sufficient; for personal and political reasons, the persecuted captive may decide one must survive morally or spiritually intact, which is why some prisoners regard suicide as a paradoxical means of self-preservation; similarly, martyrdom.<sup>2</sup> Such prisoners have always used various means to preserve and defend themselves against the corrosion of fear, uncertainty, and disinformation. Writing is one of the most important and durable of these methods. In captivity writing is often a continuation of the authors' ordinary vocations, but confinement and repression also prompt dissidents to speak out, either in self-defense or for their cause. Many prisoners wrote personal accounts that interpret their past, record present interrogations or suffering, and preserve memorial images of themselves and others as historic testimony. The Irish academic Brian Keenan indicated that he wrote about his experiences as a prisoner of Beirut militiamen, after his release, "to imprison" his own "psychic terror on paper."<sup>3</sup> Traumatic memories seem especially long lasting; yet writing with hindsight, after release, is always a different proposition from writing in extremis.

<sup>1</sup> See further Niall Ferguson, *The War of the World: History's Age of Hatred* (London: Penguin Books, 2007).

<sup>2</sup> There is considerable overlap in the themes and forms of writing by imprisoned political dissidents and religious martyrs. The combination of outer narrative of human fear and the violence attendant on imprisonment as well as the recourse to dialogue and dream visions in relating these outer and inner worlds of self-awareness and realization may be observed in several of the writers in this book who did not see themselves as martyrs for religion, and in the experiences of Christian martyrs throughout history. However, martyrology and testimony by dying is not my focus.

<sup>3</sup> *An Evil Cradling* (London: Random House, 1993), p. xiv.

Most of the works considered here are by writers, politicians, spiritual leaders, or other professional intellectuals whom most readers would now regard as men and women of conviction rather than criminal convicts. They were all writers used to expressing themselves in language inflected by their literary experience as readers as well as their personal experience of the world. They may have broken laws in defense of higher values than unjust laws, but their ethical concerns were recognized as important for their own time and place. (The exception appears to be Anne Frank, yet her posthumous standing as a thoughtful historic witness belies this apparent anomaly: she was an exceptional writer.) My aim was to sift out texts that might illuminate a literary phenomenon among European dissidents and prisoners of conscience, representing a range of periods, language cultures, and literary forms that could be conveniently made accessible to English-speaking readers. I hoped thereby to define a politics of prison writing. Many of these prisoners remain well known—Boethius, Thomas More, John Bunyan, Marie-Jeanne Roland, Oscar Wilde, Antonio Gramsci, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Anne Frank, and Primo Levi—and have been discussed independently, in specialist studies. (For others, especially the poets Jean Cassou and Irina Ratushinskaya, there is very little secondary literature.) Yet their different kinds of writing in captivity have never been read alongside each other so closely and extensively as specific responses to their various kinds of imprisonment. In addition, whereas existing studies of the works of such well-known intellectuals as Gramsci or Bonhoeffer tend to concentrate on their ideas, the literary tactics that give these ideas their vitality and impact are seldom addressed.

Each section of this book therefore offers close readings of these disparate texts related by their pragmatic functions as strategies of resistance to their authors' conditions of imprisonment, confinement, and persecution. Overall, it juxtaposes a wide range of component subjects, including fiction, memoirs, letters, theology, poetry, and political philosophy, in pairing authors to propose hitherto unexplored similarities between their works, their ethical motives, intellectual lives, and responses to captivity and persecution. The rationale for their selection here implies not only their differences from each other as writers from several different periods and language cultures but also a comparative significance in their sites of textual production and recurrent themes.<sup>4</sup> Most of the Latin, French, Italian, and German texts have been read in more than one English translation with a close eye on the

<sup>4</sup> With the exception of Ratushinskaya's Russian poetry, which has been studied only in English translations that are nevertheless germane to the argument adduced from them—they saved her life—the linguistic range of texts has been limited by my variable competence and reading knowledge of primary and secondary sources.

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original, especially for poetry. I believe that the same arguments could be adduced from different material; indeed, this project has been refined and distilled from a much larger range of subjects purely on practical grounds.

The structure of this book is unprecedented. It gives form to my argument for a series of overlapping, pragmatic strategies commonly used by writers in resisting enforced captivity: defense of ideas and values; self-defense and preservation; and testimony for mankind. Within each chapter close readings draw out the specificities of the individual texts yet also suggest the wider resources, including literary conventions, that would have helped the prison writer reconfigure strange or traumatic experiences for expression more easily or effectively. Each half chapter has a synchronic approach to writing produced within specific historical contexts; but the larger argument for identifying these works as part of an intellectual “tradition” of prison writing, based on the recognition of a special relationship between life and literature, derives from the arrangement of diachronic pairings of texts that illuminate recurrent features in prison writing across periods, language cultures, and genres. This approach can therefore offer new insights and opportunities for reassessment of well-known texts not usually considered for their historic literary qualities, as well as poetry that is rarely discussed in English, on the basis of their functions in acknowledged contexts. The authority of the writer’s experience of imprisonment is granted by readers but was frequently assumed by writers to be an important part of the appeal of their work. One of the most celebrated and widely read prison authors of the nineteenth century, Silvio Pellico, described his writing program in his forward to *Le mie prigioni* (1832):<sup>5</sup>

