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PHILOCTETES IN THE BASTILLE

Elizabeth Wingrove

HOW TO READ AN ARCHIVE

In early 1753 a Bastille prisoner named Antoine Allegre devised a clandestine postal system used by both detainees and persons on the outside. A hollow space behind a loose brick in a confessional stall served as the drop box where prisoners attending mass deposited and picked up mail. The success of the system depended in part on the prisoner-correspondents' agreement to destroy the incriminating letters they received. But Allegre was unable to part with his, and in August, after he was observed "furtively hiding a packet" in his cell, prison officials launched an investigation that exposed the scheme (AB 12,493, f. 206). The drop box was mortared shut and Allegre spent four months in the dungeon in chains. The only contraband letters found at the time were those in Allegre's packet, written by the imprisoned Protestant writer Angliviel de la Beaumelle under the name "Uranie" and addressed to "Philoctète." But there are others, including two in the Angliviel family archive written by Allegre, signed by "Philoctète," and addressed to the geographer La Condamine, which were included in a packet smuggled out of the prison in late June that contained letters from La Beaumelle to Maupertuis, Montequieu, and LaLande, all of which arrived at their respective destinations.¹

Philoctetes' appearance as the letters' figural author and addressee highlights the rhetorical practices—what Jacques Rancière calls the "creative activities of invention" (Rancière and Panagia, 116)—through which "illegitimate" speakers insert themselves where they do not belong. But such "creative activities" do not spring *ex nihilo* from the mind or pen of the writer, and in framing my reading of this criminal epistolarity as an instance of classical reception, I mean to expand our understanding of the networks of literary transmission through which

“illegitimate” speakers make themselves heard. One such network operates synchronically—through linkages between printed, penned, and spoken words circulating in the eighteenth century—and the other diachronically, through appropriations and redeployments of stories, texts, and figures from a (real and imagined) distant past. From this perspective, Allegre’s rhetorical practice might be cast as an attempt to overcome exile from the former by exploiting the possibilities of the latter: writing in the name of the wounded Greek warrior enabled a classically trained Marseille schoolteacher to launch a criminal public and so insert himself into the republic of letters.

This essay explores Allegre’s epistolarity through a reading of Sophocles’ *Philoctetes* in order to denaturalize or estrange the reading and writing practices often taken as essential to modern political subjectivity. By attending to the problematics of address—how to direct words or things to others—as represented in classical texts and enacted in their reception, I aim to unsettle a near consensus position that eighteenth-century literary culture inaugurated a politics of direct address, one that could speak intimately to whomever took up the text (and thus, in its Habermasian variant, presupposed in its very form a democratic universalism).²

Certainly, scholars of eighteenth-century print culture recognize that this apparently immediate relation was multiply mediated by market and state, from the price of paper and postage to changing patterns of distribution and censorship. But typically, the political potential vested in citizen-readers and -writers awaits only the lifting of such barriers. This is as applicable to Rancière’s critical investments in “literarity”—his term for the political capacity of writing to be “equally available both to those entitled to use it and those who are not” (Rancière and Panagia, 113)—as it is to Habermasian notions of “critical rational” subjects. My own investments in understanding how reading and writing practices might themselves compose a politics (rather than promote or impede a politics happening elsewhere and otherwise) suggest we need a closer interrogation of the challenges to reception. Such challenges—simultaneously material and rhetorical—are thrown into sharp relief by the Bastille correspondents, writers in extremis whose address was perforce indirect.

