Chapter 8

Abstract

This essay explores the centrality of the imprisoned writer to the identity and advocacy work of writers' organisation PEN International, considering the implications of the visibility of the imprisoned writer for the organisation's representation of writers and literature in general. By revisiting some key moments in PEN's history (particularly in the context of the Cold War and decolonisation), drawing on material from the PEN archives, and engaging with publications like Siobhan Dowd's edited anthology of prison writing, *This Prison Where I Live: A Pen Anthology of Imprisoned Writers* (1996), the essay charts the growing visibility of the imprisoned writer within the organisation's structures and activities, focusing especially on the foundation of the Writers in Prison Committee in 1960, and the parallels with other emerging human rights organisations of the same period. The essay argues that the centrality of the imprisoned writer in PEN is bound up with the PEN Charter's assertion that literature should remain "untouched" by "national and political passion", which ultimately acts as a strategically useful platform from which to defend writers from oppressors of various ideological hues.

Chapter 8

PEN and the Writer as Prisoner

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Introducing PEN and the Imprisoned Writer

In her introduction to the 1996 volume *This Prison Where I Live: The PEN Anthology of Imprisoned Writers* (1996), editor Siobhan Dowd declares that "Nothing captures the international imagination as readily as a writer behind bars" (3). The anthology gathers together the work of twenty-five writers describing their experiences of incarceration and was published to mark the 75th anniversary of PEN International. Dowd's introduction celebrates the efforts of PEN, a writers' organisation and NGO, to ameliorate the conditions of imprisoned writers as their "unifying mission" (3). "While PEN was not", she acknowledges, "founded with this precise task in mind, it quickly embraced it and indeed became one of the world's first human rights organisations" (3). That defence of the imprisoned writer is so closely identified with PEN suggests that the compelling figure Dowd alludes to has to an extent become the prevailing vision of the writer imagined by PEN. The writer, thus transformed into the hero of free expression under conditions of incarceration, becomes bound up with a model of literature as a cultural practice under constant threat from an antagonistic state.

This essay is an effort to think through this particular framing of writers and literature: to consider the implications of the centrality of the imprisoned writer within PEN and its relationship to the organisation's representation of writers and literature in general. By revisiting some key moments in PEN's history, drawing on material from the PEN archives, and engaging with publications like Dowd's anthology, the essay charts the growing visibility of the imprisoned writer within the organisation's structures and activities, focusing especially on the foundation of the Writers in

Prison Committee in 1960.[1] This is inevitably a highly selective account of PEN's history that brackets, for example, the evolving understanding of the right to free expression and the writer as uniquely the possessor of such rights, or the organisation's more recent preoccupations with linguistic and digital rights. The purpose of such a partial history in the context of this collection is to consider what happens to the categories of "literature" and "writer" when refracted through the lens of incarceration in the context in which PEN operated. By the same token, the varied nature of PEN's advocacy activities allows us to also consider the significance of the visibility of the imprisoned writer for the representation of prisoners and the experience of incarceration more broadly. While I aim only to give some sense of the debate and contestation that has shaped PEN's powerful defence of the imprisoned writer, it is fair to say that such contestations have characterised every step in PEN's history, especially as experienced within and between national centres in more than one hundred countries.

It is no accident that Dowd is concerned with the ability of the imprisoned writer to capture the "*international* imagination" (3, emphasis added). PEN's history is defined by the international reach central to its founding vision, and which has played out with and against various forms of cultural and political internationalism. This, coupled with PEN's avowed political neutrality, is the larger context in which the figure of the imprisoned writer has acquired moral authority and in which PEN evolved into a major actor in the literary world and on the international stage. In her short history of PEN, Dowd emphasises internationalism and political neutrality as qualities that have been integral to the organisation from its foundation in London in 1921, and suggests that these coalesce later in the century around a concern for human rights and specifically the human rights of imprisoned writers. Dowd's description of PEN as a human rights organisation rings true, and she writes with considerable authority as a researcher for the Writers in Prison Committee since the mid-1980s and later Program Director for PEN America's Freedom to Write committee.

[1] Research in the PEN Archives at the Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, Austin was supported by a British Academy Small Grant.

