

Banished Experiences

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*They have a black flag at half-mast for hope
And melancholy as their dancing partner
Knives for slicing the bread of friendship
And rusty weapons, so as not to forget*
- Léo Ferré, *Les anarchistes*

I had the chance of experiencing *in vitro* – for rather short periods, all considered – some different forms of banishment: in hiding, in prison, in exile. Although all these conditions were imposed by repression, these experiences differed quite drastically from each other. Here I will talk about them as experiments in freedom.

Rather than on the practical aspects, however, I will focus on some thoughts that surfaced in such situations. I will reference a more “internal” dimension, in order to draw some more general conclusions. This is the approach that suits me the best. In fact, from all of the situations I have experienced, my own nature would be more inclined to remember the ideas that emerged and what I would refer to as *emotional tonality*. Here however, I will have to resort to storytelling, to the most elaborate line of reasoning, to the scattered note. I will sometimes mention the words of others, but only because those words had for me, in a specific moment, a decisive importance. Only an echo – albeit distant – in the experience of the reader, will be able to distinguish these pages from a simple literary exercise.

The most extreme experience that I ever lived is not tied to a deprivation of freedom nor to fear. In a poem written while at war, Ungaretti describes feeling one day like “a docile fibre of the universe”. Something similar happened to me. The poet, however, uses that expression to describe a sort of communality with the universe, while for me it was an overwhelming disorientation. However, I remember that those words immediately struck me as the most apt. (While your heart is pounding, certain mental associations seem to push ideas into the strange universe of intuition.) For my own pride, I changed “docile” into “fragile”, trying to convince myself that this was the word that the poet actually meant. Yet, I did not consider myself only “fragile”; I really felt “docile”. Why?

I once got lost in the woods. While trying to find the road, I fell into a ravine. Thankfully my backpack broke my fall and prevented me from breaking my neck. I still remained paralysed because of the pain, and for one night and one day a dried up riverbed was my resting place. Soon after I found myself without water nor food; as I spent entire days climbing, trying to

locate a landmark, passing one night under the rain. After four days I began to notice, apart from hunger and exhaustion, the presence of a strange internal dizziness. At a certain point, the different sides of my personality began fighting each other, as if they had turned into distinct people. These dialogues were so intense that each time I would wake up after having dozed off, with my legs threaded through a tree branch to avoid falling, I could hardly remember if those encounters really took place or if it had been a dream. Amongst all the voices, two were the most recurring: the one of the pessimist and the one of the optimist. The former was raging against the naivety of the latter, with arguments that I will never forget. The clash especially revolved around the relationship between man and nature. The optimist would interpret the shapes of the woods (some branches, some paths through the bushes) as *signs*, perhaps the indication of a passageway, and his heart rejoiced. The pessimist mocked him, his reassuring anthropomorphism, aware of the fact that the forest wasn't giving signs to anyone – it simply *existed*. But the optimist wouldn't give up, creating little spirits that would accompany him on his path. When I almost tripped over a sloping rock, a few hundred metres high, was the moment that I felt like a “docile fibre of the universe”. I understood, all of a sudden, that freedom was a matter of... balance.

Many desires, many projects, many discussions about the strength of the individual who transforms his life: just a step few centimetres further, and it would have all been over. Pathetically, I regretted not being able to write anything about this to the world of my peers, on whose fragile boundaries I was still treading with uncertain step. I had the acute realization that words are a drug (in the double meaning that this term had for the Greeks, as medicine and as poison) that keeps us away from the absolute other that is Nature. Wild nature, unlike the imagery of illustrated primitivist magazines, is a terrifying place because it is “mute” – a place of the most sublime communality and also of the most perfect solitude. Even extreme solitude is a drug, because it is a relationship in which others participate – by their very absence.