I wanted . . . to help console some unhappy creature by this account of the evils that I suffered and of the consolations that, as I know from my own experience, a man can find amid the greatest misfortunes; to bear witness that in the course of my own long sufferings I did not find humanity so wicked, so unworthy of forgiveness, so devoid of excellent souls as it is usually made out to be; to inspire the noble-minded with a warm love for one another, to hate no one, but have an irreconcilable hatred only for vulgar pretension, mean-spiritedness, treachery, and all moral degradation; and finally to reassert a truth already well known but often forgotten: that Religion, no less than Philosophy, calls for energy of

<sup>5</sup> *My Prisons*, tr. I. G. Capaldi, S.J. (London: Oxford University Press, 1963), p. xxiv; Pellico’s prison memoirs, written after his release, described his spiritual awakening in prison, which shocked and disappointed many of his former associates among radical Italian nationalist writers and thinkers; the text was widely circulated, in an average of six editions a year in Italy (see further p. xxiii), and translated into most European languages within ten years.

will and tranquillity of judgement, and that without these two together there can be neither justice nor dignity nor sure and stable principles.

These aims to console and to testify to broad human concerns on the authority of personal experience (however partial) reflect the declared aims of many other prisoners writing since antiquity.

Dialogic forms were frequently selected by prisoners as opportune in different practical and cultural situations. As traditional vehicles for philosophical argument, dialogue and dialectic were used to organize logical arguments adduced by Boethius in early sixth-century Italy, by Thomas More in Tudor England, and by Antonio Gramsci in Mussolini's fascist Italy. More, Gramsci, and Bonhoeffer, with many other prison writers in different periods, also used the implied dialogue of letters (correspondence), exchanged with their families, relying on others to complete their meanings by filling in the gaps between different centers of consciousness. Boethius and Bonhoeffer, Cassou and Ratushinskaya also used the subjective monologue forms that are the generic basis of lyric, but even these forms imply an intertextual dialogue with received literary traditions and engage readers' expectations of these genres. It would be oversimplifying to argue that the emotional intensity associated with lyric verse counterbalances the cerebral concentration demanded by the theological and philosophical discourses of Boethius or Bonhoeffer. Yet contrast and difference are rhetorically marked or coded by a choice of different forms. Bonhoeffer had continued to nourish his spiritual life alone in his cell by singing psalms and hymns; his description of how surprised he was to find that in the midst of his scholarly work he also started to compose lyric verse in prison suggests that this genre had special value for a writer in prison. The Anglican priest Terry Waite reflected upon his own tactics for surviving four years of brutal captivity in Beirut: "Good language, like good music," he wrote, "has the capacity to breathe a certain harmony into the soul." Waite was already professionally aware of the life of the spirit and realized at the time that if he were to endure long periods of solitary confinement and uncertainty, he would need to develop a strong inner life. He persuaded himself that captivity presented "a unique opportunity to take an inner journey" since he was unable to travel to seek self-affirmation and stimulus externally, and later considered that this strategy succeeded because he had been an avid reader in the past; in childhood he had also been encouraged to learn poetry by heart, which he was able to draw upon for comfort and consolation when he had no books or contact with the outside world.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> See Terry Waite, Opinion column, *The Times*, 13 March, 2010, p. 20.

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Recurrent themes that permeate the functional diachronic pairings may be drawn out of these prisoners' texts. Madame Roland and Bonhoeffer each wrote about how they organized their cells and daily routine to maintain the self-discipline that they recognized was mentally liberating. This was a conscious strategy of resistance in exigent conditions to the shock of arrest, change, confinement, and isolation from friends and family. Writing distracted them, thus alleviating (to some measure) the contingent pressures of time and place; this was briefly consoling. These texts embody their specific, temporal resistance as prisoners and represent it for the consolation of other readers. Reordering the actual furniture created space for reordering thoughts and expectations: the furniture of their minds. Many of these imprisoned writers show themselves already aware of such functions for writing and used tropes of imprisonment and escape from confinement as they reassessed their responses to life, learning, and past literature in their new situations and works. No one writes in a vacuum, or without purpose, as even the density of prisoners' graffiti in the Tower of London can demonstrate; simple statements of faith and personal identity provoked others in the same space at different times to respond in similar ways. One inscription begat another.<sup>7</sup>

The literary experience of each writer in captivity also provided common themes and associative links. These include the power and freedom of the mind and the redemptive, consoling fruits of mental discipline and imagination; recognition of the importance of family relationships, especially the agency of a supportive feminine "other"; and a series of paradoxes (such as light in darkness) that reconcile conceptual oppositions in constructive modes and create gain by loss. Recurrent biblical tropes include: references to the struggles of Jonah, St. Peter, and Jesus; other figures of liberation or escape by flight, memory, dream, and death; prison tropes that stand for the world, the body, or obsessive thoughts; and the prisoner's consciousness of support from cultural traditions that expressed admiration for the ethical imperatives of conscientious struggle, dissent, endurance, and written testimony that define the politics of prison literature. Thomas More and Oscar Wilde as prisoners each meditated on transcendent meanings for the suffering of Jesus; More also identified himself with St. Peter and quoted from Boethius's great work of prison literature; Boethius had read and remembered Plato's dialogues commemorating the teaching of the condemned philosopher Socrates. Dietrich Bonhoeffer read and reflected on Dos-