However, as she implicitly acknowledges, the convergence of writers' organisation and human rights NGO that underpins her account of PEN was not an inevitable trajectory for the organisation. As I will show, the imprisoned writer acquired increasing prominence in PEN's structures and activities in the context of both the Cold War and the decolonising movements of the post-war period. PEN's evolution therefore needs to be understood alongside the emergence of other human rights organisations in this period, and the role of internationalism and political neutrality in a wider history. The essay therefore builds on recent scholarship on the emergence of human rights as a political ideology in the later twentieth century, drawing on Samuel Moyn's (2010) description of human rights as "the last utopia" and Megan Doherty's (2011) unpublished account of PEN's place within this history. But in focusing on PEN's advocacy on behalf of imprisoned writers, I am also building on Joseph Slaughter's (2018) recent critical account of the international prominence of human rights at the expense of an anti-colonial politics of self-determination, and the enormous affective power of the prisoner of conscience in this history.

PEN is unique in the history of twentieth century human rights organisations in its singular focus on writers. That PEN is a human rights NGO that is first and foremost a writers' organisation, and that these twin identities seem entirely compatible, suggest that PEN might be one place to look if we want to build on Joseph Slaughter's work in thinking about the relationship between literature and human rights as more than a set of themes. An organisation like PEN allows us to consider the links between these different spheres – literature and human rights – as a set of practices and activities that are tied to a writer's words, to their politics, to their bodies, and to their role as advocate. These practices are played out time and again in relation to the imprisoned writer, and it is this figure above all that has been the catalyst for a convergence between literature and human rights. As I will attempt to show, this has been achieved through a definition of literature as removed from politics, and it is in the figure of the imprisoned writer that this vision of literature is most vulnerable.

A Short History of PEN

According to Doherty (2011), PEN has an internationalist orientation that was solidified when it gained consultative status at UNESCO in the late 1940s and became a recognised voice in the creation and protection of internationally significant culture and heritage. From its beginnings, PEN has projected this kind of international vision. Emerging after the First World War, it was, according to its first president, novelist John Galsworthy, "a League of Nations for Men and Women of Letters" (quoted in "Our History" on PEN International website), offering writers a social space in which to exchange ideas and articulate their international vision. PEN International, as it is now known, began its days as the PEN Club, a London literary society for Poets, Essayists and Novelists founded by Catharine Amy Dawson Scott in 1921. PEN clubs quickly sprang up in other European countries, and by the outbreak of the Second World War there were PEN centres in North and South America, the Middle East and Asia. As a result, a simultaneous national and internationalist understanding of literature and writers has defined the structure of PEN, with national centres participating in an International Executive: writers organise themselves nationally (where the national is defined ethno-linguistically) into centres, which combine internationally through congresses, committees and various forms of activism. The "international" is therefore both the sphere of a broad literary culture and an escape from the domestic. It is also, for PEN and for later human rights NGOs, the space in which influence can be exerted on specific nations.

For most of the organisation's history both the international executive and the national centres have been guided by a charter that was in development from the 1920s though not ratified until 1948, and which has been modified several times, most recently in 2017. The 1948 Charter provides a fascinating definition of literature, which "national though it be in origin, knows no frontiers", and claims that "works of art, the patrimony of humanity at large, should be left untouched by national or political passion" (1948 PEN Charter, cited in Doherty, 2011, 386). Like many charters of the post-war period, including the contemporaneous Universal Declaration of Human Rights, it

remained tied to the national while projecting the "ideal of one humanity living in peace in one world" (1948 PEN Charter, cited in Doherty, 2011, 386). While this nation-bound definition of literature has been erased from later versions, the charter's internationalist ethos remains underpinned by the "unhampered transmission of thought within each nation and between all nations", and nations, states and governments continue to be broadly conceived as the antagonists of writers and literature.

PEN may be defined by an understanding of literature as "untouched" by politics, but with the charter compelling members to "pledge themselves to oppose any form of suppression and freedom of expression", the organisation inevitably strayed into the domain of the political (1948 PEN Charter, cited in Doherty, 2011, 386). Rachel Potter has argued that PEN's "survival in the 1930s and 1940s […] lay in its development of a clear sense of its political role as a writers' organisation" (2013, 78). Faced with the rise of Nazism, book burning, writers fleeing Germany and, during the war, the problem of refugee writers, PEN's activities evolved in a more overtly political direction. According to Potter, as part of their commitment to freedom of expression for exiled writers, "Literary texts, now tied to the fate of authors, required international protection from state suppression" (77). Therefore, PEN's internationalism, she argues, had to reorganise its focus and purpose: "The idea of literary free speech as the international exchange of ideas changed to become an author's human rights that needed to be defended against totalitarian states" (78).

