

Literature and Testimony in Gramsci's *Letters from Prison*: The Question of Subjectivity

Since their publication in 1947, there has been a consistent attempt to canonize Antonio Gramsci's *Letters from Prison* (*Lettere del carcere*) within the Marxist tradition, and to overlook the theoretical relevance of the many personal statements included in Gramsci's letters. On the political level, Gramsci has been presented as a champion of Marxist social theory; on the personal level, he has been depicted as a sort of witness to universal human values and the humanistic idea of life. This trend is reaffirmed by the recent English version of the *Letters from Prison* edited by Frank Rosengarten and translated by Raymond Rosenthal, which deserves a special mention for its accuracy and critical attention. However, this edition raises some basic issues about the very nature of the text — issues that demand attention in the larger context of current questions of ethics and politics, intention and meaning, agency and action. In this essay I will address the issues of testimony and subjectivity in Gramsci's *Letters from Prison* and will explore the two following sets of questions: 1) How should we read and interpret the subject-position in the text? To what extent is the subject-position relevant to the process of witnessing in the very experience of the prisoner? 2) How can we define the nature of a text that resists any literary and aesthetic connotation? Finally, how should we relate the *Letters from Prison* to the *Prison Notebooks* (*Quaderni del carcere*)?

In his introduction to the English translation of Gramsci's *Letters from Prison* Frank Rosengarten writes that, though it is "tempting" to locate Gramsci's text under the category of autobiographical and confessional literature, his letters do not privilege the personal over the political. On the contrary, Gramsci, as a "Marxist thinker trained to historicize even the most intimate events," sees his personal experiences as linked to a political and cultural project aimed at creating a socialist society (1, 26). The recognition of the political context in which these letters should be read goes hand in hand with the assertion that Gramsci was able to maintain the integrity of his selfhood, which was constructed strenuously over decades in the effort "to shape the world according to the dictates of conscious will." This very integrity prevented Gramsci from relating "immediately and emotionally to his wife's condition" (1, 27). In an article entitled "Three Essays

on Gramsci's *Letters from Prison*" Rosengarten writes:

Intense physical suffering, obsessive fears and insecurities, moments of alienation from friends, family, and comrades, were part of Gramsci's prison experience. Yet that experience can also be looked upon as a victorious struggle to maintain the integrity of selfhood. The effort to conceptualize and to articulate the various meanings that imprisonment had for him was an aspect of his struggle, which was waged, necessarily, through a process of human interaction and interdependence. (18)

Rosengarten's interpretation, though extremely accurate in its textual analysis and in its claim for a full identity of the subject and a full redemption of textual meaning, tends to align itself with a totalizing theory of discourse that makes sense of everything. This approach does not appear fully satisfactory in dealing with traumatic experiences such as those of the long-term prisoner. While I do agree with Rosengarten that in order to be a witness one needs to affirm one's own subjectivity, I would, nonetheless, suggest that the subject-position in the *Letters from Prison* should not be equated with a notion of full identity. Identity and an individual's self-conception should be studied as they develop in the particular circumstances in which Gramsci writes and in relation to the possibilities and limits offered by the epistolary genre; moreover, one has to distinguish the notion of identity and of self-conception from that of subjectivity and agency. The notion of a subject-position itself is a point of departure that needs to be articulated in the analysis of the text and its context. In this respect, one should take into account that the subject-position becomes a total identity only in extreme cases, where the self is either radically denied or traumatized and overwhelmed by circumstances.

The problematic and mutable nature of human identity is clearly stated in the *Letters from Prison*. Gramsci writes that there is "no I identifiable once and for all," so that human personality is "continually changing," and "one is continually outside of oneself and continually inside it" (2, 26). In a letter to his sister-in-law Tania written on April 7, 1931 Gramsci calls attention to the necessary heterogeneity of the self, which is the essential, particular being of a person. Gramsci's concept of human identity seems consistent with poststructuralist theory, which has challenged the idea of a "centered subject" endowed with full identity and the power to know the "outside" world. The subject in contemporary theory is always considered a *subject-in-progress*, as Julia Kristeva puts it (135); at the same time as human consciousness, viewed through the lens of psychoanalysis, turns out to be forever incomplete and illusory. Indeed, the modern psychoanalysis of Lacan has precluded any idea of a definite self: "Le moi est comme la superposition des différents manteaux empruntés à ce que j'appellerai le bric-à-brac de son magasin d'accessoires" (187). Nevertheless, if we take into account the particular condition of the prisoner Antonio Gramsci, we have to recognize the peculiar nature of the subject-position in the *Letters*