I call the Bastille a criminal public to highlight the sociability, collectivity, and opposition to the state characteristic of its members,

who, like the bourgeois and republican originals, came together through networks of literary transmission.³ In his prison diary La Beaumelle imagined the pleasures and utility of one such network:

A *Gazette de la Bastille* would be a very intriguing thing: the sentiments of the prisoners, their thoughts, their hopes, their projects, the curiosities of the old ones, the adventures of the new ones, their games, amusements, the revolutions in their way of being and their manner of thinking, their efforts to communicate their ideas and their sadnesses, their desire for freedom. All this would be the basis of such a *gazette*, infinitely useful for making known the human spirit. (Taphanel, 142)⁴

The challenges to creating such linkages were enormous. Secrecy was the norm in the prison, where almost every detention represented a royal act of “extraordinary” justice.⁵ Prisoners’ identities were thus tightly controlled information and communication among them was forbidden. But their persistence in seeking means to write is everywhere evident in the archives. They requested permission to write to family, friends, business associates, state ministers, and the lieutenant-générale of the Paris police (whose authority encompassed the Bastille). Letters to state officials typically plead for release or privileges like walks in the courtyard. Letters to family and friends—subject to examination and regularly returned to the prisoner for editing—reflect the themes generally attributed to letter writers of the period (e.g., business concerns, emotional states). When permission to write was denied, prisoners found substitute means. Notes, commentary, and messages were scribbled in the margins of books kept in the prison library. At least one prisoner managed to scratch out words on tablets concocted of bread morsels, wine, and saliva, while a great many etched messages into the pewter plates on which their meals were served.

The extant materials from these perilous dialogues—letters, codes, notes, bedsheets inscribed with blood—document a ferocious desire to “speak” through writing, even or especially when it is unclear who would hear them. In these circumstances, the problem of address becomes an urgent matter. Indeed, it is the crux of communicative success: *what* is being said becomes less significant than the effort itself to reach another with one’s words, to “hail” others *as* interlocutors, to be recognized in return. The reports of Bastille officials support this conclusion: they indicate exasperation (sometimes amusement) with

the prisoners' tenacity in devising writing materials, but they rarely make reference to the content of the communication. Instead their reports focus on the indeterminable circulation of prisoners' words: where might their graven missives end up, to whom might they speak?

Such an "imagined community" depends neither on mass circulation nor on readers' absorption in common texts but on the very possibility of reception: the successful arrival of the word generates the ties that bind would-be interlocutors. As La Beaumelle's musings on a Bastille *Gazette* suggest, prisoners' desires to read and write might be fed by the fantasy of mutual transparency—of self-expressive revelation disclosing a common "*esprit humain*." But the expressive range of language cut into wood or wax or pewter, embedded in numerical code, or scrawled on purloined paper will be inescapably compromised. Likewise, inasmuch as Allegré and his fellow correspondents sustained written relations only by destroying their texts, a sign of the success of their criminal public is that there's very little left to read. The interpretive challenge in both instances—prisoners' efforts to write in the Bastille and mine to read in the prison archives—amplifies the distinction between the linguistic content of dialogue and its social, material, and rhetorical form. Or rather, it underscores the need to reconsider the relationship between the two. My reading of Sophocles' *Philoctetes* elaborates this point, by exploring the drama's representation of performative speech.

THE PHILOCETES PROBLEM

The two-fold struggle to speak and be heard features prominently in Philoctetes' story, the outline of which appears in the *Iliad* as it catalogues the men who sailed from Methone and Thaumacia:

Philoctetes the master archer had led them on
in seven ships with fifty oarsmen aboard each,
superbly skilled with the bow in lethal combat.
But their captain lay on an island, racked with pain,
on Lemnos's holy shores where the armies had marooned him,
agonized by his wound, the bite of the deadly water-viper.
There he writhed in pain but soon, encamped by the ships,
the Argives would recall Philoctetes, their great king. (Homer, 122)

Philoctetes' martial prowess owes much to his bow, a gift of gratitude from the poisoned Heracles whose funeral pyre Philoctetes alone was willing to light. But now the compassionate friend has himself become insufferable: he cannot articulate because his pain reduces his speech to cries and moans and he cannot be heard because the wound exudes a putrid stench from which his comrades flee. Ten years after abandoning him on Lemnos, the Greeks learn from a captured Trojan prophet that Philoctetes is necessary to their victory, and Odysseus is sent to retrieve him and his bow. Upon his return to Troy, Philoctetes kills Paris and his wound is healed.