It is in this context that we might begin to understand the enormous symbolic significance of the imprisoned writer for PEN. As the Cold War intensified, the organisation's structures and activities began to be oriented more towards the plight of incarcerated writers. In advance of the International PEN Congress in Rio de Janeiro in July 1960 a number of resolutions were circulated, among them a resolution submitted by the Swiss French Centre, subsequently ratified by the Congress, to formalise the reporting on writers imprisoned in all countries and to form a special committee

empowered to act on behalf of PEN to support imprisoned writers – what became the Writers in Prison Committee. It is clear from the note in the resolution defining "writers in prison" – a category that would be a continual source of controversy – that this work was considered to be continuous with PEN's advocacy for freedom of expression: "by 'writers in prison' we mean all writers imprisoned for their writings or their opinions, such imprisonment being in violation of the principles of the PEN Charter" (Swiss French Resolution, reproduced in Minutes of English PEN Executive Committee, March 17, 1960). In keeping with the tendency that Potter identifies, this represents a further move away from texts and towards writers, and specifically towards the body of the imprisoned writer.

To some extent, then, the Writers in Prison Committee that would emerge from the Rio Congress is the logical culmination of PEN's advocacy on behalf of writers who had fallen foul of state authorities since at least the 1920s and 30s, when the organisation made well-publicised interventions on behalf of writers during the Spanish Civil War. The context had changed, however, and the catalyst for the Swiss French resolution lay in the immediate events of the Cold War. As Doherty (2011) documents, a controversy erupted within PEN in the period following the Hungarian Revolution in 1956 which saw several "dissident" writers imprisoned by the Soviet-backed regime, including Tibor Déry and Julius Hay. PEN campaigned on behalf of such writers. Yet with echoes of the conflict between the International Executive and the German Centre in the 1930s, there were serious tensions between the International Executive and the Hungarian PEN Centre, whose autonomy was called into question by Paul Tabori, a prominent PEN figure and himself a Hungarian exile. The controversy resulted in the expulsion and then reinstatement of Hungarian PEN in the space of a few years, and exemplified debates within the organisation about whether conditions in communist countries could ever allow those national centres to align with PEN's values.

The effects of the Hungarian controversy were long-lasting, embedding the imprisoned writer within the structures of PEN through the Writers in Prison Committee, and, significantly, at the centre of the International Executive. Although the committee's information would come from national centres, in reporting directly to the International Executive, and acting on its behalf between meetings of the executive, the committee would partially circumvent national centres, thus bringing about a subtle change in the mechanisms of PEN's internationalism. While PEN maintained a policy of neutrality in the context of the Cold War, the organisation was at the same time strengthening its institutional structures to allow it to intervene more robustly in eastern block countries, and much of the energy of the committee was directed towards helping dissident writers.

The shift to the body of the imprisoned writer, especially the dissident writer in the context of the Cold War, then, represents an intensification of the implied antagonism between the writer and the state already evident in the PEN Charter. Not only should the work of art, according to the charter, "be left untouched by national or political passion", suggesting that art, in this case literature, inhabits a sphere distinct from national or political passions, but "free criticism of government, administrations and institutions [is] imperative for the necessary advance of the world towards a more highly organized political and economic order" (1948 PEN Charter, cited in Doherty, 2011 386). The case of the imprisoned writer brings to the fore the state's power over the body of the writer, therefore necessitating criticism of government. Thus, in the heat of the Cold War, the imprisoned writer increasingly comes to stand symbolically for the writer in general threatened by totalitarian regimes, with PEN as their external and international champion. At the same time, the embedding of this figure in PEN's structures through the Writers in Prison Committee also crystallises an alternative role for the writer as human rights advocate and defender. The result is that the version of the writer projected by PEN on the international stage, as Dowd's anthology suggests, is either the heroic victim or the heroic saviour, depending on the writer's national context.

Writers in Prison Committee and Decolonisation

It became clear even in early debates about the Swiss French resolution that the Cold War was not the only context in which writers were being imprisoned and in which PEN would be compelled to act. At a meeting of the International Executive in London ahead of the Rio Congress delegates from various centres debated the resolution. There was broad support for it, but also some differences in understanding its scope. It is evident from the minutes of this meeting that David Carver, the hugely influential London-based International Secretary of PEN from 1951 to 1974, had a strategy for retaining control of the emerging Writers in Prison Committee in London, and therefore by English PEN, who then controlled the International Executive. According to Carver, the committee, which would include Carver in his role as International Secretary, should be comprised of three members who could meet in person to discuss their work; the members should therefore be based in London.