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Ruth Ahnert, "Writing in the Tower of London during the Reformation, ca. 1530–1558," in *Prison Writings in Early Modern England*, ed. William H. Sherman and William J. Sheils, *Huntington Library Quarterly*, 72 (2009), 172–78 and references cited.

toyevsky's novel, *Notes from the House of the Dead*, that reworked aspects of the author's personal experience of imprisonment. Bonhoeffer also identified himself with biblical figures such as Moses, and Jonah, confined within the belly of the whale for disobeying God's commands when he failed to fulfill his ministry. Wilde and Primo Levi correlated the horrors of their respective situations with those of characters in Dante's *Inferno*, without appropriating Dante's theology. Roland and Anne Frank inscribed images of themselves within historical writing projects that have ensured their survival after death as literary voices on the page. Juxtaposing prisoners' texts from different periods and language cultures makes it easier to appreciate how often they converge in subtle and distinct ways, and how their similarities reflect the empirical reality of their authors' confined circumstances and, simultaneously, rise above them in uplifting responses that can move and inspire others. In short, these texts and authors have often been regarded as instrumental in helping others to live their lives. Brian Keenan's account of his four-year imprisonment described it as "a strange reality far removed from normal human experience, yet one in which, paradoxically, so much more of what we are as human beings was revealed" (p. xiii).

The focus of this book is the importance of the life of the mind as it is manifested in new writing produced from situations of captivity, confinement, and persecution rather than the cultural, political, or sociological significance of the "prison" as a site of mechanized brutality or social conditioning (as Michel Foucault has taught us).<sup>8</sup> It is written for specialist and non-specialist academic colleagues and graduate students with interests in comparative literature, cross-cultural history, religion, ethics, and politics, as well as for general readers who may be curious to explore evidence of the writing life and the resilience of extraordinary human beings. Among the questions explored are, What kinds of themes and forms recur in this writing, and why? How is this prison writing paradigmatic yet particular, constrained by conventions yet also rising above them? What gives a writer authority in the eyes of readers; and why does the carceral experience, and literary self-impression, of those acknowledged to be at the border of life and death seem important to others living comfortable lives faraway and in different periods? As it defines writers' literary strategies of resistance in response to their situations, this book is also concerned with their formal and rhetorical methods and retains an ethical concern for applications of writing and readers' responses to writing produced in several varied yet comparable kinds of captivity. In this way it differs from earlier studies of French or

<sup>8</sup> Michel Foucault, *Surveiller et punir: naissance de la prison* (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1975); tr. Alan Sheridan as *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (London: Allen Lane, 1977).

North American prison writing, feminist approaches, and specialist period or author-centered studies of these works.

While there are effectively no precedents for this cross-cultural approach to the topic, studies of French literature have led the way in demonstrating the centrality of prison writing to various concepts of an established literary canon. In 1989 Jean-Marc Varaut briefly described the situations of fifteen poets in a chronological sequence.<sup>9</sup> Yet, as a lawyer and social scientist, he naturally concentrated on writers' experiences rather than their expressiveness, and he neither linked subjects thematically nor provided an overview of their relationships to other literary contexts, except to hint at the meditative and subjective qualities of carceral poetry. (I am grateful to Varaut for an introduction to Jean Cassou's sonnets.) By contrast, Elissa Gelfand's *Imagination in Confinement* (1983) had discussed five Frenchwomen's prison writings, from the late eighteenth to the twentieth century, within social and literary contexts (specifically, "the forces that shaped their lives" as women), to explore how their works might offer insights into "our own imprisonment in cultural prejudices" (p. 10) of the gendered "monstrous": antifeminism.<sup>10</sup> The large-scale recovery and publication of women's writing indicates the historic significance of Gelfand's pioneering study but also, inevitably, its limitations in terms of more recent historical studies of women's writing and its circulation. Her discrete subjects (including Marie-Jeanne Phlipon, better known as Madame Roland) are assumed to reveal universal preoccupations and attitudes: "establishing the threads that connect women's texts through time" (p. 23). Gelfand's book indicates that it was at least in part a reaction to the exclusion of women writers from Françoise d'Eaubonne's *Les Ecrivains en cage* (1970), which had ranged beyond French literature to include texts by St. John of the Cross, Silvio Pellico, and Dostoyevsky, yet explicitly omitted the writings of more obviously politically engaged prison writers. These she regarded as essentially "non-literary" agents of action that contested "la société elle-même" rather than the representative forms given to society in works of art (p. 222). D'Eaubonne antedated Foucault and read the *vie intime* of the writer in his text in the light of psychoanalytical theories from the 1960s.<sup>11</sup> By contrast, I write of the consolations of writing for all and do not presume equivalence between the writing self and the writer's literary self-impression however closely they

<sup>9</sup> *Poètes en prison. De Charles d'Orléans à Jean Genet* (Paris: Librairie Académique Perrin, 1989).

<sup>10</sup> (Ithaca: Cornell University Press). Gelfand's chapters are subtitled "The Biological Monster"; "The Social Monster"; and "The Intellectual Monster."

