

Spaces of Feeling and Felt Spaces – Spatially Structured Emotions in the Jailhouse

by Sebastian Ernst

"Only by enduring many trials and tribulations was I prepared to grapple with the strokes of fate I later met with. If those hours of joy in the past were wiped away [...] then I certainly wouldn't have been able to be the Socrates of the Magdeburg Jail that I was for 10 years."[1]

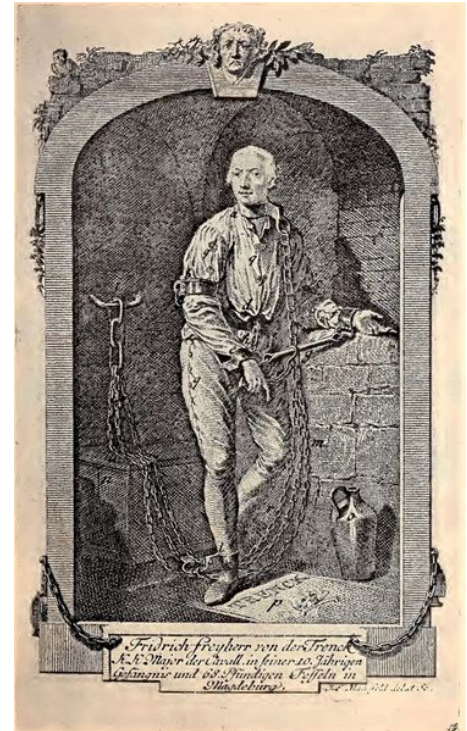
This passage from Friedrich Freiherr von Trenck's writings exemplifies the way he emotionally processed the experience of incarceration. In doing so, they offer insight into a specific form of the spatially conditioned dimension of emotions, which will be the subject of this article. There seem to be a set of specific emotions that correspond to most, if not all, spaces. In turn, these emotions, like the spaces they arise in, are bound up with certain interests, hierarchies and identities. Similarly, there are many emotions that one is only permitted to feel or express (or not feel) in certain spaces.[2] This is also true for spaces of incarceration. In such spaces there are many emotions that can be felt, derived either from the individual experiences of the incarcerated person or as willed transformations of that person's initial feelings. As Trenck's case clearly demonstrates, the spatially structured emotions of the jailhouse cannot be exhausted by a single feeling, but are rather multifarious and complex.[3]

Trenck was born in 1729 and died in 1794. He became an officer, a profession that, along with the help of his father and his studies, stoked his desire for "fame, action and adventure". His education made him acquainted with the literature of his time. His desires, his profession and his education provided him with specific forms of self-understanding and specific modes of interpreting his situation – forms and modes of self-understanding which were not available to all. Conventions and concepts for describing and processing emotional experience were among these modes of interpretation. Such forms of self-understanding, it might be added, were not accessible to all. Trenck was entrenched in a historically specific emotional community, and the models he used to conceptualize his emotions were products of this culture. Moreover, the emotional reality he experienced was conditioned by this emotional community, which in turn ultimately informed the notions he had about the world as a whole. Those who subscribed to this culturally conditioned reality had an understanding of the "jailhouse" primarily informed by imaginary depictions, lacking immediate experience. But once Trenck found himself sitting in a cell, this reality and all its constitutive presuppositions and prejudices were called into question for him.[4] He had to grapple with the emotional norms, personal feelings and the "knowledge" of the jailhouse as a site of punishment where those who society deemed punishable were sent. Being marked for punishment gained significance through the fact that the punished person was labeled a "criminal", a "traitor", one who had "misbehaved". Trenck's consciousness of his innocence stood in constant conflict with these labels forced upon him. He described his innocence as "an aggravating force in the defenselessness of the incarcerated", a force that brought him to contemplate suicide.[5] He writes that whenever he thinks about being labeled a traitor, he would rather throw himself "upon a thousand sabers and bayonets"[6] than remain incarcerated, his "heart pounds" and "vengefulness and rage" swell up in his soul against the feelings of "serenity and patience".[7] Thus, Trenck's experience of incarceration reveals the way socially conditioned, normalized emotions and the meanings and values attached them can impinge upon a person's self-perception, ultimately calling into question the basic presumptions underlying their experience of reality.