I found myself, lying on those rocks in the dried up riverbed, imagining the words that under such circumstances my comrades would have said to me, and I laughed, a full and serene laugh. My comrades... Words as drugs. One of my most intense moments with theory was an evening when, out of necessity, I lit a fire with a book about Hegel. It is hard to describe my hesitation in ripping out those pages, or the thoughts that came to me in the company of the fire, or how Hegelian dialects appeared to me then, bowed to such an unusual use... By no coincidence it was then that I understood Heraclitus the Obscure: he saw in the flames the tactual expression of coming into reality.

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Logic cannot resist against someone who wants to live, once said Kafka. I promised myself to always remember what I had felt on that rock, each time I would talk with confidence about struggle and radical choices.

Life, on the other hand, with its necessary illusions, often keeps this awareness of “docility” at a distance. With a similar awakened consciousness, in fact, it would hardly be possible to act. What to destroy and what to build, if we don't know whether we'll even still be there the next step? Even when I was in prison or in exile I promised myself to do many things when I got back, but of course many of these intentions were never fulfilled. Life sucks you in and helps you forget the blows you've received. Yet I am aware that this sense of everything's emptiness has slipped into me as a note that secretly follows me in any convinced affirmation. If I listened more to that rocky demon, I would speak a lot less. On the barren rocks, where the eagles build their nests, I have tasted how much strength the possibility of suicide can instill. The idea that, at any

moment, you can wish goodnight to the music, makes life wonderful. “Go ahead, keep daring, nobody can force you to live!”: with the obstinate voice of such a demon, we can confront all enemies, because on the sharp tip of this consciousness all blackmail crumbles.

On the edge of an inviting precipice, in the absolute of emptiness, where all fiction falls and only what counts counts, I have known unconditional love.

In other words, the optimists, for reasons that reason cannot grasp, won. I felt inside the most uncontrollable euphoria when, at night and under the rain, some kind of cosmic voice (my own personal Mephistopheles) proposed a pact: “If you renounce to your ideas, I will get you out of this forest”. I mentioned euphoria because I declined the offer. Rhetorical even in your delirium, some would say. Be that as it may, even our hallucinations *reveal who we are*. It might seem strange, but, for the greatest part, for me living in hiding is contained in the story I just told. The rest is a series of details. We really only remember what has shaken us.

I understood, by listening to my different selves, while they were quarrelling in the forest, the meaning of the Nietzschean affirmation, according to which the definition of “I” is only a grammatical illusion, our lives being a space crossed by many powers in conflict with each other.

After this moment, I have often found myself thinking about the concept of identity.

What really scares us is the absence of control over what surrounds us. I have no doubts about the fact that the few days lost in the woods marked me much more than the months I spent in prison. In prison – within the conditions that I experienced – everything is, or seems, under control. Of course you are deprived of your freedom, you feel the hatred for your jailers, yet you are on your side and them on theirs. Everything repeats itself, allowing you to plan some – even minimal – projects. There are some codes of behaviour. Between the prisoner that completely internalizes them, becoming a full part of the institution and the rebel who stubbornly refused to adapt to them, the differences are huge. However, even the most resolute rebel makes use of certain protocols. In other situations instead, our codes completely fall through, because nothing, not even our lack of freedom, is certain. I believe the absence of any guarantees brings you closer to madness. In this respect, I got a better glimpse to the real weight of a radical anti-psychiatric critique.

I often woke up startled by the fear of not having any water (in those cases it was an indescribable pleasure to have a bottle of water close to my bed); however, I hardly ever dreamt of prison.

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Earlier I talked about identity. Living on the run is an extraordinary experiment in the discovery of this topic, much more useful than many philosophy books. Coeurderoy said that we should have the possibility of changing our name each day. It is the same thing I repeated to the cops that were questioning me at the Ministry of the Interior, adding that the concept of identity is an authoritarian concept. The extent to which the world of domination relies on the police’s classification of identity, was proven to me in the uneasy reaction of the cops to my words. What is identity?