from Prison, its struggle to gain full identity and to maintain the conditions necessary to develop a free will. The question of subjectivity in texts such as the *Letters from Prison* has to be addressed by way of an ethical critique, which should show how the ever-changing nature of the self should not hinder the necessary attempt at constructing a subject.

In a letter to Tania on January 25, 1932 Gramsci writes: "After much suffering and many efforts at restraint, one becomes used to being an object without subjectivity *vis-à-vis* the administrative machine that at any moment can ship you off in any direction, force you to change habit" (2, 130-33). Here Gramsci points to the extreme situation in which he was living, insisting on the referential and existential character of his letter writing. "I did everything to give you a precise idea of both my physical and psychic conditions. If you thought that this was just literature you were wrong" — he writes to Tania on July 2, 1933 (2, 305-06). Gramsci expresses the crucial idea of being a witness, being an active part of the historical process, as opposed to being simply a writer acting in a literary mode detached from what Gramsci would call "il mondo grande e terribile," the real world, "vast and terrible." Among the Latin words that mean "witness" there is *superstes* (survivor), and thus it is not surprising that one may find in Gramsci's letters a lesson on psychological survival for long-term imprisonment. Gramsci describes how people learn to adapt involuntarily to situations of extreme stress and separation from everything familiar. This is an account of the slow torture which the government holds prudent to administer to those who upset the *status quo*. Gramsci outlines the closed emotional world of the prison cell and the attempts he made to resist the all-enveloping quality of an environment which, with its distorting of the dimensions of time and space, becomes a formidable enemy for human beings (see for instance the letter written on May 20, 1929, to Giulia [I, 265-67]). In a letter to Tania written on March 6, 1933 Gramsci compares himself to a survivor of a shipwreck who undergoes a process of molecular transformation that leads him to become cannibalistic. Gramsci describes the paradox of the witness who knows that he will shortly be tainted by the very knowledge of the disaster that overtakes him:

a similar change is taking place in me (cannibalism apart). The most serious thing is that in these cases there is a split in the personality; one part of it observes the process, the other suffers it, but the observing part (as long as this part exists there is self-control and the possibility of recovery) senses the precariousness of its position, that is, it foresees that it will reach a point at which its function will disappear, that is, there will no longer be any self-control and the entire personality will be swallowed by a new "individual" who has impulses, initiatives, ways of thinking different from the previous one (2, 278-80).

The condition of the witness is paradoxical, as is the language used in his testimony of certain events, especially those involving either absolute faith or another absolute belief or feeling. It is impossible to give an anonymous

testimony, the witness needs to be faithful to a consistent identity, to assert his own subjectivity; yet, the trauma and the shock he experiences distance himself from any fixed identity. Rubina Giorgi writes about the trauma and the paradox of testimony, which lie precisely in this gap between the need of a consistent subject and the flow of time and of traumatic events that contradict this consistency and coherence. In this gap the subject experiences a crisis of identity, and for this reason Gramsci fears losing contact not only with the exterior world, but also with his inner life, trying often to reaffirm his own identity as political prisoner, especially in the letters to his mother. Writing to her on May 10, 1928, Gramsci directly addresses the problem of his subjectivity: "I am a political detainee and will be a political prisoner, I have nothing now or in the future to be ashamed of in this situation" (1, 206).

From the stand-point of his asserted identity as "political prisoner" Gramsci often criticizes what he calls the "irrational and chaotic activities" of his relatives who, in the effort to help him, sometimes, on the contrary, contribute to the deterioration of his condition. Thus, certain of the letters Gramsci wrote to his wife and sister-in-law demonstrate insensitivity on his part toward their condition. This insensitivity has been pointed out and commented on at length by feminist criticism, especially in the work of Adele Cambria, where Gramsci becomes the fulcrum of a patriarchal model which his wife Giulia and his sisters-in-law Tania and Eugenia had deeply internalized.