<sup>11</sup> *Les Ecrivains en cage: essai* (Paris: Editions André Balland). See also Nicole Thatcher and Ethel Tolansky, eds., *Six Authors in Captivity: Literary Responses to the Occupation of France during World War II* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2006), for a collection of papers by different hands on a synchronic, localized topic.

may be related.<sup>12</sup> Active political engagement is no bar to the production of literature.

Following Foucault, and looking well beyond the French tradition, Ioan Davies did more to explain—as a professor of sociology—how prison writing relates to our everyday concerns and how “some issues in prison writing, which involve the telling of a particular kind of story,” have become part of Western literature. His concern with “how prisoners, through writing, try to rescue themselves and us” (p. 7), lacks Gelfand’s historical awareness but shared her commitment to contemporary social criticism.<sup>13</sup> His subjects are chiefly from the twentieth century; nevertheless, the range of reference extends (ahistorically) to Boethius, in order “to establish a sense of the themes that pervade prison literature.” Davies covered vast historic and topographical fields, but his approach did not require him to locate his subjects in their own synchronic contexts; he used extracts from his selected texts as if they were all written by his contemporaries in order to illuminate late twentieth-century theoretical and political arguments. His range and resolute command of theory is impressive, yet his premises that, for example, the humanities in the postmodern world are “complicit in barbarism” and reduced to “absolute relativism” can seem reductive and strained. The cultural politics of Gelfand’s and Davies’s arguments epitomize a North American approach to prison writing pioneered by H. Bruce Franklin’s *The Victim as Criminal and Artist: Literature from the American Prison*.<sup>14</sup> Franklin’s thesis—also propounded in the wake of Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish*—that understanding society and culture in the United States requires an understanding of “the role of the American prison” throughout its history, and the struggles of oppressed “minorities,” was originally perceived as radical and iconoclastic. Hitherto marginalized, black writers were reassessed in the light of literary and oral traditions descended from cultural conditions in an early slave economy. By 1989 Franklin’s revisionist agenda had succeeded so well that its author was able to affirm that “literature by American prisoners became recognized as a crucial part of our culture soon after the first edition” (p. xii).<sup>15</sup> I argue that following the medieval reception of Boethius’s *Conso-*

<sup>12</sup> See further on this topic in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century literature, Max Saunders, *Self-Impression: Life-Writing, Autobiografiction, and the Forms of Modern Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

<sup>13</sup> *Writers in Prison* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990).

<sup>14</sup> (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978). Expanded and revised, with a new introduction, as *Prison Literature in America* (1989).

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Doran Larson, “Toward a Prison Poetics,” *College Literature*, 37 (2010), 143–66; the author is described as an associate professor of English in the United States and leader of a writing workshop “inside Attica Correctional Facility.” Some of the best studies from North America on prison writing maintain the arguments initiated by Franklin and developed by Davies: e.g., Jason Haslam’s focus, in *Fitting Sentences* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005), on late nineteenth- and twentieth-century texts in their related political and historical contexts illustrates three

*lation of Philosophy* (ca. 524–25) this was always the case in Europe, and since I am not concerned here with the history of social developments, penal policy, or contemporary popular culture, which often valorizes the delinquent, I refer to the prison or idea of captivity only where it is discussed in the prisoners' writing.<sup>16</sup>

Prison writing is not one genre, as some have argued, or even a hybrid (there is no standard typology of form).<sup>17</sup> Whereas lyric poetry and letter writing often predominate as short forms compatible with the arduous conditions of many writers' captivity, other kinds of episodic and fragmentary texts may be seen as pragmatic consequences of confinement, danger, and secrecy. However, these generic kinds are commonly used in many different writing contexts (including war, travel, or illness); and some specialized kinds of petition and witness statements by writers in prison also (exceptionally) take stylized literary forms, including verse.<sup>18</sup> In assessing how

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themes: "Carceral Society," "Writing Wrongs," and "Prisons, Privilege, and Complicity"; it concludes with an impassioned argument for prison and sentencing policy reform in a contemporary North American context. Among other synchronic studies, Barbara Harlow's *Barred: Women, Writing, and Political Detention* (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1992) highlights the role of women in exposing human rights abuses throughout the world in the late twentieth century. (I have learned from Harlow and Gelfand to pay due attention to the transmission and editing of prison writing texts and the special problems these matters of production and reception sometimes raise in respect of women authors.) Although Joanna Summers in *Late-Medieval Prison Writing and the Politics of Autobiography* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004) also offered a synchronic approach to her fifteenth-century subjects, like Harlow, she did not consider form or genre in assessing their political role. Nevertheless, Summers elucidated important general aspects of prison writing that "attempts to overturn the impotency of the author's imprisonment" (pp. 3–4) and demonstrated how "writing as victim is an effective and persuasive textual strategy in attaining credibility and sympathy, and an empowering one in terms of propaganda value" (p. 133).

<sup>16</sup> E.g., by Bonhoeffer, Wilde, and Frank. See *The Oxford History of the Prison: The Practice of Punishment in Western Society*, ed. Norval Morris and David J. Rothman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995). I have also found the following very helpful: Christopher Harding, Bill Hines, Richard Ireland, and Philip Rawlings, *Imprisonment in England and Wales: A Concise History* (London: Croom Helm, 1985); Michael Ignatieff, *A Just Measure of Pain: The Penitentiary in the Industrial Revolution, 1750–1850* (1978; London: Penguin Books, 1989); Clifford Dobb, "London's Prisons," in *Shakespeare in His Own Age*, ed. Allardyce Nicoll (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965), pp. 87–100.