The story's satisfactory outcome appears to depend, if not on an end to Philoctetes' suffering then at least on making it bearable—expressible—within a community of men: only in this way can his abandonment be undone. In *Poetry and the Fate of the Senses*, Susan Stewart presents this dilemma as paradigmatic of the literary and ethical challenges inherent in every attempt to represent another's anguish and pain. Communication of and across isolation and suffering, she argues, entails an "implicit tie of intelligibility between speaker and listener" made problematic by the very isolation and suffering one aims to communicate (103–4). Stewart calls this "the Philoctetes problem": how can one know "what sounds, what cries, were uttered, how agony was expressed, by Philoctetes in his abandonment?" Her answer takes its bearings from the Homeric version cited above, with its account of the Argives "recall[ing] their great king." Stewart suggests that this "recall" makes Philoctetes' utterance available for reception. With no witnesses to his suffering, his voice becomes audible because his men recall him—they remember and retrieve him—and in so doing make possible a poetic (re)creation of his plight. We hear his voice through the "image of his suffering" that the poet creates. A solution to the "Philoctetes problem" (which Stewart also calls the problem of the "dead letter") is thus the poem itself: it represents the tie of intelligibility between speaker and listener, and it reinstantiates their co-presence with each reading.

But what prompts the Argives to "recall" Philoctetes? Homer offers no explanation for why, after ten years, their "lost leader" comes to mind. And why assume he wants to be recalled? Again, the *Iliad* speaks only of a desire *for* Philoctetes born of his absence; there is no word on whether he shares any such longing. While for Stewart the

key to maintaining “ties of intelligibility” is bridging the distances born of time, place, and experience, her solution presumes the intersubjectivity whose failure drives Philoctetes’ story. Indeed, both his fate and that of the Greeks depend on reconstituting that relationship. Can “images” alone repair what is finally a failure of communication? This concern—that the prophylactic of poetic recreation ignores the politics of dialogic impasse—prompts me to reframe the “Philoctetes problem” to underscore that the dead letter will never arrive at its destination if it isn’t correctly addressed. From this perspective, the puzzle becomes how to induce recognition, and the promise of audibility turns on the problem of address.

Shifting from epic to tragedy, I read the “Philoctetes problem” as it unfolds in the *Philoctetes* of Sophocles. The drama takes place at the scene of the abandonment on Lemnos, where the newly arrived Greeks attempt to retrieve Philoctetes and his bow: must he, as Odysseus contends, be tricked into giving up the weapon, at which point he can be overpowered and hauled back to battle? Or can he, as Odysseus’s young companion Neoptolemus urges, be approached directly, honestly, to accept their worthy appeal or defend himself with worthy force? How language works as a political medium is a persistent theme in the play, where every speech seems to probe the implications of Odysseus’s opening claim that “it’s the tongue, and not deeds, that commands all things for mortals” (Sophocles, ll. 109–10). Philoctetes’ misery will figure in any effort to recall him to the political world. Both physical and psychic, his suffering threatens dialogue at every turn: intermittent paroxysms of pain leave him speechless as well as testing the endurance of others; the deprivation of human company has left him almost mad with grief and enraged at those who put him there. Cut off from communication by his body and his society, Philoctetes appears to be an impossible subject of political address.

The play opens as Odysseus and Neoptolemus first encounter Philoctetes through the material signs of his meager life: “crushed ground cover, as if from someone lying on it,” “a wooden cup—the work of an amateur,” “pus-heavy” rags left out to dry (ll. 41, 43, 45). Neoptolemus introduces us to these abject objects just before Odysseus discloses his plan to trick Philoctetes into giving up his bow. He advises Neoptolemus to pretend to have deserted the army at Troy after Odysseus reneged on a promise to give him the weapons of his father, Achilles.

Presenting Philoctetes with a familiar tale of betrayal, Neoptolemus will be ideally poised to gain his sympathy and so his trust: “With your words, capture the mind, the very soul of Philoctetes” (ll. 61–62).

