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SYMPOSIUM

## Abolition and the Prophetic Imagination

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“We wanted no prescription, no recipe, no prophecy.”<sup>1</sup>

—Louis Appert (aka Michel Foucault), “Struggles Around the Prisons”

“Le songe prophétique est comme la voie oblique de la philosophie.”<sup>2</sup>

—Michel Foucault, “Dream, Imagination, and Existence”

There is something prophetic about abolition; some element of the elsewhere that marks its practice, and its discourse. In the work of undoing, there is a crack. In the refusal, a moment of imagination. Abolition is driven by definitive demands as much as by what is yet to come and what is still unfinished.<sup>3</sup>

For some, Michel Foucault is a prophet. He is a prophet in exile and a prophet in extremity.<sup>4</sup> As the “power-thinker,” he offers a diagnosis of oppressive power formations and a vision of resistance—always at the edge of what is and in the hope of what is to come. But Foucault himself has a certain allergy to the prophetic, a certain visceral intolerance for the word. “I never behave like a prophet,”<sup>5</sup> he insists, and “the role of the

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<sup>1</sup> François Colcombet, Antoine Lazarus, and Louis Appert, “Struggles around the Prisons,” in *Intolerable: Writings from Michel Foucault and the Prisons Information Group, 1970-1980*, eds. Kevin Thompson and Perry Zurn, trans. Perry Zurn and Erik Beranek (2021), 370.

<sup>2</sup> Michel Foucault, “‘Introduction’ to Ludwig Binswanger’s *Le Rêve et l’Existence*,” in *Dits et Ecrits I* (2003), 83.

<sup>3</sup> Liat Ben-Moshe, “‘The Institution Yet to Come’: Analyzing Incarceration through a Disability Lens,” in *The Disability Studies Reader*, ed. Leonard David (2013), 119-132.

<sup>4</sup> Christina Hendricks, “Prophets in Exile: A Diagnosis of Foucault’s Political Intellectual” (2000); Allan McGill, *Prophets of Extremity: Nietzsche, Heidegger, Foucault, and Derrida* (1987).

<sup>5</sup> Michel Foucault, “An Ethics of Pleasure,” *Foucault Live: Collected Interviews, 1961-1984*, ed. Sylvère Lotringer (1996), 380.

intellectual today is not that of proposing solutions or prophesying.”<sup>6</sup> To Foucault’s ear, a prophet is more of a reformist than an abolitionist, ready to make recommendations rather than insistent on the necessity and yet indeterminacy of change. From this vantage point, the trouble with being a prophet, with saying such-and-such a thing needs to change in such-and-such a manner, is twofold. First, it closes down possibility, answering frozen formulas with yet another sovereign injunction rather than opening up a praxis of vigilance and vulnerability. Second, it is often just not one’s place. Solutions need to be as local as the problems and led by those closest to them. Universal pronouncements about what ought and ought not to be are useless and embarrassing. Those abstracted from these contexts have no business hawking quips – or wrangling armchairs for a seat.

When it comes to Foucault’s involvement with the Prisons Information Group (Le Groupe d’information sur les prisons, GIP), he is especially insistent. He wants nothing to do with recommendations of reform. As an information group, he says, the GIP had “nothing to propose;” “we wanted no prescription, no recipe, no prophecy.”<sup>7</sup> It aimed only to make known that “the existence of the prison posed problems, just as much as what happened there.”<sup>8</sup> No prophecy, then, only problematization. No proposals for alternative penalties, improved facilities, or corrections to the correctional system. Only an insistent analysis of how the problem of criminalization gets crafted, gets tuned such that prison is the only imaginable solution—and a terrible one. For Foucault, problematization refuses all unfounded presumptions of access and authority requisite to deciding what ought to be done and what ought to be thought. It is a humbler task of understanding the present and its history rather than deciding its future. As such, for Foucault, the GIP’s work is incongruous with reform and falls far short of prophecy.

But there is always more to the GIP than Foucault would understand – and more to problematization and to prophecy.

The GIP had a prophet in its midst. Gerard Grandmontagne, a young man who, after being repeatedly incarcerated for petty theft and drugs, and finally placed in solitary for homosexuality, took his own life. The GIP published Grandmontagne’s letters under the pseudonym of H.M. The letters are torrid scrawls. Words of refusal and of hope, of longing and of delight, of stupor and rage, of belonging and alienation. And words of prophecy. According to Walter Brueggemann, the prophetic message does not paint a definitive picture of the future but rather galvanizes the suffering of a people so as to viscerally critique an oppressive system and energize the oppressed with lyric possibility.<sup>9</sup> The prophet does not decide nor totalize. Instead, they grieve, they grieve in community, and in doing so they forge the path of freedom. H.M. is this sort of prophet.

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<sup>6</sup> Michel Foucault, *Remarks on Marx* (1991), 157.

<sup>7</sup> Colcombet, Lazarus, and Appert, “Struggles around the Prisons,” 370.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*; Cp. Perry Zurn, “Publicity and Politics: Foucault, the Prisons Information Group, and the Press,” *Radical Philosophy Review* 17:2 (2014), 403-420.

<sup>9</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (2018).