<sup>17</sup> Larson's reductive approach reads the writing of contemporary prisoners as a "genre" dealing with "a common subject" that is directly linked "to the strategies of power exercised within prisons in general"; Larson, "Toward a Prison Poetics," 143. I am grateful to Rosalind Oates for this reference.

<sup>18</sup> This tendency must not be over emphasized. In the early modern period, for example, Cervantes' *Don Quixote*, and Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* are traditionally ascribed to their authors' enforced leisure in prison without being recognizably distinct from other, more fortunate writers' prose fictions. Cellini wrote his autobiography as a prisoner, but it's not clear that this situation made him write differently from Thomas Whythorne, for example, who wasn't a prisoner. However, Walter Raleigh and John Selden used their long imprisonments to undertake extensive study; Raleigh wrote a history of the world which ended, after five volumes, having progressed only to the second Macedonian War, indicating that "it is enough for me (being in that state I am) to write of the eldest times"; *The History of the World*, ed. C. A. Patrides (London: Macmillan, 1971), p. 80 (preface). Selden borrowed Westminster Abbey's copy of the Babylonian Talmud (amounting to nearly 6,000 folio pages) to keep himself occupied in prison; see J. P. Rosenblatt, *Renaissance England's Chief*

writers' experiences of confinement and persecution, and their political, philosophical, or ethical incentives (either declared or implied) shaped the forms and substance of their texts to maximize their appeal for their first readers, it is important to consider the evidence for dynamic relationships between writers and their first readers in synchronic approaches to individual texts. Most of the writers discussed here realized that their lives were at stake, and many did not survive their captivity, which had repercussions for the transmission and reception of their texts.

The two most influential prisoners—Socrates and Jesus—wrote nothing that survives. Yet their exemplary lives and the ideas attributed to them, especially those associated with their deaths by execution, are pervasive in Western history, philosophy, religion, and literature. The representation of their intellectual and personal identities, defined and transmitted by others, became authoritative paradigms for prison writers, especially victims of ideological conflicts, and their readers. Plato created the record of the wisdom of Socrates in a series of dialogues that expound the philosophy of his teacher. Plato's Socrates became an iconic figure largely through the representation of his last days as a prisoner. His arguments for the immortality of the soul carry more weight for readers who are convinced (by their own emotional reactions) that these arguments sustained the prisoner's calm confidence in facing death, and rejecting opportunities to escape his sentence by compromising his teaching. St. Paul disseminated the ideas of Jesus, together with commentary on the evangelists' testimony of how these ideas were lived by Jesus, in a series of letters to new Christian communities throughout the Greek-speaking world. Paul's pastoral letters spoke for him, in his absence, including that enforced by his own situation as a prisoner in Rome. The advice and instructions in these captivity epistles in which it was thought that the apostle's experience of persecution tempered and thereby strengthened his message, helped to establish the church by reifying the spoken words and exemplary life, and death, of his master. The Christian theology of a prisoner's sacrificial death by execution that redeemed the sins of the faithful also imbued other prisoners' suffering and deaths with meaning. In classical and biblical texts, in later saints' lives, and chronicles or other histories of political worthies, different kinds of writers represent prisoners

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*Rabbi: John Selden* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 2–3. For an extensive sequence of verse epistles petitioning individuals and groups for relief and justice, see the book of poems by Théophile de Viau (1623–25) printed while he remained a prisoner in the Conciergerie in Paris. These instrumental works survived him and were widely read in the eighty-eight editions published by 1696. Cf. Charles d'Orléans's campaign for aid toward his release in verse epistles petitioning the Duc du Bourgogne who replied in the same form (1439). See further my "La nuit trouve enfin la clarté: Captivity and Life Writing in the Poetry of Charles d'Orléans and Théophile de Viau," *European Journal of Life Writing*, 2 (2013), 79–109, <http://ejlw.edu>.

as superior or especially insightful beings. Aeschylus's Prometheus and the biblical prophet Jeremiah, for example, also suffered imprisonment for their teaching.