Teresa De Lauretis has pointed out that the characteristic features of Cambria's work point to a new practice and vision of the relation between subject and modes of textual production. In order to avoid mystification and mythologizing, writers, performers and the specific audience addressed are clearly identified. Cambria and De Lauretis write from the ideological and emotional viewpoints of contemporary feminism, envisioning a feminist theory of the process of textual production and consumption, where the rejection of a universalizing and totalizing reading emphasizes the process of reading itself as a constitutive act of the subject outside the text, allowing the formation of a woman's agency and subjectivity.

My main concern in this article is twofold: on the one hand, I wish to develop a critique of the attempt to hypostatize the subject-position in the text — as in Rosengarten's analysis. In this perspective, I have pointed out the relevance of the traumatic context in which the subject writes. Nevertheless, I understand that one should not hypostatize the context of the letters either, as this would erase the very question of agency. On the other hand, I suggest that to hypostatize the reader's position, as happens in Cambria's reading, can also be misleading if one wishes to grasp not the one meaning of the text, or the true definition of the subject, but their complexity and their resistance to a unitary system of signification. Despite Gramsci's reluctance to regard his letters as literature, the *Letters from Prison* exhibit a literariness which lies in the way they

resist being treated as pure ideology and being used to advance a political agenda. Only their literary value can preserve what is essential in Gramsci's letters and protect them from the insidious and pervasive power of appropriation and homogenization of history and culture.

The ethical criticism I am pursuing does not conceive of literature simply in terms of an activity which allows an aesthetic recognition and confirmation of communal and shared values, but as a sublime practice, as an extraordinary experience that calls our historically conditioned views into question. Nowadays, in the actual philosophical debate on the problem of subjectivity, it is possible to find claims in favor of an ethical understanding of the relations among text (and the subject-position in it), context and reader. In my view, this kind of understanding allows the most appropriate approach to those texts, such as Gramsci's *Letters from Prison*, that perform critical and transformative work on the very notion of subjectivity in relation to their context of production and reception (this kind of approach is at the core of Dominick LaCapra's *Representing the Holocaust*). This critical approach represents a reversal of the theoretical point of view developed in the past decades by Poststructuralism, Deconstruction and Weak Thought, which in different ways, had proclaimed the "decline of the subject."

One of the decentering moves that has contributed to the questioning the traditional idea of centered subjecthood has been the critique of the author elaborated by philosophers such as Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault. In his 1968 essay "The Death of the Author" Roland Barthes argued in favor of "the birth of the reader" as a necessary counterpoint to the disappearance of the author in contemporary criticism. For Barthes it does not matter who writes; writing is important as "that neuter, that composite, that obliquity into which our subject flees ... where all identity is lost, beginning with the very identity of the body that writes" (49). In "What Is an Author" Foucault criticized the individualistic and bourgeois notion of subjectivity and called attention to different conditions, forms and functions of the subject.

The most powerful philosophical critique of the subject, somehow consistent with poststructuralist theory, can be found in an essay entitled "The Decline of the Subject and the Problem of Testimony," written by the leader of the so-called Weak Thought, Gianni Vattimo. Vattimo emphasizes the vanishing of the subject overwhelmed by a historical process not masterable in individual and existential terms. Thus, any appeal to the idea of testimony nowadays can be labeled "anachronistic," especially taking into account two authors in whose work the current "impersonalistic" trend in culture and philosophy first appeared. Vattimo is thinking, on the one hand, of Nietzsche's rejection of the bourgeois/Christian notion of the subject and, on the other hand, of the intensification of the critique of the bourgeois/Christian subject in Heidegger's ontological turn, which closely corresponds to his analysis of metaphysics as the destiny of Western thought.

