THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

HUMAN RIGHTS IN THE TWENTIETH-CENTURY:
A LITERARY HISTORY

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO

THE FACULTY OF THE DIVISION OF THE HUMANITIES

IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE

BY

HADJI BAKARA

CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

DECEMBER 2016

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES

Note: Actual images not included in this version of the dissertation due to copyright issues.

I want not poetry, but a new diction,
Because only it might allow us to express
A new tenderness and save us from a law
That is not our law, from necessity
Which is not ours, even if we take its name.

Czeslaw Milosz, "Natura" (1948)

Human dignity needs a new guarantee, which can be found only in a new political principle, in a new law on earth, whose validity this time must comprehend the whole of humanity.

Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951)

INTRODUCTION

A CENTURY IN FOUR FIGURES

Imagine that you find an old suitcase with two envelopes, each filled with a bundle of cards. One set of cards provides straightforward information about a person. It tells you what the person is: they are born in Russia but have no citizenship; they are thirty-four years old, they are married. Their name is Vladimir Nabokov. The documents themselves — exit and entry visas, refugee aid forms, medical examinations, personal interviews — tell a distinctly twentieth-century story of statelessness and the quest for asylum. The second set of cards — greater in number — tells a different story. A middle-aged European man falls in love with his stepdaughter who is barely a teenager. Eventually, he kidnaps and repeatedly rapes her. The story, above all, is about the loss of the girl's rights and dignity.

Figure. 1. Vladimir Nabokov. American Immigration Identification Card 1940.

Figure 2. Vladimir Nabokov. *Lolita* Index Cards. Undated

These two sets of cards, Vladimir Nabokov's American immigration documents and the cards on which he devised and wrote his novel *Lolita* (1958), provide two very different stories about the ways in which human rights are lost and gained. They also serve as contrasting points of entry into the contemporary study of human rights. On the one hand, beginning with the path-breaking work of Hannah Arendt, many historians, philosophers, and political scientists have argued that human rights must begin with granting rights to the rightless, which over the last hundred years has principally meant the stateless, refugees, and migrants.[1] To recognize Nabokov as a legal claimant to asylum would begin to restore his rights and security. On this view, the acquisition of legal asylum and eventually citizenship and community is the path to

[1]Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt and Brace, 1953); Giorgio Agamben "We Refugee" in *Means Without Ends* (Mineappolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), *Homo Sacer* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004); Seyla Benhabib, *The Rights of Others* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Ayten Gundogdu, *Rightlessness in an Age of Rights: Hannah Arendt and the Contemporary Struggles of Migrant* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

human rights. To really know how a human acquires human rights we need only look at one set of cards and abandon the rest.

On the other hand, a growing number of historians, literary critics, philosophers, and educators argue that only by reading, recognizing, and learning from the complex set of human and social relations unfolded in a novel like *Lolita* can we fully understand how human rights develop, operate, and are maintained.[2] This school traces human rights back to the novel, and not just any novel, but the germ of *Lolita*: Samuel Richardson's *Clarissa* (1748). Like *Lolita,* Richardson's *Clarissa* is a novel about a captive innocent and her wretched rake captor, which plays with the opacity of guilt and confession, consent and domination, and the nature of evil. In turn, these same questions are taken up in J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* (1999), one of the most canonical of contemporary human right novels, also inspired by *Lolita*. Indeed, literary texts today are regularly held up as laboratories for exploring right moral judgment and deliberation, delivering "others" across borders and boundaries, and with them, the depths of social intelligence necessary to think and practice human rights.[3] Moreover, so important is the moral substance of a novel like *Lolita* that to read it might count as an act of human rights activism in itself, as Azar Nafisi suggests in her international bestseller, *Reading Lolita in Tehran* (2003). When we take these views into consideration, immigration documents and refugee cards provide only a fraction of the story of how a human comes to attain and uphold their human rights.

[2] For the argument that human rights have their origins in the eighteenth-century novel, see Lynn Hunt, *Inventing Human Rights* (New York: Norton, 2007); Leeland De La Durantaye, *Style is Matter: The Moral Art of Vladamir Nabokov* (Ithica: Cornell University Press, 2007).
[3] Shameem Black, *Fiction Across Borders* (New York: Columba University Press, 2010), David Palumbo-Liu, *The Deliverence of Others: Reading Fiction in a Global Age* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), Martha Nussbaum *Poetic Justice: The Literary Imagination and Public Life* (Boston: Beacon, 1997).