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Within our daily relationships we show a constructed image, put together by many elements. Our past history, what others know about us, are assumptions we rarely reflect about, because we are used to them. When we get close to someone we open up our most precious part, feelings and ideas that have their own stories. The clandestine, instead, has to continuously recreate for himself a new identity, whose impeccable coherence is crucial to not raising suspicions. To non-

chalantly get used to a name that is not your own, to the story that you have created, is a very singular experience, for some unsustainable (perhaps because it is too close to the *I is another*, as expressed by the outlaw of poetry, Rimbaud). An interesting and worthwhile aspect of such a condition is that it pushes you to develop a particular capacity, the one of being able to talk about yourself, sometimes with extreme sincerity, while avoiding references to details of your life. I would not call this a capacity of abstraction, rather a capacity of transforming lived experiences into a brew of thought and emotions. A different concept of identity is perhaps what remains after this distillation process. What is thrown away after such an internal alchemy can be very important, I would say painfully important. For me, for instance, it was quite hard to give up the public aspect of subversive activity, because of my experiences and actually also because of my “personality” (I use the quotation marks because I cannot forget a phrase from the notebooks of Valéri according to whom what we call personality is only periodical...). Certainly a constant thought of a comrade on the run is how to remain bound to the projects of other comrades, the identity that is at stake (do they remember me?...). Coherence, which in social relationships is also a guarantor of “correctness”, protecting us from the fear of chaos, often much less “gratuitous” than it seems, gains a unique dimension. Here the tension between theory and practise follows a much more personal thread. It becomes a sort of loyalty to oneself. This coherence is attained often at the expense of one’s affections. I, by choice, did not set up a clandestine life with such rigour (as a visit from the police showed a few months later...). However I can sense how in certain aspects one can tend to close themselves up, in a vortex of incessant precaution, while in others there can be an opening. I understand the comrade that says that they only lived authentic freedom in clandestinity, travelling *incognito* through places and alongside people. I had a small taste of this one evening on a hill, observing the lights of a city from the distance of a fugitive. Those who are banished can reverse their situation and become *bandits*.

Learning how to pay attention (to the territory in which you move through, to your appearance and behaviour, to your contact with comrades not actively wanted by the law) is not something that can be improvised, as it requires adequate time and energy. This can probably be better explained by other comrades, as they possess more wise experience on this subject.

As far as your own perception of your identity, there is a big difference between being on the run and in prison. In prison you are there with your story. I remember the profound joy, even euphoria, when in my cell I started writing to comrades with whom I had not been in contact since a long time. Writing with “my own” name, receiving correspondence, talking about past experiences and future projects, all this filled my heart and my days. The comrades talk about prisoners, organize solidarity events, make their ideas public. Those underground are often much more isolated. Their coherence is much more difficult and proud, as it does not have external gazes. May the wanderers be remembered.

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Clandestinity is an experience of intense relationships, great complicities, but also deep solitude. Often the demon of nostalgia visits, who awakens memories that you believed buried. A long lost childhood friend, the smell of the bakery you used to go to as a kid, a first love as a teenager on which you embellish a much greater story, perhaps doing the same to yesterday’s cute passer-by; and then words, places, songs, everything seems plotting melancholy. What a strange world the one of nostalgia, that can even melt the heart of a wandering anarchist to a silly Sanremo song [televised music competition]...

I think everyone knows, by personal experience, the difference between sadness and melancholy. The latter is a dark feeling, but a darkness that nourishes. Have you ever noticed how the melancholics have their own sort of kindness, so diligent yet distracted? Overtaken by the nostalgia of their past, they develop a particular sensibility for strangers, almost trying to transform the void into a promise of happiness. Exile is also a bit like this.

Only recently did I pay attention to the verses of the Leo Ferré song quoted at the beginning, finding them recently, in a peculiar coincidence, also written with a marker on a wall. It's curious how the song portrays anarchists as melancholic, don't you think? "They have a black flag at half-mast for hope / And melancholy as their dancing partner"... I think clandestinity has transformed this in me: since then my unwavering optimism has become more melancholic, as if it were accompanied by a sweet gypsy melody.