Aziz Ahmad, Urdu poet, scholar and Pakistani delegate, saw things differently. According to the minutes, for Ahmad

> there were basically three different types of writers who were in danger of imprisonment: first, those in Communist countries, second, those in colonial countries such as South Africa and, possibly, in South America, and third, writers living in the so-called free countries where dictatorships were in power. After making this point, [Ahmad] proposed the [idea] be extended, with committee members representing, say, the west (though they should have few cases), the Communist bloc, Africa, Asia and South America respectively. (Minutes of International Executive Committee of International PEN, April 4, 1960, 5-6)

By articulating an understanding of the problems the Writers in Prison Committee was designed to address as historically and regionally specific, Ahmad was, in a sense, challenging the centralisation of power in London and "the west", from where interventions might be made around the world, and arguing instead for a distribution of power across different regions. This might be thought of along the lines of the international influence increasingly exerted by formerly colonised countries at the rapidly expanding United Nations, or indeed the push and pull between the UK and current and former colonies within the Commonwealth. Ahmad was voted down, however.

Controversy also arose when the resolution was formally passed at the Rio Congress, this time from tensions within the South African delegation, and between the South African delegation and the International Executive. The delegation was led by novelist Sarah Gertrude Millin, President of South African PEN since 1927 when, according to Peter McDonald (2009, 167), Galsworthy invited her to form a national centre. Her fellow delegates were Lewis and Dora Sowden who became involved in the centre in the 1940s, giving it a greater sense of purpose but also leading to frictions which would crystallise at the Rio Congress. In the archive we can see Millin's letter to Carver explaining why she walked out of the Congress debate on the Swiss French resolution in response to Lewis Sowden's contribution. Sowden had noted, as Ahmad had previously, that the Writers in Prison Committee might also focus on South Africa. According to a report on the Congress from Carver, Sowden "had mentioned with regret that there were signs his own country, South Africa, might join that unhappy band who had writers imprisoned for expressing their views" (Minutes of English PEN Executive Committee, October 6, 1960, 4). This did not go down well with Millin, who according to Carver's account "had declared with passion that such action was entirely justified by a government during a state of emergency; she had consulted legal authorities in South Africa who had assured her of this, and she felt any government had every right to imprison its writers at such times" (Minutes of English PEN Executive Committee, October 6, 1960, 4). In her letter to Carver, Millin takes umbrage at Sowden's mention of South Africa in

relation to the Writers in Prison Committee: “thus associating S Africa’s conduct with that of the USSR when the battle for over forty years has been against the USSR” (Letter from Millin to Carver, July 1960 [undated]). Millin’s objection, in other words, is not to the principle of PEN supporting imprisoned writers, but that PEN might support imprisoned *South African* writers. Millin, that is, sees PEN’s focus as anti-communism rather than anti-authoritarianism. The debates of the Rio Congress took place in July 1960, in the immediate aftermath of the killing of 69 people at Sharpeville on 21 March when South African police opened fire on a demonstration against apartheid legislation and thereby ushered in a period of mass detentions and police repression. Millin’s framing of the situation as bound up with Cold War ideologies sidesteps the official racism of the apartheid government, even if it signals how this often proceeded through anti-communist propaganda. Her objection to the idea of PEN intervening on behalf of writers imprisoned in these circumstances bears comparison with the examples of German PEN in the 1930s and Hungarian PEN in the 1950s, and suggests that national centres were sometimes the most reluctant to intervene locally, defending the right of their respective governments to imprison writers and journalists. And this is a constant theme in PEN’s history.

The Algerian War, another anti-colonial struggle, also featured in PEN’s discussions in this period, particularly the detention of writers and journalists, including Henri Alleg, as well as the blacklisting of French writers and intellectuals who in 1960 signed the document known as the Manifesto of the 121, supporting the cause of Algerian independence and those who engaged in acts of military insubordination. There was a debate within the Executive of English PEN about whether or not to defend those who were persecuted for signing the manifesto. Carver and most others were in favour of public statements of support, but there were also strong voices against, arguing that the British would and should act the same way in an emergency. Another delegate drew an analogy with the actions of the forces known as the Black and Tans, former soldiers drafted into the Royal Irish Constabulary in 1920 to suppress the Irish War of Independence. Carver, whose position

straddled English PEN and the International Executive, responded by highlighting a pattern of tensions between national centres reluctant to intervene locally and the International Executive, which he presumed to rise above such considerations. According to the minutes, "Mr Carver said it was interesting to hear a member of the English Executive using the same argument which had been so unpopular when used by Mrs Sarah Gertrude Millin – namely, that in a time of internal strife a country's government was quite justified in using unlawful methods" (Minutes of English PEN Executive Committee, November 9, 1960, 3-4).