Many of the recurrent ideas and tactics of European prison writing can be found in Boethius's *Of the Consolation of Philosophy* (ca. 524–25), which must be regarded as a foundation text for both its strategic intellectual content and its tactical generic paradigms. Boethius, the poet, theologian, and philosopher in prison, quoted, or alluded to a wide range of ancient wisdom literature including works by his philosopher heroes (Plato and Seneca), Greek tragedy, and Cicero's Latin oratory. By means of this intertextual dialogue with literary and philosophical resources Boethius was able to project an image of his well-stocked mind that is more personal than the references either to his family and career or to the nebulous circumstances surrounding his imprisonment. The church made Boethius acceptable to medieval Christians several centuries after his death, but it is important to note the cross-cultural inclusiveness of his text that promotes a view of the world dominated by a providential power that is not specifically Christian. The dramatized fiction, within the text, of the condemned prisoner's mental and emotional recovery from self-pity, and his proof that thoughts are free, has inspired many generations of readers. Their reception of this work not only granted Boethius the immortality of his literary self-impression as a noble philosopher and learned poet but also stimulated readers to console themselves and overcome adversity in their own lives as they admired the resistance to persecution that is enacted in its formal structures. "The only way one man can exercise power over another is over his body and what is inferior to that, his possessions. You cannot impose anything on a free mind, and you cannot move from its state of inner tranquillity a mind at peace with itself and firmly founded on reason" (book 2, prose 6). This work had a profound impact. After Boethius, the writer in prison becomes a type, a hero who can be victorious in defeat, establishing another consoling feature of prison writing: the paradox of gain by loss. Thoughts are free, yet prescribed literary forms and tropes liberate creativity; and a literary afterlife enables the literary personality to live on after the writer's death: "Der springt noch auf." The Hungarian poet Miklós Radnóti's poetry notebook was recovered from his pocket when his body was disinterred from a mass grave after World War II. In one poem, "Letter to my Wife," he promised "I'll come back; / I'll stick as fast as bark upon an oak!" In one of his last poems, "Picture Postcards IV" (31 October 1944), the speaker described falling over the corpse of a comrade who had been shot in the neck. He whispered to himself, "that's how you'll end too / . . . Lie still; no moving. / Now patience flowers in death." As the poet disturbs the body, a German

soldier quips, “Der springt noch auf,” as if the dead man might rise again and escape. This prophetic epigram is a sign of the resistance that figuratively enabled the doomed poet’s voice to live on in his verse after it was literally sprung from his grave.<sup>19</sup>

While humane empathy with prisoners’ suffering and shared literary traditions help to make their writing accessible, the opportunities and sometimes the decisions to invite readers to share representations of the prisoners’ ideas, experiences, and feelings were often made by others after the writer’s death. The editorial roles and processes of these intermediaries also imply creative acts, developing the original authors’ works for the benefit of new readers in new contexts. Such efforts remind readers (sometimes formally, in prefaces or notes) of the displacements of actuality in any writing. The essential “otherness” of the past—even one’s own past—always requires the creative efforts of interpretation: imagination, experience, humility, a healthy skepticism, and a willingness to construct significance in the responsible sifting of responses. All readings are interpretations. Paradoxically, the most enduring works are always being revised and made new. All writers are, first, readers. In Auschwitz Levi attempted to teach another prisoner some Italian and resorted to his memory of Dante’s Ulysses canto (from the *Inferno* in which Ulysses drowns) that he had studied at school; in the process of expounding Dante’s malleable metaphors, he thought he grasped a fleeting insight into their unfathomable situation. The literary analogy they had grasped incompletely in the concentration camp became the foundation of a figurative bridge that Levi built to help others grapple with the unprecedented reality he later described, analyzed, and commemorated in new writing. Literary traditions become meeting places for different generations because they are shared and memorable even in the absence of reading materials, as Cassou, Levi, and Ratushinskaya all demonstrated. When the prison writers selected existing texts as resources and models for their new writing, they also translated and refreshed those earlier works’ potent political or spiritual resonances in subtle, creative ways. I have assumed that the transmission and reception of these new works provide indications of their authors’ eloquence and rhetorical persuasiveness for different readers. But fine words alone are not sufficient.

The impression of some common ground in human experience enables the urgency and clarity of many prisoners’ expressions in extremis to register their resonance and interest for readers. Readers also invest texts with authority based on the experience they recognize, or believe they recognize, in

<sup>19</sup> *Foamy Sky: The Major Poems of Miklós Radnóti: A Bilingual Edition*, ed. and tr. Zsuzsanna Ozsváth and Frederick Turner (Budapest: Corvina Books, 2000), pp. 193–95, 213, and 217n.

writing produced in specific situations.<sup>20</sup> Our sympathies follow our interest, and many writers, or their editors, recognized the political value of writing that projects ideas and images of suffering humanity in contexts calculated to authorize that experience and generate new insights and sympathies in their readers. Most readers enjoy opportunities to forget themselves in reaching out to meet and engage with the constructs of other minds and times (as far as this may be possible); curious, thoughtful readers may enrich and develop their lives in response to the literary strategies and imagination of writers who had designs on readers' responses and thoughts, as well as reports on experiences to communicate.

Adversity was useful. Readers value experience. In early periods there may be very little supporting archival evidence for the prisoner's situation depicted in the text. In other cases external evidence (rather than the report) of textual transmission often provides opportunities to test the provenance and thus the authority of the experience represented. It is difficult to define and assess prison writing solely from internal evidence, not least because it is necessary to express and communicate the extraordinary by means of the familiar, and writers in prison use the same literary forms and tropes as their contemporaries may do in other situations; others may also appropriate the image of the prisoner for their own purposes.<sup>21</sup> The concept of the cell, the mental anguish of the prisoner, and readers' recognition of various ways in which these features metonymically configure aspects of the human condition imply wider applications for prison writing in many periods as well as the success of literary representations of imprisonment often unconnected with actual cases.