Following this trend of thought, the notion of "subject" in poststructuralism has become a tabooed term; but, more recently, in an era that has been called post/poststructuralist, there has been a sort of return of the repressed, and Agnes Heller has commented on what she calls "the Heideggerian fiction of the death of the subject" in this way:

The narratives of the end of the subject are extremely strong statements about both personalities and subjects. In fact, the narratives encapsulate worlds according to those contemporary philosophers. They are subjects; moreover they are representative subjects. The less we want them to be representative subjects, the more they become one. Not even philosophers can jump over their own shadows. (78)

Agnes Heller makes clear that contemporary philosophy cannot avoid the influence of the past. From this perspective, in contemporary theory we now witness the return of the repressed idea of subjectivity. Susan S. Friedman speaks of our era as a "post/poststructuralist" era, which has resurrected the author and put the notion of agency on the agenda once again — a notion which earlier had been deconstructed as a humanist illusion. The metamorphoses of the subject in critical theory have led Dolora A. Wojciehowski to recognize that humanism is the unconscious of contemporary theory, and that even post-structuralism in all of its forms (psychoanalytic theory, feminism, neo-marxism, semiotics of culture, reader-response theory) is part of a historical continuum which goes back to the founding fathers of humanistic culture, such as Francesco Petrarca and Pico della Mirandola. Poststructuralism is similar to humanism in that it attempts to differentiate itself from the past, to affirm a new subjectivity and a new form of mastery.

Nonetheless, one understands how the notions of author, subject and agency, attacked and criticized by poststructuralism, cannot be the same in our times as they were in traditional modernism, and that the assumption of the absolute transparency of language cannot be accepted by a criticism that seeks to elaborate a critique of culture while at the same time being self-conscious and self-critical.

This return to the notion of subjectivity has been welcomed by feminist criticism, because, as Nancy K. Miller writes, "women have not had the same historical relation of identity to origin, institution, production that men have had;" so "collectively" they have not felt too much burdened by the notion of subject. They feel the necessity to leave the door open to the question of agency (106). Here, on the sociological and political level, the question of subjectivity becomes important again and tends to assume the form of a full identity for the marginalized groups who are denied agency. However, one may argue, the collective subjectivity of the reader must always come to terms with the individual point of view, which is always a particular expression of a particular time and of a specific context. Moreover, and this is even more relevant for my purpose here, the collective subjectivity of the reader should not affirm itself at

the expense of the subject-position in the text and of the literary devices that constitute the specificity of each text. The reader should not resist the text from an outside context, but rather show how each text on the specific literary ground resists any ideological or critical closure and puts into question even its own assumptions (this critical stand has been recently advocated by Shoshana Felman who speaks of an "ethics of interpretation").

The ethical approach to Gramsci's *Letters from Prison* that I am pursuing here assumes a subject-position in the text that is neither the centered and autonomous subject expressed by a bourgeois and patriarchal culture, nor an ever-changing subject expressed by the deconstructive critique of identity (for an in-depth analysis of a similar critical approach which rejects both traditional and poststructuralist theories see Smith). Also, I hold that political readings of the text assume a traditional notion of subjectivity on the part of the reader, which prevents the reader from a real and deep interaction with the text and with the subject-position in it. The subject-position in the text and outside of it (on the part of the reader) is a reality under construction in the very act of writing and of reading: one has to be aware of this if one wants to appreciate the literary work as a living reality and not as a dead document which serves to perform all kinds of ideological experiments.

What is missing in the reader-oriented approaches to Gramsci's *Letters from Prison* such as Cambria's is the literary dimension of the text and consequently the complexity of the subject-position in the text. Finally, this kind of critical stand, in its effort to resist the text from the outside, completely misses the sense of tragedy that pervades Gramsci's *Letters from Prison*. From this point of view the *Letters* witness a desperate attempt to realize the impossible task of creating a real communication from both within the prison cell and outside of it, between the prisoner and his relatives and comrades (the failure of Gramsci's dialogical attempt has been pointed out by Donghi). The prison cell is secluded; the prisoner is invisible to the others and becomes more dramatically unknown to himself. I would argue that Gramsci's state of invisibility led his comrades and relatives to misunderstand his spiritual and material condition.¹ Nobody — neither Giulia, nor Tatiana nor his fellow Communists — recognized or admitted to themselves that they were communicating with someone deprived of his real life, and whose person was gradually taking on a phantasmal character.² I

1 One should not forget the devotion and the affection that Tania showed to Gramsci during his imprisonment (see Natoli). On the other hand, I would suggest that Gramsci's condition in jail prevents him and his correspondents from developing any real and complete relationship. In this situation the misunderstandings were inevitable.