The pattern Carver identifies sheds some light on the perceived role of the International Executive in mitigating the influence of local political considerations. The International Executive offered itself as a distant neutral broker, a counter-balance to the conflicts of interest that might arise closer to home, and therefore ultimate custodian of the PEN Charter's commitment to protect literature from "national or political passion". Notably, the argument in favour of supporting the signatories of the Manifesto of the 121 was not based on political sympathies with their position; this much was made explicit in the course of the discussion. Rather, the PEN Charter demanded that the organisation would defend the right to freedom of expression and due process for the signatories. In relation to the Writers in Prison Committee, Carver was especially sensitive to any suggestion that the activities of the committee were political. In a letter to *The Bookseller* (May 21, 1960) ahead of the Rio Congress, Carver contested their earlier description of PEN's investment in imprisoned writers as a "political theme": "PEN is, of course, a non-political organization and there will be no 'main political theme' discussed at the Brazil Congress" (Minutes of English PEN Executive Committee, June 2, 1960, 4). Here we have an example of Carver assuming for PEN itself the "non-political" definition of literature that lies at the heart of the charter. Such a position, and claim to international neutrality, was critical to PEN during this period. Indeed, drawing on Samuel Moyn's work on the emergence of human rights organisations in the 1970s, Doherty notes that "PEN's humanitarian turn", exemplified by the Writers in Prison Committee, offered "an appealingly

neutral path through the worst days of the Cold War" (2011, 252). Even at the time, however, Millin's interventions at the Rio Congress laid bare the fragility of this neutral path. It was under constant threat of being perceived as anti-communist rather than anti-authoritarian, and efforts to hold apart European Cold War politics and the politics of decolonisation were not tenable given the Cold War's many global fronts.

Changes to the Writers in Prison Committee

While its distance from national centres seemed to be the guarantee of political neutrality for the Writers in Prison Committee in its early years, the relationship between the committee and national centres was recalibrated when Michael Scammell, English biographer and Slavic specialist, took over as Chair in 1976. Scammell transformed the committee into a robust information centre, producing regular reports on the status of imprisoned writers around the world. Organised by region, the committee's reports, which over a ten year period grew from 81 cases to 349, came to paint a grim picture of the vulnerable position of writers and journalists in various countries (Von Vegesack, 2011, 16). There was a strong concentration on eastern Europe, but the reports also tracked varying flashpoints in the global Cold War and other sites of conflict and political upheaval. The information contained in the reports was gathered from national centres and supplemented by organisations like Amnesty International as well as the committee's own investigations. National centres took on the role of adopting imprisoned writers from other countries as honorary members and campaigning on their behalf. They attracted international attention through coordinated events like the Day of the Imprisoned Writer, which continues today. But the gradual institutional changes that took place suggest that national centres were not entirely united behind the work of the Writers in Prison Committee, and indeed that the committee continued to expose fault lines between different regions.

Rules for membership of the committee were altered in 1987 at the Lugano Congress, ostensibly strengthening the power of national centres over the working of the committee though in effect narrowing the range of centres involved. In order to qualify for membership, national centres now had to commit to operating their own committee in the service of persecuted writers, and they had to commit to funding the Writers in Prison Committee at an internationally agreed rate, as well as to adopting at least two honorary members. What this meant in practice was that the Writers in Prison Committee was largely controlled by national centres in western Europe and the US, even as it still reported to the International Secretariat and to delegates at Congress. So, while Michael Scammell's lengthy reports on persecuted writers were impressively international in their scope, those making decisions about the Committee's reporting and work were a shrinking group of western European states plus the US. This does not seem to have been a deliberate strategy, but we are, in effect, back to the problem identified by the Pakistani delegate before the Committee ever came into being – a problem of where values are determined and decisions are taken, and by whom. Across the trajectory of PEN's development, which has intersected with major world historical events – and notwithstanding its global reach – institutional structures have ensured that power has largely been retained in the economic centres of western Europe and the US. And these structures have helped to determine the roles available to writers within the organisation. At the same time, neither did the committee enjoy unanimous support from those same European and US centres, nor indeed was the International Executive itself always supportive. PEN President Francis King and International Secretary Alexandre Blokh were sceptical of the prominence afforded the committee in PEN's profile and activities and in 1987, as Scammell was stepping down as its chair and being replaced by Swedish publisher Thomas Von Vegesack, saw an opportunity to dilute its power. According to Von Vegesack's account in his memoir of his involvement with PEN, *Dagarna med PEN* (2011, 44) and reinforced by archival accounts of the Lugano Congress, Susan Sontag led resistance to King and Blokh's efforts to downgrade the committee from her role as American PEN delegate, and

the events would lead to further reflection on the committee's operation at a special meeting at the Toronto Congress in 1989.