The massification of activities and gestures renders the critical word increasingly inoffensive. We often get the feeling that talking means quite little. Also from this point of view prison and clandestinity have been quite different experiences for me. In prison I experienced the power of the word. To speak in a certain way to the screws, to the warden and to all the administration workers, or with the fellow inmates during yard time, has *practical* effects. Words of rebellion are closer to the possibility that they could transform into action; and thus are scarier.

As a clandestine this power of the word is often limited, and this not only for obvious security reasons.

It could happen that you hesitate to speak because what you say could assume the tone of a lecture, given that openly speaking cannot become a shared practise with other comrades (for instance if others expose themselves publicly, while you cannot). Then you prefer to remain silent, unless you can find a way to be complicit toward a common project. After all, you are even more free to act, since you have an advantage on your enemy: he does not know where you are...

In some native communities still alive, there exists a form of punishment, which its members consider the harshest.

It's neither physical torture, nor prison, nor exile. Confronted with particularly serious and deplorable acts, the community reacts by treating its author as if he didn't exist. Not looking at him, not talking to him or about him, the tribe considers him, for a period of time, as if he were *invisible*. They say that this is an unbearable punishment.

Our individuality is built and sharpened on a continuous play of communication and reciprocal recognition. We become invisible to one another when we lose our very presence, rendered cumbersome and anonymous by a massification that prevents us from determining our relationships and sincerely expressing ourselves, without mediations.

This is similar to the situation that millions of clandestine individuals are faced with today in the world, mostly *economic immigrants* of the capitalist massacre. They are rendered invisible, obliged to slither like shadows along the streets of the metropolis, to atone for the crime of being poor and foreign. The clandestine scares us because we recognize through his uprooted and precarious experience, our own, same condition. Submitted to an enormous productive and technological apparatus, we control nothing. Tossed around from one material need to the next, any meaning completely eludes us.

I am happy to see that in this book [*Incognito*] there is included the experience of somebody that has known and knows what it's like to be clandestine, but for reasons that are different from the ones of many comrades.

By this I don't mean to flatten the differences, but to begin to formulate a radical critique of borders and documents, on a more *social scale*. Unfortunately the subversion of the categories of domination (worker or unemployed, citizen or foreigner, documented or undocumented, innocent or guilty) is mostly *our own* discourse, and not a general one. In struggle any separation should actually be forgone, but it is not enough to just say that these categories are not there. At this point, the practically global condition of millions of men and women *legally inexistent*, as they were defined by a well-known and servile Italian political scientist, could be simultaneously a painful and formidable occasion to overthrow all authoritarian and collective identities. Often, however, those rendered invisible, being deprived of their speech and mutuality, look for a sort of protective community in which to blend. This is where fundamentalism comes into the picture, as a symmetrical product of capitalism that systematically negates this similarity. A reflection on its social causes is more than ever urgent, given that it is certainly not with the intellectual proof of the nonexistence of god that one can formulate a practical critique of religion. The need of a community, in a world where the only accessible community is based on consumption, is increasingly strong and manipulated by the latest nationalist or fundamentalist hypes. The numbers of invisibles, who only find themselves surrounded by animosity and indifference, keep growing each day. Men and women who are constantly faced with an ultimatum: either submit or be expelled, either coerced integration or deportation. To create common spaces of revolt, starting from immediate needs in order to push beyond them, is much more than simple solidarity; it's a path that concerns our own freedom, because the powerful sirens of temptation, able to transform the possibility of social war into the certainty of a "racial" war, are relentless.

It is in the overwhelming chaos of languages and cultures that new directions and new unions can be experienced and experimented...

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How to remain invisible to power and its lackeys – how to *challenge any identification* – while remaining socially visible? This seems to be the question of any comrade on the run. I only presume that beginning from a more widespread wandering, we can begin to speak about our wandering comrades, and shortening the distances.

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