What would a history of human rights look like if we took all of the cards in the suitcase at equal value? Such a history would need to read with equal care, the tattoo-like markings and stamps on Nabokov's immigration card, *and* the playful sentences of his deceptively sensual novel. It would have to consider the political circumstances that render a human being stateless and rightess, studying how it is that a person might come to possess a little paper card that reads: "Nationality: Without." At the same time, such a history would be required to attend to how the novels of a once stateless Russian circulated the globe decades later, moving sometimes seamlessly, at other times clandestinely, across borders that its author might be barred from crossing; or how the same state that recognized Nabokov as an asylum seeker and granted him rights would later rescind his right to write and publish freely. It would need, in other words, to distribute attention in such a way as to compass the full historical breadth of a life such as Nabokov's, which included violent expulsions, statelessness, and censorship, while at the same time narrowing in on the meaning, circulations, and global afterlives of a literary text.

This dissertation is an effort to write such a history. It is not a global history of *Lolita* or Nabokov's oeuvre; and in fact, Nabokov will now be left behind. What follows is a study of global literatures, writers, and institutions in the age of human rights. As I define and interpret it here, this is an age that began roughly around World War II and extends into the present, defined by the contrapuntal events of unprecedented mass violence, genocide, displacement, and incarceration, on the one hand, and declarations of universal rights and the rise of an international human rights movement on the other. Together, these oscillating tides of brutality and hope transformed the dynamics of international politics and society in the twentieth-century. They also transformed its literature, which has left behind a singular record of the vicissitudes of human value in crisis. No doubt, to claim the importance of human rights for literature over the

half-century or more will appear a simplistic claim, the kind we take for granted, say, when Barack Obama asks the Chinese government to release imprisoned Hong Kong booksellers and uphold international standards of human rights, or when over 1000 international writers sign a declaration in support of the "equal rights and protection" of Europe's refugee population. But precisely because the entanglement between literature and human rights became so widespread and diffuse in the twentieth-century, the history of this entanglement has remained largely out of view. To bring it into view is to see the century anew, not just its literature, but also its politics. This is the goal of my dissertation.

§

While the last decade has seen the emergence of a burgeoning field of scholarship on literature and human rights, the story I tell in the following pages has remained greatly hidden for two reasons. First, as I discuss further on, existing studies rights have tended toward a long genealogical view, seeking the origins of human rights in the history of literary forms such as the novel.[4] And second, because the literary history of human rights is spread across the conventional periods, categories, genres, and archives employed by literary studies to mark out its object of analysis. The history traced here will generally disregard national and regional categories (American or African literatures), thematic, formal, generic, or theoretical categories (trauma, the novel, postcolonial) and periods (modernism, postwar, or contemporary). By narrowing my purview to the twentieth-century (rather than the long history of human rights) I provide a tighter and more rigorous historical picture of the inter-development of literature and

[4] The major genealogical arguments for the novel are found in Hunt *Inventing Human Rights,* Joseph Slaughter *Human Rights Inc: The World Novel, Narrative Form, and International Law* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007). Longer genealogical views that go as far back as the Greeks can be found in Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice,* and *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990).

human rights than previous accounts. At the same time, I work with an expansive and global archive of texts, characters, and institutions. This combination of historical circumscription and archival expansiveness forms the basic skeleton of the project.

Rather than working chronologically through the century, or choosing representative authors and texts, this study maps the literature of the twentieth-century through four overlapping figures and histories: the legislator, the refugee, the prisoner, and the witness. These histories are shaped by a method in which I oscillate between four ways of looking at and reading these figures and their literary and historical worlds. I work with them, first, as actor's categories, assembling and analyzing archives of writers who were, for instance, refugees (Arthur Koestler, Anna Seghers, Bertolt Brecht, Hannah Arendt) or prisoners (Ngugi, Kim Chi Ha, Breyten Breytenbach, Jacabo Timerman). Second, I explore the figures as subjects of modern and contemporary literature; for example, in Harold Pinter's dramatic work of the 1980s, or Margaret Atwood's fiction and poetry of the same period, both of which are preoccupied with the politics and poetics of imprisonment, interrogation, and torture. Third, I consider how these figures have catalyzed durable links between writing and rights at institutions such as the United Nations, PEN International, and Amnesty International, using institutional archives to historicize and theorize contemporary norms and ideals in human rights culture. Finally, my dissertation asks how these figures have worked as metaphors and figural openings for imagining the ethics and politics of literature itself, as in Czselaw Milosz's influential call for a "poetry of witness," in Archibald MacLeish's efforts to declare human rights through acts of poetic legislation at the United Nations, in Seamus Heaney's poetry of "conscience" forged in response to the "troubles" of Northern Ireland, or in Nadine Gordimer's investment in the writer as a "witness to the unspoken" in South African Apartheid.