Neoptolemus at first refuses Odysseus’s scheme—“I’d rather fail while acting nobly than win dishonestly any victory” (ll. 105–6)—but quickly comes around, in apparent response to Odysseus’s promises of future glory. At the same time, Neoptolemus’s original appeal to honor as *his* guiding principle depends on a shared human, perhaps martial, nobility that is called into question by the first signs we receive of Philoctetes: the abject objects Neoptolemus catalogues. If the honorable course—to engage openly in fair battle, whether of arguments or arms—requires an honorable opponent, the fetid-smelling, howling, and well-armed Philoctetes is effectively beyond the realm of properly political relations.⁶

But this is not to say that Philoctetes is beyond the realm of language. Not only does Odysseus warn Neoptolemus on just this score—“He’s a spinner of tales, that one—Take only what seems most useful in what he says” (ll. 142–43)—but the chorus’s many lamentations on Philoctetes’ isolated and despicable condition consistently represent him as a speaking subject. They offer this image just before we see, or rather hear, him for the first time:

The man may well be no inferior in birth to the best born,
yet he lies alone, apart from all others,
except the spotted and hairy beasts—pitiable
in his hunger, in his sufferings, his miseries
without cure.

And babbling Echo, appearing in the distance, merely
throws back to him his pitiable complaints. (ll. 184–90)

The sounds that follow—“heavy groans,” “a far-reaching howl,” “the voice of one who makes his way in agony” (ll. 204–6, 213)—might suggest a “victim” (l. 173) made abject by a fall out of language, the loss of linguistic competence. But as the characterization above suggests, what remains emblematic of his untouchability is the endless ricochet of his address—the pathos of speaking when no others can or will hear.

When Philoctetes finally appears on stage, his initial hail to Neoptolemus and his men confirms the intensity of his communicative desire:

Strangers—
 who are you, who have oared your way here,
 a desolation
 no better to drop anchor at then to live in? . . .
 Let me hear a voice—do not fear me and
 panic at my wildness, no; but
 pitying a man so ill-starred and alone and suffering as
 I am, and with
 no friend, no companion—please, speak—if you have in fact come as
 friends. (Il. 214–24)

His joyous response after Neoptolemus identifies himself—“O most welcome voice—To be addressed by such a man, a Greek, after all this time!” (Il. 226–27)—highlights the pleasures of a common tongue that are interpellative before they are representational. Here the “ties of intelligibility” between would-be interlocutors are enacted discursively and from his first utterance, Philoctetes announces a dialogic imperative circumscribed by the persistent possibility of disjointed address.

As the play proceeds, his summoning powers expand. He is initially hailed in terms akin to the “babbling Echo” that marks his political isolation, as Neoptolemus, feigning never to have heard of him, offers instead of recognition the lie about his own suffering at Odysseus’s hand; as their dialogue continues and Philoctetes persists in addressing Neoptolemus as trusted friend, the latter grows increasingly uncertain about what he is doing. His confusion intensifies after he takes possession of the bow—“My speech is aimless, I don’t know where to turn it” (Il. 949–50)—and he ends by revealing the deception. Enraged, Philoctetes curses him into silence (“You fire—you absolute horror, you most hateful stratagem of terrible outrage—” [Il. 989–90]) before launching into the first of a series of apostrophes:

Oh harbors,
 Oh headlands,
 Oh mountain beasts in packs, oh rugged rocks—
 For I know none other to speak to except
 You who have always been here with me—
 To you I speak,
 Of what the son of Achilles has done to me. (Il. 1001–7)

Gone are the howls and groans that punctuated his earlier speech as Philoctetes continues, for about fourteen lines, to narrate to the harbors

and headlands the perfidy of his would-be friend. As the standoff comes to a head—Neoptolemus pleading for him to return, Odysseus demanding that he obey—Philoctetes gives no ground, rejecting their promises of restored nobility at Troy in favor of a world he has fashioned through poetic address. Speaking to his “double-mouthed” cave, his purloined bow, his hands, the cliffs, the birds, the sea (“you who have always been here with me”) Philoctetes dramatizes an interlocutory zeal fueled by the agony of abandonment. He is not attempting to represent his suffering: he is refusing to go unrecognized as a betrayed friend. Neoptolemus cannot identify with his pain; he can only acknowledge that he perpetuates it. And so he does. Forced to recognize Philoctetes’ dignity and thus his duty as friend, Neoptolemus returns the bow and agrees to support him, if need be, in armed battle against their fellow Greeks.