2 Gramsci makes an explicit reference to the phantasmal nature of the relationship with his wife Giulia: "It seems to me that in the course of these five years we have increasingly become phantoms, beings that are unreal for each other" (Letter to Giulia written on November 30, 1931 (2, 106-07).

wonder if at that time it would have been possible to understand or even imagine what was really going on in Gramsci's life-world in prison; but now that the *Letters from Prison* are available we cannot avoid the question of the subject-position in the text, yet we cannot provide an easy answer to that question either.

I will conclude my essay with a brief remark on the question of literary genre, which I raised in my introduction, and some thoughts about the possible interaction between the *Letters from Prison* and the *Prison Notebooks*. I would not read the letters as a kind of intellectual and spiritual autobiography, because they are not an autobiography, even though some of them have autobiographical content. In general the letters are mutable in character, they have a protean aspect: depending on the writer's aim they can either be portrait or mask, and tend to define themselves in terms of this polarity. In some letters Gramsci had to wear a mask in order to avoid censorship, because his letters were not private, but public, given the presence of the censor that forced him to develop what he calls a "penitentiary style of writing" (see the letter written on November 24, 1936 to Giulia [2, 364-365]). Therefore, I would suggest that the *Letters from Prison* tend to become a portrait of the author that holds the antithetical characteristic of any letter: on the one hand, it creates a bridge and it closes the distance between the addresser and the addressee; on the other hand, it creates a barrier between the two and confirms their distance (see Altman). Autobiography may dissolve the distance, ambiguity and polarity inherent in the epistolary genre. Writing an autobiography became Gramsci's project after having read Gandhi's and Trotsky's autobiographies. At that point, he realized the political and, at the same time, personal importance of autobiography: to present his life as it was and not as it should have been according to the abstract law of the will (*Prison Notebooks* 14§59). Here, one has to admit a significant shift in Gramsci's well-known position in favor of the role of will in human personality. He has always thought that "optimism of the will" should be mitigated by the "pessimism of the intelligence" (see letter to Carlo on December 19, 1929 [1, 299]); in his prison existence it was not only intelligence but also feeling and suffering that persuaded him to consider the limitations of a life centered on the will. In one of the *Letters from Prison* he emphasizes how poor and arid is a life based only on volition: "But whereas in the past, as I have said, I felt almost proud to find myself isolated, now instead I experience all the pettiness, the aridity, the squalor of a life based exclusively on will. This is my present state of mind" (2, 51).

These words resound with the profound self-criticism of a revolutionary who in the tradition of Marxism and Leninism has based his entire life on collective struggle. One may also argue that in this letter written to Tania on July 3, 1931 there emerges the possibility of a new approach to politics and ethics based on the recognition of the importance of all human faculties in the life of the political activist. Here Gramsci seems to reject the Leninist idea of the professional

revolutionary who puts his feelings and affections under the strict control of his will, renouncing his private life and paying attention only to public and political life.³

This new emphasis on the importance of personal feelings has not been discussed by criticism, which has also failed to appreciate the idea of autobiography Gramsci develops in the *Notebooks*, where one finds a justification for autobiography as a political genre capable of revealing the deep reality of a subject, beyond the influences of the historical circumstances and the dominant culture (see *Prison Notebooks* Q14 § 59). This approach was not developed by Gramsci but the passages on autobiography in the *Prison Notebooks* and the many references in the *Letters from Prison* confirm Gramsci's concern with the personal and private dimensions of life that cannot be overwhelmed by any political or ethical project. Ethics and politics can point out the general condition of a new society but they cannot create passion in individuals; for this reason ethics and politics tend to resolve individual passion into volition. But, as Gramsci writes on May 18, 1931 to Tatiana, "real life" can never be determined by "wishful thinking" or abstract formulas and volition, because "it springs from inner roots" (2, 34).