One of the central items on the agenda of that 1989 meeting was the definition of a writer in prison, a pressing topic after a fractious congress debate in Lugano in 1987 about Nelson Mandela's status as a writer. The East German PEN Centre had asked the Writers in Prison Committee to investigate the possibility of adopting Mandela as an imprisoned writer. Scammell, still chair of the committee, described his investigation as part of his report to the committee on South Africa. In his effort to determine whether or not Mandela should be adopted as an honorary member, Scammell had read *The Struggle is My Life* (1978), a collection of Mandela's articles, speeches and letters, honing in on the famous Rivonia trial speech. It is "not a conventional book", Scammell pointed out in his analysis, concluding therefore that Mandela is not a conventional writer:

> It seems to me that whatever one may think of Mandela's bravery and eloquence and political wisdom, it would be stretching the definition of "writer" to breaking point to include him in our concerns on the basis of a collection of speeches, and that the admission of a commitment to violence, however great the provocation and noble the aims, inevitably disqualifies him from the attentions of this Committee. (Report of Writers in Prison Committee, Lugano Congress, 1987, 13-14)

Scammell's report on Mandela is a rare example of PEN reading a writer's work as part of the operation of the Writers in Prison Committee. Equally notable, though, is the way it is read, in such a policing fashion, as grounds for excluding the author from the advocacy work of PEN.

Significantly, Scammell falls back on the definition of the category of writer to justify this exclusion, though he is in effect redefining the category around Mandela even as he invokes a pre-

existing definition. For Scammell, Mandela might be in prison, but he is not enough of a writer to warrant support by PEN. In McDonald's account of South African PEN in *The Literature Police* (2009), it becomes clear that their definition of a writer as the author of two full length books was in fact discriminatory against black authors, to whom book publishing was not necessarily readily available but who published in pamphlets and periodicals and other forms (187). Scammell is therefore reproducing the logic of South African PEN, wittingly or otherwise, even as it seems that the national centre was more often than not at odds with the International Executive and the Writers in Prison Committee in particular. In a similar vein, his reading of Mandela's Rivonia trial speech – focusing on its references to violence with little appreciation for Mandela's careful deliberations on the relationship between law, violence and the legitimacy of the state – places him, again perhaps unintentionally, with the UK and US governments who viewed Mandela as a communist and a "terrorist".

That this occurred as late as 1987, just five years before Mandela's release, is rather surprising. No doubt the fractious nature of the discussion that ensued, and indeed Scammell's conclusions, derived in part from the fact that the request to review Mandela's inclusion had come from the East German Centre; in other words, the episode exposes once more, at this late stage, the global character of the Cold War and the fragility of PEN's politically "neutral" stance. Tensions at the Congress were eventually eased by unanimous support for a resolution from the Cote d'Ivoire Centre calling for Mandela's release, hence sidestepping the issues of whether or not he was a writer and his compliance with the PEN Charter. The events also stand in pointed contrast to English PEN's Celebrating Nelson Mandela event in 2018, which marked the centenary of his birth and the publication of his prison letters. Mandela's transformation into statesman, humanitarian and, of course, writer, was by this point complete, allowing Director of English PEN, Antonia Byatt, to comment that "English PEN is delighted to be celebrating Nelson Mandela's legacy of championing human rights" (Frecknall, 2018). That the discourses of humanitarianism and human

rights present themselves as apolitical is frequently the subject of critique, but this was – and is – precisely their virtue for PEN, as they offered a kind of apolitical politics in the middle of the Cold War.

The Writer as Exemplary Prisoner

If the Writers in Prison Committee is the catalyst for PEN's evolution into a human rights organisation, it is typical of other human rights NGOs of the post-war period in which the prisoner of conscience and political dissident became the exemplary figure for humanitarian thinking and action. Slaughter (2012) points to this history in the emergence of Amnesty International, which began as a campaign for amnesty for prisoners. It was launched by founder Peter Benenson via an article in *The Observer* and a book which detailed the stories of several prisoners of conscience from across the globe, many of them writers. Both were titled *Persecution 1961*, illustrating how the foundation of Amnesty emerged on remarkably similar terms to PEN's Writers in Prison Committee, which was established a year earlier. Discussing this moment, Slaughter explains how "The modern amnesty campaign emerged, at least in part, as a defense of literature, or literary values, forms, and figures of free expression" (2012, xi), and how, in turn, it had an influence on literature:

> What we call the World Republic of Letters in the second half of the twentieth century was at least in part shaped by the human rights campaigns defending the lives and rights of individual writers, but the campaign methods themselves seem likely to have had an influence on the generic shape of later-twentieth-century literature, and vice versa. (xiv)

Slaughter revisits the pivotal role of the political prisoner in his 2018 article "Hijacking Human Rights" to consider the relationship between human rights discourse and anti-colonial and postcolonial politics in particular. He describes political prisoners and dissidents as the main

currency of human rights organisations from the 1970s on, as they, like Benenson, rely on individualised stories of dissidence and suffering, especially of intellectuals – stories that tend to individualise both the political prisoner or dissident, and the person sympathising with them. For Slaughter, this forms part of the context in which "supranational concern in the First World for the civil and political rights of individual prisoners in the Second and Third Worlds displaced collective struggles for self-determination as the quintessential human rights cause" (765). In essence, empathy overtakes action.

To some extent the pattern Slaughter identifies is evident in Dowd's PEN anthology, which brings together the work of writers who experienced imprisonment around the world, including in former colonies, and which, as I suggested in my introduction, frames PEN's work in defence of imprisoned writers firmly within the logic of humanitarian and human rights discourse. To be clear, it is not that the book sets itself *against* any particular political struggle, but the effect of its framing is to draw attention to the individual experience of incarceration above any sense of collective identity or action. The book is structured to strip away biography, context and politics, all of which are relegated to the end matter, instead emphasising the universality of the experience of imprisonment in extracts that are arranged chronologically from detention to release, to reflect the "journey" of imprisonment (1996, 12).

One of the blurbs on the back cover is a quotation from Joseph Brodsky's Foreword, emphasising the individual nature of the writer's struggle: "Read this book now", the blurb instructs, "as a manual for asserting individualism under overwhelming odds". This appears to endorse PEN's vision of the writer as individual hero of free expression and antagonist of an oppressive state. However, Brodsky's Foreword, written just weeks before his death in 1995, in fact offers a much more nuanced account of the imprisoned writer than the blurb suggests, and wrestles visibly with the idea that the writer is somehow exceptional and worth saving above other prisoners. In other

words, Brodsky's discussion hinges on the enormous value placed on the writer by PEN and the idea that this value is somehow crystallised in contexts of incarceration. "[A] writer is not a sacred cow", he points out, and if prison is an extension of society, "By finding himself behind bars he [the writer] just continues to share in his people's predicament" (1996, xiii). He nonetheless does not suggest that writers should be left to languish in prison, and his efforts to rationalise why writers in particular should not be imprisoned go some way towards helping us understand the unique force of the figure of the imprisoned writer that has been harnessed so powerfully by PEN and other human rights NGOs. Brodsky draws attention to the value of a writers' work, from the political interventions they might make on behalf of their people or fellow prisoners, to "the simple reason that he might produce yet another book" – any book – and books, he implies, have a civilising effect, creating societies of the developed world that he calls "the luxury liners" (in contrast to the "overcrowded boat sinking in the sea of injustice" from which an imprisoned writer sends out an SOS) (xiii). Ultimately, however, he finds a more generalised value in the figure of the writer as the quintessential individual, and as a result "a superb metaphor for the human condition" (xv). The work of a writer – as *literature* – is above all an expression of individualism, and the anthology should therefore be read as "a manual for asserting individualism under overwhelming odds, under extraordinary duress" (xiv). "What [the writer has] got to say about imprisonment", he continues where the blurb cuts short, "should therefore be of great interest to those who fancy themselves free" (xv). So, while Brodsky shows some scepticism about the particular privilege granted to the writer, and no qualms about the idea that a writer's work might be expressly political, the writer's power is, in the end, a metaphorical one, standing for an idea of freedom conceived as individual.

Like the tensions in Brodsky's Foreword, the extracts themselves do not always align with the version of the writer projected by the anthology. This is best captured in the extract from Ngũgĩ wa Thiongo's *Detained* (1981), in which he expresses ideas about writing and writers that seem to be

diametrically opposed to the values of PEN:

> A writer needs people around him. He needs live struggles of active life. Contrary to popular mythology, a novel is not a product of the imaginative feats of a single individual but the work of many hands and tongues. A writer just takes down notes dictated to him by life among the people, which he then arranges in this or that form. (1996, 69)