The failure of both Neoptolemus’s and Odysseus’s strategies to recall Philoctetes—he can be neither persuaded nor tricked—initiates the need for a *deus ex machina*: the play ends with the appearance of Heracles, who foretells Philoctetes’ healing and glorious future at Troy before advising him that “the moment to act is upon you” (ll. 1644–45). And so *he* does, after a final farewell address:

Farewell,
 Chamber that kept watch over me,
 water-nymphs,
 nymphs of the meadows,
 the muscled crashing of sea against headland.
 where often my head, though
 inside the cave, was drenched by the south wind’s
 beating,
 and often the mountain of Hermes sent
 back to me in answer
 my own voice
 echoing,
 groaning,
 as I weathered the storm. (ll. 1648–60)

So ends the drama that also begins with Philoctetes’ resounding labors to anthropomorphize the natural world. Such self-generated dialogue evokes the power of poetry characterized by Socrates as a creativity that “is responsible for something coming into existence when it did not exist before” (Plato, 205b8–c2). In this case, the power of creative

invention concerns the very possibility of recognition, the mutual address of friendship that would enable Philoctetes to insert himself (back) into a community of men. The shape-shifting Odysseus might seem better suited to the intrigues and manipulations of the political world; but for both “weathering the storms” of inevitable human treachery and forging the ties that can rescue us from them, Philoctetes might have the upper hand. As a figure of address—a suffering subject whose precise poetic aim targets a worldly response—he remains a potent political character.

CRIMINAL PUBLICITY

We see a rhetorical performance of this “Philoctetes” problem—how to generate recognition through communication—in Allegre’s letters. He was twenty-five years old in 1750 when he was embastilled for forging letters detailing a plot to kill the king and his mistress, Mme de Pompadour, by sending them letters laced with poison. From the moment he entered the prison until his 1763 transfer to the asylum of Charenton, Allegre worked diligently to provoke his own recall: a plentiful archive documents his epistolary efforts to be heard by the minister of war, the minister of finance, the lieutenant-générale of police, Bastille officials, and Louis XV, in addition to Pompadour. He typically signed these letters Allegre or, on occasion, the vaguely noble sounding D’Alegre. But when he aimed to communicate across the physical, social, and psychic distances separating prisoners inside the Bastille, he took the name Philoctète.

In addition to being part of the classical curriculum, Sophocles’ drama also circulated widely in French translation (in Pierre Brumoy’s *Le Théâtre des Grecs*, first published in 1730). So perhaps the wronged warrior offered Allegre a newly resonant dramatic trope. Certainly, his letters are filled with lamentations on the misery of his isolation, and they frequently take up the theme of friendship: whether his would survive his imprisonment or help to secure his release. Consider the following from a letter addressed to Tournel, his partner in a Marseille boarding school, written near the end of Allegre’s first year in the Bastille:

The works of the ancients are filled with beautiful maxims on friendship, and on the duties of friends: but what they rarely say is that the word “friend” is a vague and common name that most people use without thinking about what it means. And then, few friends are sincere. Everyday do we not have the sad and unhappy experience of this sentence—*Donec eris felix, multos numerabis amicos; tempora si fuerint nubila, solus eris*

The esteem I have for you makes me fearful, and the fear leads to suspicions. But I know your heart. It will be more true than my unhappiness will be large. Wouldn't it be an inconsistency and reversal of the blind goddess to break a union in which interest and *amour propre*—the typical social arbiters—have never arisen? My dear friend, we will love each other always, and neither distance nor misery, nor disgrace, nor prison, nor any other misfortune will ever extinguish or affect our mutual affection. Like those illustrious friends whose fidelity was so famous in antiquity: inferior to them by rank, we are still free to equal them in sentiment. (AB 11,729, f.147 [v])