On the other hand, autobiography and biography cannot create any general and abstract law of social and personal development; they can only provide fresh and new material that can help to know and better understand ethical and moral life (see Amendola). Gramsci knew that; he did not pursue any concrete autobiographical project and in the *Prison Notebooks* he developed above all his idea of the party as a collective intellectual. Nevertheless, the references to the political party should not be disjointed from the consciousness of the political role of autobiography he posits, nor from the testimonial value of his *Letters from Prison* pointing to his criticism of a life centered on abstract volition. The *Letters from Prison* cannot be read as a counterpoint to the *Prison Notebooks*, and my analysis is not meant to do that; but at the same time, I am convinced that Gramsci's *Letters from Prison* cannot be interpreted simply as a confirmation of Gramsci's theoretical reflections. Although the very nature of the text calls for an approach focused on the fluidity of the subject-position in its necessary interplay with the context and the reader, the letters resist any one-sided interpretation that does not leave open the radical question of meaning they put forward.

Finally, I would say that even in the *Notebooks*, where Gramsci's attention focuses on class or the social group, the individual as a synthesis of historical

3 Gramsci already developed a conception of the necessary unity and balance of human faculties when he fell in love with Giulia. The letters written from 1924 to 1926 testify to the origin of this conception that was interrupted by Gramsci's imprisonment. See, for instance, the letter written from Vienna on March 29, 1924 in Gramsci 1992, 310-11. The pre-prison letters are very important and should be soon made available to the English reader.

elements is held responsible for his/her own active response to the given historical formations (see *Prison Notebooks* Q10 § 48). Gramsci himself, during the Summer of 1936, in one of his last letters from prison, writes to Giulia: "I've always thought that my individual fate was a subordinate matter; this does not mean that my individual fate, just like that of any other individual, does not preoccupy me or even 'should' not preoccupy me" (2, 362-363).

In this essay I have tried to do precisely this: to take into account the overwhelming power of the prison world, without forgetting Gramsci's resistance and quest for a new personal subjectivity in which he displays the same acuteness and daring penetration to explore the "vast and terrible world" he displays in political theory and social analysis, while putting aside the conventional systems of analysis.

I will conclude my essay by recalling a letter to Giulia on February 27, 1928, where Gramsci admits that the external environment had succeeded in overcoming his resistance and in modifying a certain area of himself. These changes seem to be "necessary and ineluctable" but the individual still has the chance to react; and the most effective way to deal with those "necessary changes" has become what Gramsci calls "a certain ironic spirit" (1, 181). Only self irony, indulgence and tolerance can give him a kind of tranquillity that is not complete apathy or indifference because, as he writes three years later to Tania, "it leaves a few gleams of light for the future"(see the letter written on April 7, 1931 [2, 25-27]). Whenever he goes back over the entire course of his life trying to make sense of it, he feels exactly like Renzo Tramaglino at the ironic end of *Il promessi sposi*. Like Renzo he can make an inventory and can claim to have learned not to do this and not to do that; yet the sum of these lessons is of very little use to him. The meaning of life can be found in literature, not in life itself. Literature and memory can provide one's own life with a sense of full identity, but Gramsci invites the reader to consider that any narrative, also a direct narrative like that provided by his letter writing, always has a highly problematic relationship with real life. Through the very structure of irony, the reader is forced to recognize not only the existence of the unsaid within the text, but also to see how the linguistic structure of representation grounds the said in the unsaid, making the unsaid the essential element of discourse. In conclusion, the "I" in Gramsci's *Letters from Prison*, becomes not simply a linguistic function that can be assumed indiscriminately by anyone in a group situation marked by oppression, as it tends to be the case in recent theory on testimonio (see Beverly 83), on the contrary, the "I" in the *Letters from Prison*, becomes the distinctive mark of Gramsci's subjectivity, which is a veil at once covering and revealing his pain, his suffering and his struggle.

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