Ngũgĩ's description of the creative life converges with Brodsky's sense of the writer as someone who shares and amplifies his "people's predicament" (xiii), but it explicitly rejects the idea of the writer as an exemplary individual. Similarly, in her reading of the prison memoirs of Ngũgĩ and others as "resistance literature", Barbara Harlow argues that prison memoirs are "actively engaging in a re-definition of the self and the individual in terms of a collective enterprise and struggle" (1987, 120). If the plight of the imprisoned writer exemplifies the freedom and individualism of writers in general for PEN, it does quite the opposite for Harlow, for whom prison memoirs offer a critique "of the very institution of literature as an autonomous arena of activity" (1992, 4). Contrary to the principles of political neutrality that enable PEN to champion the cause of writers across the world, Harlow understands such a version of literature as part of the problem PEN strives to address:

> Literature, that is, when abstracted from the historical and institutional conditions that inform its production – and its distribution – can serve in the end to underwrite the same repressive bureaucratic structures designed to maintain national borders and to police dissent within those borders. The literature of prison, composed in prison and from out of the prison experience, is by contrast necessarily partisan, polemical, written as it is against those very structures of a dominant arbitration and a literary historical tradition that have served to legislate the political neutrality of the litterateur and the literary critic alike. (1992, 4)

Harlow is often discussing writers who were supported and adopted by PEN, but reading them very much against the grain of PEN's logic. Indeed, in reading their work at all she proceeds on a different path to PEN, whose attention solely to the question of whether or not someone is a *writer* creates a focal point for its campaigns that is simultaneously more abstract and more embodied. That *This Prison Where I Live* is presented in its subheading as an anthology of "imprisoned writers" rather than *prison writing* is telling in this regard.

Dowd's anthology is fascinating for its efforts to frame the accounts of imprisonment that it collects within PEN's understanding of literature as somehow removed from politics, and it is entirely in keeping with its commitment to free expression that those extracts do not always align with this vision. Another, slightly later PEN anthology of prison writing, *Doing Time* (1999) edited by Bell Gale Chevigny, offers a snapshot of the immense variety in PEN's advocacy work across different national centres, and in particular the evolving understanding of the relationship between writing and imprisonment. *Doing Time* collects prize-winning work from the PEN Prize awarded by American PEN since the 1970s for work published by a writer in prison in the US. Dowd's anthology, as I have shown, detaches history and politics from the extracts of prison memoirs by relegating biography to the end matter. But her introduction also opens by sidestepping the politics of incarceration itself: "This anthology […] is not about the locking up of criminals, whatever one thinks of this practice", but about "the misuse of prison" (Dowd, 1996, 1). In contrast, Chevigny's introduction offers rigorous attention to the political and racial context of incarceration, and also to the conditions in which prison education and writing programmes take place and allow prisoners to become *writers* in the course of their incarceration. She is at pains to emphasise continuities between the prison and the outside world, and in linking prisoner rights to the radical movements of the 1960s and 70s enables a broader understanding of the category of the political prisoner than human rights NGOs typically allow. In contrasting the "ordinary domestic sinners" of prison

writing in her anthology with what she calls the "first amendment saints abroad" who are generally championed by PEN, Chevigny's anthology and introduction seem to stand in implied opposition to the emphasis of PEN's international advocacy work and the structures that delineate a distinction between "home" and "abroad" (xix). In fact, she charts the way in which American PEN bridged this gap through increasing advocacy for access to library facilities and writing programmes for US prisoners from the 1970s on, including through sponsorship of the PEN Prize (1999, xix). While her introduction confronts directly the political context of incarceration, the biographical notes penned by the anthology's contributors – also relegated to the end matter – do not uniformly embrace writing as an explicitly political act, as Harlow's emphasis on the "polemic" might lead us to expect. Rather they emphasise, time and again, the transformative experience of writing.

PEN, of course, does not selectively defend heroes of free expression; rather, its advocacy work, informed by the scrupulous observation of a definition of literature as a sphere distinct from politics, transforms imprisoned writers into Chevigny's "first amendment saints". In the example of Mandela we have seen that this category is harder to sustain when the writing itself comes under scrutiny: perhaps no writer's work can live up to the standards of political neutrality propounded by PEN, and certainly not the kind of writers they defend. It may be therefore that as PEN approaches its centenary in 2021, we might rather understand its enduring adherence to an idea of literature as distinct from "political passion", not so much as a definition of literature – though this essay is an effort to chart PEN's role in constructing or perpetuating such a definition of literature – as what J.M. Coetzee in another context calls a "foundational fiction" (1996, 14), a construct essential to an organisation that of necessity must operate to defend the interests of writers from oppressors of various ideological hues.

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