The letter's citational gestures confirm that Allegre's writing was enriched by encounters with classical texts. One might conclude that these encounters led him to identify with Philoctetes and so to craft his prose to reflect the character he sought to become, or imagined he was. And indeed such reflections reappear throughout Allegre's letters: in his appeals to the lieutenant-générale to commute his sentence to exile on a deserted island, in regular complaints that he has only “filthy rags” to wear, and outrage that he sleeps on straw.⁷ But the classical enrichment evident in his writing encompasses more than the conjuring of ancient characters and the deployment of stock phrases, the “seasoning” of one's work, as Cervantes puts it, with some “Latin maxims which your own memory will suggest” (his examples include the Ovidian line used by Allegre), which, when tossed off, provide an aura of erudition (Cervantes, 6). Any conclusion that Allegre identified with the classical figure cannot be limited to thematic affinities, for example, to the emotional states and accoutrements (straw, rags, ancient adages) of suffering in degraded and degrading circumstances. The textual traces that I want to track—the babbling Echo that strikes me as I read Allegre's letters—are those rhetorical forms that enable and disconcert dialogic address.

In writing to Tournel, for example, it is not sufficient that Allegre recall a relationship rooted in the everyday interactions of a shared

business; the friendship must be recreated through dialogue. Of course, representation—the making present of something absent: their common history, Allegre’s esteem, his pressing need—is critical to the task; but the necessary (if not sufficient) condition for success on that front is successful reception. In other words, the happy performative paradoxically requires that recognition precede cognition. This is the lens through which to read Allegre’s deployment of the first-person plural in the letter excerpted above: is the “we” of the first paragraph, who “everyday” experience the abandonment of friends when the going gets tough, the same “we” of the second paragraph, who “will love each other always” however cloudy the times? The transition between the two is marked by an almost digressive pronouncement in the first-person singular that manages to be simultaneously ominous and opaque: why does Allegre’s “esteem” for his friend make him “fearful,” and what are his ensuing “suspicions” about? But what this murky self-expression lacks in referential clarity it makes up for in performative force, as the “we” constituted through a shared awareness of insincere friends splits into an “I” and “you” who might well stand on opposite sides of the Ovidian line. The suspense generated by the possibility of misdirected address (is Tournel a fair-weather friend?) is resolved as Allegre confidently resumes the disquisitional tone of his opening sentences before launching into the hortatory pitch of the final lines: by the letter’s end, the “we” has been reconfigured as ancient, loyal friends. Allegre (re)forges “ties of intelligibility” that might bind by bridging the distance between Marseille and the Bastille (and between the abjected and the esteemed) through appeal to a common world comprised of ever-present classical figures.

One might suspect that Allegre and Tournel’s shared past—which included a livelihood, library, and home—is critical to understanding these rhetorical practices. So, for example, the letter’s emotional intensity and textual intimacy could be taken as symptomatic of their particular relationship. But his letters to a wide range of persons—in his family, the prison, the republic of letters, and the state—persistently perform the agony of address, making its uncertainties the very language of his isolation. On the one hand, his challenges were clearly owing to questions of character. A *mauvais sujet* imprisoned for writing letters expressing regicidal intentions must overcome the assumption that his every utterance is insincere. Here are two, fairly typical

passages from his letters to the prison governor; the first was written at the time he devised the postal scheme, the second was written from the dungeon, shortly after its discovery:

The only grace I ask of you, Monsieur, is to not suspect me of lying or bad faith. A suspicion of this sort would suggest that I am ungrateful, and an ingrate is for me a monster, equally the enemy of god and men. Eh! Monsieur, the depths of my soul are not so evil, my faults do not lead to that conclusion. The idea is crushing, almost wrenching tears of blood from me. (AB 11,729, f. 147 [v])

My blood is yours. There isn't a drop I wouldn't spill for you. Do not believe that by saying this I am trying to seduce or flatter you. No. I have no other motive than to make my feelings known to you, and you can treat me in whatever manner you judge fitting, without the slightest murmur leaving my mouth. (AB 11,729, f. 291 [v])