In the literature of the West, material prisons are frequently made into figures for existential states. The mortal body was commonly seen as a prison for the eternal soul, which may be freed only at death. In popular seventeenth-century English emblem books, based on Flemish models, graphic explication of this Platonic dualism is attached to biblical texts.<sup>22</sup> By an extension of this Platonic dualism of the spirit trapped by the body, it was

<sup>20</sup> Rivkah Zim, "Writing behind Bars: Literary Contexts and the Authority of Carceral Experience," *HLQ*, 72 (2009), 291–311.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Victor Brombert, *The Romantic Prison: The French Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979); Albert Camus, *The Rebel*, tr. Anthony Bower (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1971).

<sup>22</sup> See Francis Quarles's emblems for Ps. 142:7, "Bring my soule out of Prison that I may praise thy Name," reprinted in my "The Reformation: The Trial of God's Word," in *Reading the Text: Biblical Criticism and Literary Theory*, ed. Stephen Prickett (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), p. 102, showing a human figure (*Anima*) crouching within a bird cage and appealing to an angelic representation of Divine Love outside the cage; and Rom. 7:24, "O wretched man that I am: who shall deliver me from the body of this Death," showing *Anima*, the human soul, shaking the bars of her prison formed by the ribcage of a human skeleton, reprinted in my "Writing behind Bars," 293.

also traditional to represent the irrationality of sexual attraction and the power of human love as forms of imprisonment or slavery that can either degrade or ennoble human subjects endowed with free will. (This had a playful poignancy in the frustrated love poetry of Charles d'Orléans written during his twenty-five years of exile and imprisonment.) According to Christian theology, the soul is shackled by sin, and suffering was rationalized as God's chastisement; an actual prisoner was therefore doubly bound; and concern for prisoners was a religious duty. From the sixteenth century onward, popular images of prisoners, and contemporary applications for imprisonment themes, often reinforced the associations induced by these older traditions, which created a circle of influence. This includes religious traditions of charity toward prisoners, inspired by affective and ethical responses to biblical prisoners, especially to the iconic image of Jesus as a prisoner. Shakespeare's noble historic prisoners, including King Lear and Richard II, consistently reflect the idea that prisoners are heroic representatives of humanity who gain philosophical and ethical enlightenment from their misfortunes, and even redeem themselves through various kinds of resistance as prisoners, and become capable of articulating important truths for others. W. B. Carnochan's thoughtful, eclectic essay on "the literature of confinement" proceeds from an epigraph by Theodor Adorno: "There is no material content, no formal category of an artistic creation . . . which did not originate in the empirical reality from which it breaks free."<sup>23</sup> That liberation trope, Carnochan argued, "evokes the prison theme, that, broadly defined, has played a large part in a culture that understands artistic creation as an act, forever being repeated, of release from constraints" (p. 427).

All the works discussed here transcend generic expectations in several ways. Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy* is biographical, philosophical, political, and dialogic in form as well as poetic: a work of art, patently mixing fact and fiction yet persuasively truthful in a historic sense and its feeling for life. More's *Dialogue of Comfort* is historical, political, and theological as well as fiction that engages complex literary codes. Wilde's letter *De Profundis* is part autobiography, part confessional conversion narrative, and also, in part, radical social and cultural criticism. Cassou's poetry, like Ratushinska-ya's, is formal lyric, subjective, and essentially private, yet also (in part) intensely political and therefore public. Levi's narrative testimony, poetry, and essays mix biographical, historical, philosophical, and political elements in works that match the intellectual rigor and aesthetic complexity of Boe-

<sup>23</sup> "The Literature of Confinement," in *Oxford History of the Prison*, pp. 427–55 at p. 427; Carnochan gives the source as *Commitment* (1962). Cf. Adorno, *Aesthetics and Politics*, ed. and tr. Ronald Taylor (London: New Left Books, 1977), pp. 177–95 at p. 190.

thius's achievement and historic cultural standing, in defining and defending a more humane concept of civilization. These inspirational figures are my bookends.

From antiquity to the present, the rhetorical modes of prison writing have been subsumed within, and indivisible from, the authors' declared (or apparent) purposes in writing. Understanding how a prisoner's voice is constructed in any work—a letter, poem, journal entry, philosophical treatise, or personal confession—is a necessary preliminary to interpretation of these broadly comparable strategies of resistance, which are seldom mutually exclusive. These are first, to defend ideas or values, and either promote them in their authors' absence or warn readers to prevent future suffering (such testimonies can also give voices to those unable to testify for themselves). Secondly, to bear witness in an individual case and argue it before a wider tribunal, which may include an appeal to posterity, or a claim to fame and a reformed reputation. Thirdly, to sustain, comfort, or reconcile the writer and finally, to provide evidence of those responses in terms that convince the prisoners' associates and first readers. Authorial strategies may misfire in some situations, and they may be ignored by some generations of readers. Nevertheless, in demonstrating and analyzing one or other of these pragmatic functions in each section of this book, I have sought to define a politics of prison writing and highlight the principal characteristics of a literary phenomenon that transcends distinctions of genre, period, and language culture.