The Jailhouse as a Form of Emotional Punishment

The use of the jailhouse as a form of punishment has the aim of exerting domination over those incarcerated and prevents the latter from pursuing their own aims and wishes. It is thus a place where negative emotional states dominate, emotional states which themselves foster the jail's aims of domination. Conversely, the authorities demand that these negative emotional states be overcome by performing certain actions and holding certain attitudes. Furthermore, the jail can lead prisoners to experience negative emotional states that are tolerated, but not permitted, or even undesirable for the punishment's purposes.

Trenck writes about extreme negative emotional states that are difficult to capture with words: "My pen cannot describe to the reader that with which my heart, my thoughts struggled with that first night, struggles which hardly allowed me to escape making the most final of all decisions".[8] At the same time, he enumerates certain emotions, such as "despair", "mania" and "melancholy". These emotions are thus closely related to



one another in his descriptions. For instance, Trenck's brooding leads him to "a sort of justified melancholy" that can bring one "to idleness, despair and mania".[9] In Zedler's Encyclopedia, published around the same time, "mania", "despair" and "melancholy" are listed as being related states.[10] In Trenck's writings, melancholy is positioned as the most general emotional state, itself leading to "despair" and "mania", and ultimately to the loss of one's reasoning faculties: "All my passions befell me at once, and my young blood raged against everything rational".[11] Strong negative states are thus characterized as "passions" in order to underscore their intensity as well as their effects on the author's capacity to reason and judge. Both Zedler's Encyclopedia and Trenck's writings claim that suicidal thoughts follow from reason being robbed of its efficacy: "There I sat on the wet floor in thick darkness, without solace or aid, left to myself. [...] and I thanked God they hadn't taken my knife from me, which [at that moment?] I wanted to use to end my life. Suicide is the true solace of the unhappy, honest man who is superior to all the prejudices of the mob. With it one can defy fate and even monarchs".[12]

Nevertheless, Trenck not only experienced extreme negative emotions, but oscillated between them and the feeling of "hope", which he experienced when making plans to attempt escape.[13] When these attempts failed, the strong feeling of hope immediately turned into its opposite: "Omniscient God! what was I thinking at that awful moment! Has ever a creature been more justified in his despair?"[14] Strategies of coming to terms with one's emotions, even strategies that were once successful, are brought to their limits in such situations. Trenck writes: "[...] I sought new courage and solace and found none, neither in religion nor in worldly wisdom"[15], a period of despair that culminated in a suicide attempt. Trenck was fully aware of the connection between the failed escape attempt and extreme negative emotional states that followed, negative emotions which could not be contained and which put an abrupt end to a relatively peaceful phase: "[...] as an attempt to escape failed; – then I experienced moments that brought me to mania and despair, I felt the full weight of my burden".[16] Hope serves as a sort of defense against melancholy and despair and even helps Trenck escape these feelings entirely. However, due to its intensity, it can be very dangerous if the goal it is directed towards fails: this causes the original intensity of the emotion, which gave it its healing dimension, to be transformed into its very opposite. [17]

Hope and melancholy, and concomitantly all of the feelings that follow from them, are all founded upon strong emotional states, and ultimately constitute two extremes that influence one another and are definitive for the jail space.

The Jailhouse as a Space of Forced Emotional Labor

Coming to terms with these strong emotional states is a condition of survival, both in a physical and in a psychological sense. In attempting to do so, Trenck deploys various strategies of emotional labor, which for their part are conditioned by Trenck's social and cultural background. The necessity of working through these emotions was all the more pressing due to the fact that Trenck felt responsible[18] for the situation he found himself in, thus experiencing guilt, which made dealing with the situation that much more difficult: "[...] in the first days, before my skin hardened and my heart turned to stone, my state of pain and rage turned my imagination into a theater of horrors".[19]

Among the various modes of emotional labor, one is most interesting for the purposes of this paper: the possibility of moving from one emotional community to another. This strategy has, in Trenck's case, a direct correlation to spatiality.