"I'm a voice crying in the wilderness," H.M. writes.<sup>10</sup> It is an explicit reference to the Judeo-Christian faith, recalling the cries of John the Baptist (John 1:23) and Isaiah before him (Isaiah 40:3). As foretold by Isaiah, John the Baptist cried out in the wilderness on the cusp of Christ's first coming, preparing hearts and minds for a time of radical change. Indeed, H.M. uses the same locution as that which appears in the French Bible at the time: "*je suis la voix [de celui] qui crie dans le désert.*" H.M. thus archives himself in one of the longest, most legible of all prophetic lineages. In doing so, he lends credence and clarity to his voice, sharpening it. The passage is less a testament to erasure than it is a protest, an insistence on meaning-making, belonging, and even hope, within and against a system that aims to quell precisely that meaning, belonging, and hope.

Across the Old and New Testaments, the wilderness is a waiting ground that precipitates revelation. The same word is used to refer to the Israelites wandering in the wilderness for 40 years to inherit the promised land (Acts 7:36). That waiting ground, moreover, is typically a place of political exile, even social abandonment. But it is consistently, also, a place of unusually intimate companionship, especially with the divine. As such, the very notion of belonging is reframed in the liminal space of the wilderness; God appears to his people in a pillar of fire, a voice on the mountain top, a wind outside Elijah's cave, and in a burning bush. It is here, in this space of abandonment and yet belonging that Old and New Testament prophets find their voice. It is standing on the outskirts of empire that they launch their searing critiques, proclaiming and mobilizing a kingdom not of this world. The Greek *érēmos* and the Hebrew *midbar*, translated as wilderness, typically refer to an "uninhabited," "uncultivated, unpopulated place," or even an "unappropriated territory."<sup>11</sup> It is an anti-imperial, even anti-carceral space of possibility.

The letter in which H.M.'s cry from the wilderness is inscribed is dated September 9, 1972. It begins with a deep frustration, common to many prisoners, that he writes and writes but barely ever receives mail. H.M. begs his friend S. to please write something, and to please write regularly, so as to remind H.M. that he is not "all alone." The letter then describes the kind of furtive companionship H.M. is building in prison (with his doctor, his psychiatrist, his cell mate, a new cell arrival, and a book), and the community he hopes to be a part of upon release (a communitarian hideaway, "a small farmhouse," "a goat and a few sheep"). H.M. then launches a clear anti-carceral screed. Insistently, brazenly he speaks: "Society has rejected me, but I'll survive without it. It can't harm me anymore. [...] I will howl [*hurlerais*] injustice, I will proclaim [*proclamerai*] the corruption of the police and their barbaric and arbitrary methods. Whatever it costs me, I will speak [*dirai*] the Truth." This is H.M. the prophet, this is H.M. speaking from exile, yes, but also after drawing strength from insurgent intimacies and forbidden belongings. As he speaks

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<sup>10</sup> Groupe d'information sur les prisons, "Letters from H.M.," in *Intolerable: Writings from Michel Foucault and the Prisons Information Group, 1970-1980*, ed. Kevin Thompson and Perry Zurn, trans. Perry Zurn and Erik Beranek (2021), 172.

<sup>11</sup> See James Strong, *Strong's Exhaustive Concordance* (2003).

Truth to power,<sup>12</sup> he insists that carceral space is never total or totalizing—there is a de-territorializing wilderness even here, in the Fresnes Prison. And it is through his furtive sociality and his “howling” speech that H.M. makes the cracks of carceral expansion yawn still wider.

In retrospect, perhaps H.M. is not the GIP’s only prophet. Hélène Cixous, Jean Genet, and Serge Livrozet (as well as George Jackson and Angela Davis to whom the GIP looked) launched incisive critiques of capitalism, racism, homophobia, xenophobia, misogyny, and classism from the wilderness of carceral enclosures, while simultaneously energizing all who would listen with a vision of otherwise possibilities. A certain hope in sorrow. They, too, insisted on the life left to live in excess of oppressive structures. They, too, demanded the prison—and its many injustices—be razed to the ground, but also identified new forms of sociality already rising in its wake. Together, they engaged a kind of prophetic abolitionism.

Foucault was perhaps appropriately tentative about specific calls for change, which are so easily touted by hubristic intellectuals and coopted by established forces. But the GIP was always messier and more complex than he knew. The prophetic dreams in the GIP’s orbit paint an oblique path to doing sociality differently, and to thinking it differently. Thinking behind and to the side of carceral logics. Thinking the act of belonging in the crack of isolation. Thinking abolition.<sup>13</sup> Hope lies in the fact of structural frailty in the face of these dreams. “Hope,” Cixous would say, “is the blood of it.”<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> See Christina Hendricks on parrhesiast as prophet in “Prophecy and *Parresia*: Foucauldian Critique and the Political Role of Intellectuals,” in *Conceptions of Critique in Modern and Contemporary Philosophy*, ed. Karin de Boer and Ruth Sonderegger (2012), 212-230.

<sup>13</sup> Ladelle McWhorter, “The Abolition of Philosophy,” in *Active Intolerance: Michel Foucault, the Prisons Information Group, and the Future of Abolition*, eds. Perry Zurn and Andrew Dilts (2016), 23-40.

<sup>14</sup> Perry Zurn, “Hope is the Blood of it: On the GIP, Paris 8, and the Urgency of Writing,” An interview with Hélène Cixous, in *Intolerable: Writings from Michel Foucault and the Prisons Information Group, 1970-1980*, ed. Kevin Thompson and Perry Zurn, trans. Perry Zurn and Erik Beranek (2021), 401.

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