Part I considers writing as a means for intellectuals in prison to defend their ideas and cultural values against a dominant persecuting power. It pairs Boethius and Bonhoeffer as disciplined and dignified rational theologians to illustrate the cultural continuity of values identified with classical humanism, and Judeo-Christian ethics based on biblical traditions. It also exemplifies the basis of their ethical philosophies in human empathy and imagination through their intermittent recourse (as writers facing death) to lyric poetry. Thomas More's various prison writings are literal and figurative (intertextual) dialogues with classical and biblical traditions, literary forms, and exemplary models. Like Bonhoeffer he was concerned with the problems of Christian discipleship in the contemporary world. Yet, as a humanist lawyer, his mental habits, like those of the Marxist political philosopher Antonio Gramsci, were characterized by the formal challenges inherent in dialectic that were both ingrained by education and acknowledged natural predilections. The greater their sense of persecution, the stronger these predilections appear in each; and the more personal their problems as prisoners appear, the more public or political their significance. More's defense of the church was matched by Gramsci's concern for the state. Juxtaposing their

works reveals “family” resemblances that modify our views of each and emphasizes their strategic political ambitions in using personal experience to interpret literary and philosophical models for the instruction of others. In these four prisoners’ works, it is also striking how actual and imaginative reliance on a sympathetic feminine “other” emerges as a dominant shared trope.

Part II assesses attempts by several different types of prison writer, either to defend and preserve themselves, by pursuing consolatory tactics based on imagination, dreams, and personal memories, or to construct images of self-identities as memorials, to represent the writer after his or her death, using a variety of literary forms. Any autobiographical work reinvents the past in reframing selected incidents that are construed as the past by memory or imagination which, as St. Augustine had recognized, are contingent and non-essential.<sup>24</sup> The ancient world had developed many methods for committing complex matters to memory, including associations between known places and elements of the material to be remembered: in the first “place,” in the second “place” were not dead metaphors in predominantly oral cultures. Consequently it became common to associate locations and matters of importance. The prison denoted a place of extreme suffering that forced attention on vital matters worthy of remembrance and careful consideration. The arts of memory may also be fixed and rendered distinct by the action of writing. Memory thereby also becomes shareable. John Bunyan and Oscar Wilde each wrote variants on the traditional pastoral letter in which they sought to justify previous actions that had led to trial and imprisonment. They used their introspection to promote lessons for others by drawing on their experiences of imprisonment to reconstruct images of themselves that challenged and resisted those of the judiciary. Yet, in the process, each writer addressed and reconfirmed his society’s views of the nature and functions of imprisonment by also describing his exemplary spiritual conversion experience. Madame Roland and Anne Frank each wrote memorial narratives to preserve details of her life and times, believing not only that these were inherently valuable because they represented her ideas, feelings, and experiences in wider historic contexts but also that the activity of writing would help to sustain and comfort her in confinement. These four prisoners’ works preserve variations on a form of dialogue with self and other in prose. Jean Cassou and Irina Ratushinskaya also constructed an alternative life of the

<sup>24</sup> *Confessions*, 10.15. Cf. “The wide plains of my memory and its innumerable caverns and hollows are full beyond compute. . . . My mind has the freedom of them all. . . . I can probe deep into them and never find the end of them. This is the power of memory! This is the great force of life in living man, mortal though he is!” *Ibid.*, 10.17; tr. R. S. Pine-Coffin (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1975), pp. 222, 224.

mind in prison, applying the arts of poetry and memory to sustain themselves, and to forge mental links between past and present that helped them to resist oppression. Their lyrics celebrate freedom in imagination and dreams, harnessed to a dissident humanism and the purposeful vigor of a political consciousness that rejected either fascist or Soviet oppression. Reading their poems in tandem demonstrates how far their resistance was personally rather than ideologically motivated in response to their circumstances: the French communist and the Ukrainian Christian endured and resisted totalitarianism by drawing on subjective and cultural memories in lyrics that then inspired others who were similarly oppressed. The mental discipline and imagination intrinsic to their poetry defended individual human beings and exemplified human rights to freedom of thought; these same strategies, albeit historically nuanced, were identified in the prison writing of Boethius. The art of memory and the memory of art sustained and consoled them all.

Part III examines the ethical commitment of one exceptionally conscientious and prolific writer, who, having survived imprisonment during which he was unable to read or write, began a series of historic, personal testimonies soon after his release. Primo Levi wrote in a variety of genres, both on behalf of fellow prisoners and, explicitly, to warn or teach his readers about the moral, social, and political dangers in what he had seen, and endured. His prose and poetry have the finished qualities of calm yet penetrating analysis, perfected over time (and with the ironic “benefits” of hindsight and haunting traumatic memories) in response to old and new problems in the life of his times. He has become widely recognized as one of the most important, and hence influential, moral philosophers and public thinkers of the late twentieth century, yet he wrote of human frailties, extreme cruelty, hatred, and moral apathy, and for the future. His reputation, founded on the authority of his experience as a prisoner and eyewitness who refused to judge, but never forgot or forgave his oppressors, places him in a direct line of prison literature traditionally derived from Boethius.

From Boethius to Primo Levi, the consolations of writing created order from chaos to focus willpower and resistance, to testify for posterity, and to maintain, for the writers’ present, and future generations, some means to control the depredations of uncertainty, fear of moral failure, or the desolation that comes from a sense of waste and loss in conditions of deprivation. The completion of these strategies of resistance takes effect in the minds of readers who find in these works compelling insights into the dignity of humankind and evidence of the liberating imagination and cultural memories that protect and nourish the free mind. It is impossible to remain human and be unmoved by what we read.