Barbara Rosenwein claims that there are three primary reasons for making the shift from one emotional community to another, communities which exert an influence on the feelings of the individual, the norms that inform those feelings and the ways the individual deals with them. The first cause of a shift, according to Rosenwein, arises out of a scenario in which an emotional community with its own rules and customs achieves more power over an individual, thus evoking a shift in hegemonical conceptions of reality. The second comes about when the emotional rules of a community offer the individual a reality that is easier to bear. Thirdly, there are scenarios in which shifts in the environment alter an individual's values, goals and modes of expression, in other words, shifts which alter that individual's reality.[20]

Trenck's reasoning for undertaking a move from one emotional community to another thus touches upon all three of Rosenwein's categories and is moreover bound to a very specific space. In his struggles with his own emotions, Trenck deploys "new" emotional norms and thus a different emotional culture. He thereby develops a new form of self-understanding that promises a more "tolerable" reality. Trenck articulates this "more tolerable" reality by describing himself and his situation using roles and tropes that all refer to spatially bound emotional states. Likewise, these roles and topoi have a practical dimension, making other forms of action possible. Trenck opts to depict himself as a "wise man", "philosopher" and "martyr", which is exemplified by a specific person, namely the incarcerated Socrates, or even by a more general cultural trope, namely the incarcerated wise man. Trenck becomes "Socrates in the Magdeburg Jailhouse"[21] and a "real wise man".[22]

This new way of describing and evaluating his situation allows Trenck to reorient his emotional life in a way that corresponds with the spatial coordinates he finds himself placed in. In turn, this reorientation of his emotional life promises him a reality that is easier to bear. It is thus possible for him to construct an identity

anchored in the situation he is positioned in as well as in the roles appropriate to it, all the while allowing him to escape the guilt placed upon him in being labeled a "criminal". In turn, Trenck transforms the space itself: it becomes a "jail of the educated". At the same time, a new mode of feeling is brought about, defined by calmness, composure and resilience in the face of worldly sacrifices, joys and maltreatment. This new mode of feeling is also defined by resisting "all sensations of desire", exerting "patience in bearing one's burden" and, in the words of Zedler, in an "unshakeable constitution"[23] that is "sublime in the face of fear" and "free of all forms of grief"[24]. Trenck summarizes the advantages of this new mode of feeling as follows: "The man who is interested in science and who is resolved to make progress in scientific knowledge will find nothing that he cannot overcome, not even in jail does he complain of boredom; he knows how to distinguish the real pleasures from the artificial and thus remains unmoved in the face of the whirlwinds of fate. Even if the sky falls down, he will certainly cover his head, but he will show no fear".[25]

This quote exemplifies the way in which Trenck was able to appropriate and evaluate his understanding of emotions while maintaining their immediate relation to a specific spatial context. These modes of conceptualizing emotions are contained in the ready-made cultural roles at Trenck's disposal that he uses to construct his new identity and communicate his new mode of feeling. It can be presumed that this new understanding of emotions alters Trenck's real feelings. Even more significantly, it can be presumed that this new understanding helps him hold onto his new, more bearable reality and that they allow him to position himself in new ways in acts of communication. Ultimately, these are Trenck's motivations for undertaking his emotional labor. As a consequence of Trenck's orientation towards a new emotional community, it is not only his feelings that undergo a transformation, but also the space he is situated in. In the process of Trenck's appropriation of a new identity and a new mode of feeling that are both bound to specific spatial-emotional tropes, both the space he finds himself in, namely the jail, and his feelings themselves take on new shapes. The jail of the deservedly punished or of unjust punishment, the jail of sacrifice, social labels and social expulsion, becomes the jail of the educated. There, the educated man learns about his own thought processes and his own emotions. Such a space serves a purpose that diverges from those of justice or punishment. It serves the purpose of "testing" resilience. The jail thus becomes a symbol of the prisoner's new identity. Trenck appropriates an alternative model of feeling, specific to his situation, in order to construct a new, more bearable reality. This new model consists of reconceiving the correlation of the space and the emotions felt therein. It shows the extent to which space and feelings can be connected in the cultural imagination, in identity constructs and in cultural tropes, and the extent to which appropriation and education can change both: spaces and feelings are phenomena that are learned in connection with one another.