Given a patronage system rooted in ties of unquestioning loyalty, the need to be heard as a grateful subject was particularly acute. And in the age of sensibility, there is perhaps nothing like blood and tears to drive the point home. So attempting to show readers the purity of his heart was clearly a goal. On the other hand, Allegre's letters move beyond bodily tropes of character to register dilemmas posed by writing. How does one address another who has total control over almost every circumstance of life, including over the continuation of the dialogue itself? Will impassioned assertions of innocence be taken as political defiance? How can one avoid being misread when flattery, seduction, and honest self-expression can all look the same?

The multiple failures of language are, again, a recurrent complaint in Allegre's prison letters. Here's one example, which is neither typical nor unique:

I throw myself at your feet, I embrace your knees, I bathe them with my tears. Have pity on me, let yourself be roused by my cries. Listen to me, Monsieur, excuse me. I ask you, in God's name, how can I sway you, who will give me words moving enough! How can I depict here my feelings and the excesses of my pain! Forgive me, Monsieur, extend me a rescuing hand! Have pity on me! I believe in you, I am confident that my pardon will follow as a result of your clemency, and as the fruit of my letter. (AB 11,729, f. 292 [v])

Allegre's concluding gesture toward the instrumentality of his self-expression might be reminiscent of the cunning Odysseus, but he is

speaking the language of Philoctetes. He narrates, or rather performs, his abject pose in an epistolary present tense (“I throw,” “I embrace,” “I bathe”) that sustains a co-temporal if not co-present address, and in so doing he gives representational form to an authentically embodied character: in lieu of implausible promises of bloodletting he offers an easily imaginable scene of despair. But Allegre crafts his recognizably suffering position in order to pursue address through the rhetoric of failed representation: how can he possibly touch his reader? What words could be sufficiently moving? What language could be adequately graphic? Here, recognition will come not despite the insufficiency of language but because of it: reaching out to one’s interlocutor and being touched in return—grasped by a “rescuing hand”—can be the only response when description proves impotent. And it is in performing representational impotence that Allegre’s communicative interaction begins to bear fruit.

There is much more to be said about the letters Allegre wrote and received as Philoctète.⁸ But I want to close by suggesting that his communicative desires, and his capacity to satisfy them, cannot be assessed only in relation to the end he ostensibly sought, that is, release from the Bastille. Sometimes, indeed maybe every time he “spoke,” the practice was itself an iteration of relations of recognition that can only be achieved through dialogue. What matters then is less the content of his “utterances” than his self-insertion into a circulatory system that, unlike the entry into (or fall out of) language, hinges on the contingencies of address. We do not know how many exchanges Philoctète was conducting with other prisoners; no doubt they were all as fraught as the world-animating address of Philoctetes on Lemnos. But not because their dialogue lacked transparency, symmetry, or unconstrained access. On the contrary, like the angry archer who demands to be heard, the Bastille prisoners might help us to understand better how dialogic practices themselves create and sustain communicative networks whose very circuitry comprises the stuff of recognition. Here communicative competence means making one’s voice be heard, not through sobering, righteous, or simply moving acts of self-expression—the persuasive power of speech typically disparaged as “mere” rhetoric—but through acts of creation so precarious, so uncertain that

they might well amount to bringing a desolate island to life, or perhaps, to crafting a dialogue between archival records and archaic tongues.

Notes

1. In addition to archival documents, sources used to reconstruct this episode include Lauriol and Ravaisson-Mollien. I thank the Newberry Library for a 2003–4 NEH/Mellon Fellowship, during which I began work on this project.
2. See Habermas.
3. See Warner for a discussion of the wide-ranging investments in “public” and “publicity.”
4. All translations from French are my own.
5. See Strayer.
6. See Knox for an exploration of this Sophoclean topos.
7. AB 11,729 (f. 276); 12,493 (f. 205); 12,499 (f. 4).
8. I thank Claude Lauriol for access to these documents; he has requested that I not quote them in “public” contexts.

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