Summary

Trenck's experience shows that spaces of incarceration can be understood as spaces where specific forms of feeling are institutionalized, and that such spaces are a cultural template of the early modern period. Concepts of emotions such as "melancholy" are of particular significance. Most significant, however, is the notion that the jail is a space where emotional labor is performed, a space that in turn conditions the forms this labor can take. The discrepancy between self-image and the ascriptions of others, as well as other issues dealt with in this paper, often lead people placed in situations like Trenck's to attempt to change their own emotions by deploying various strategies. This is especially the case when this discrepancy is jarring, as in the case of an innocent man taken prisoner. The possibilities available to people around the end of the 18th century have been explicated here using Trenck's example. Of course, it is conceivable that there are other strategies, but they too will likely bear the mark of the social structures they originate in. Most interesting and effective is the strategy of developing a new identity and thus taking on a new emotional community. This new culture is already given as a template and is directly related to specific spaces. The idea that a prisoner can move from one emotional community to another seems plausible, as the example of the "incarcerated Socrates" has shown. Such a shift proceeds along the lines of known spatial-emotional models. It has the consequence not only of a shift in the actual emotions felt, but also in a transformation of the space in which they are felt, opening up new forms of meaning and thus new possibilities of acting. The jailhouse is thus only one possible site where the connection between space and emotions and the spatial structuring of emotions in the early modern period can be researched. Further research into the correlation between space and emotions in this epoch as well as transepochoal perspectives on the "jailhouse" would be useful.

[1] Friedrich Trenck, *Friedrich Freyherr von der Trenck merkwürdige Lebensgeschichte*, vol. 1 (Göttingen, 1787), 199.

[2] Initial historical research on this correlation has been undertaken. Cf. Joyce Davidson, ed., *Emotional Geographies* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005) and Mick Smith, *Emotion, Place and Culture* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009).

[3] Cf. Falk Bretschneider, *Gefangene Gesellschaft. Eine Geschichte der Einsperrung in Sachsen im 18. und*

19. Jahrhundert (Konstanz: UVK, 2008), 327.

[4] The precise definition of the jailhouse is only of marginal interest, as the experience of a space as a jail is the deciding factor for this study.

[5] Cf. Trenck, *Lebensgeschichte*, vol. 1, 77.

[6] Cf. *ibid.*, 78.

[7] Cf. Trenck, *Lebensgeschichte*, vol. 2, 71

[8] *Ibid.*, 30. Cf. also Trenck, *Lebensgeschichte*, vol. 1, 71f.

[9] Trenck, *Lebensgeschichte*, vol. 2, 53f.

[10] Johann Heinrich Zedler, *Großes vollständiges Universal-Lexikon aller Wissenschaften und Künste*, Band 36 (Halle/ Leipzig, 1732-54), 464ff.

[11] Trenck, *Lebensgeschichte*, vol. 1, 77.

[12] Trenck, *Lebensgeschichte*, vol. 2, 30.

[13] Cf. *ibid.*, 75.

[14] *Ibid.*, 45.

[15] *Ibid.*

[16] *Ibid.*, 70f.

[17] *Ibid.*, 122.

[18] Cf. Trenck, *Lebensgeschichte*, vol. 1, 71f. and 141.

[19] Trenck, *Lebensgeschichte*, vol. 2, 34.

[20] Cf. Barbara Rosenwein, "Theories of Change in the Histories of Emotions," in *A History of Emotions, 1200-1800*, Jonas Liliequist, ed. (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2012), 18f.

[21] Trenck, *Lebensgeschichte*, vol. 1, 199.

[22] Cf. Trenck, *Lebensgeschichte*, vol. 1, "Zueignung"; *ibid.*, "Vorbericht"; *ibid.*, 14, 107, 154; Trenck, *Lebensgeschichte*, vol. 2, 62, 357, 101 and 228f.

[23] Cf. Zedler, *Universal-Lexikon*, vol. 38, 280, article "Socrates".

[24] Cf. *ibid.*, 287.

[25] Trenck, *Lebensgeschichte*, vol. 1, 9.

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