Why these four figures? In some cases, the answer to this question is more obvious than others. No one would deny that the refugee and the prisoner are figures central to the history of human rights. In fact, gleaned from the perspective of the history of human rights, the twentieth-century, and the now twenty-first, can seem divided by oscillating waves of forced migration and mass incarceration. Chapters 2 and 3 respectively work as a hinge between the mid-century crises of statelessness, the first great human rights crises of the century, and the later rise of mass consciousness and advocacy for individual prisoners, which gave rise to a fully fledged human rights movement in the 1970s. The legislator of chapter 1, by contrast, is a more abstract figure and organizing concept in the history of human rights and in this study. By invoking the legislator I obviously intend to raise the question of law, broadly conceived; yet in focusing the chapter on the UN and the poet Archibald MacLeish (a lawyer, but not strictly a legislator) I aim to limn a porous boundary between poetic legislation and world legislation, first articulated in Percy Shelley's famous assertion that "poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world." Not coincidentally, Shelley is most likely the first poet to have written a declaration of universal rights, as he did in his *Declaration of Rights* (1812), and my gambit is that the idea of world legislation, which reached one historical apex with the founding of the UN, animates a poetic imaginary that reaches for the ideal of universal human value without exclusion. Finally, the figure of the witness in chapter 4 will be familiar to readers versed in the history and culture of human rights. Indeed, the witness is central to a spectrum of subdisciplines surrounding the study and practice of human rights, including Holocaust studies and Latin American *testimonio,* as an actor's category (the camp survivor or subaltern subject who bear witness and testify where silence would otherwise reign) and as metaphor for ethical life in a globalized world that

"demands a response to suffering."[5] A witness, as Stanley Cohen puts it, might simply be "those who come to know, see or hear, either at the time or later" about the suffering of others"[6] Yet while a great deal has been written on the witness as a figure implicated in trauma and suffering, my chapter traces a counterintuitive archeology that bypasses the figures and movements most often associated with the idea, opening onto a new way of understanding literature in relation to human rights in the twentieth-century. Of course, like the idea of human rights itself, the subjects of my chapters have older histories. Yet I hope to show that their specific cultural lives in the twentieth-century unlock a great deal about our recent past and historical present. When read transnationally, I argue, each figure can tell us something new about the literature of the century and the century itself.

Concentrating on the years around World War II and the "triumph" of human rights at war's end, Chapter 1 (the legislator) presents a kind of literary history of human rights at mid-century, uncovering the forgotten history of the American poet Archibald MacLeish's involvement with the founding the United Nations and his efforts to declare and articulate human rights, both at the UN and in his postwar poetry. Through extensive work in MacLeish's papers from the founding of the UN and close readings of his contemporaneous poetry and poetic fragments, the chapter explores a crucial tension between literary and legal universalism at mid-century. In addition, I unearth and interpret the aesthetic ideas promoted by some of the most important proponents of human rights at mid-century, including the South African statesmen, Jan Christian Smuts, and the French Catholic philosopher Jacques Maritain, each of whom greatly influenced the language and philosophy of the UN Charter and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948). I argue that MacLeish attempted to reimagine universal rights as the

[5] Stanley Cohen, *States of Denial: Knowing About Atrocities and Suffering* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001), 15.
[6] Cohen, *States of Denial,* 19.

outcome of perpetual human remaking, which he attempted to model in both his declarations of rights at the UN and his poetry. In doing so, he brought the history and values of literary modernism to bear on the question of human rights.

The philosophy of Hannah Arendt bridges the first chapter to Chapter 2 (the refugee). Like MacLeish, Arendt, a once stateless German, was distrustful of human rights as they were articulated and declared after World War II. In some of the first and still most trenchant analyses of human rights, Arendt judged the UDHR an "unrealistic" document, precisely because it did not attend to the political and existential facts of statelessness. But if the UN and other "well meaning humanitarians" didn't apprehend the problem and potential solutions to the crisis of the refugee, who did? The chapter offers an answer to this question by assembling an original archive of refugee writings from the mid-century, writings which have not previously been read together — works by Bertolt Brecht, B. Traven, Anna Seghers, and Arthur Koestler. These writers are shown to variously describe and imagine what is lost in the experience of violent displacement; and in doing so, prefigure possible experiences, exchanges, environments, and resources required to redress this loss. The literary work of Arendt's fellow refugees is used here to rethink her important categories of "work" and "action" from *The Human Condition* (1958)[7] This chapter also works with the early archives of PEN International, and its short-lived (and unknown) PEN Refugee Writing Committee (RWC). Devoted to aiding refugee writers who flooded into England in the late 1930s, the RWC transformed the culture and mandate of PEN, shaping it into the global human rights organization it is today. The RWC also developed a unique program of humanitarianism during the war, one that sought to aid not the "bare life" of

[7] Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958).

its subjects, but their *work*. [8]This program — what I call "humanitarianism of the pen" — expanded what was understood as "life," folding acts of creation into an otherwise biological category, and thus shifting ideas of the human, community, and literature in concert.

Chapter 3 (the prisoner) moves from displacement to incarceration. Like the chapter on the refugee, these pages unfold in relays between individual works and institutional histories, using the history and archives of the PEN Writers in Prison Committee and Amnesty International. Here, the rise of Amnesty and the human rights movement is studied alongside the works of writers who were the subjects and participants in this emerging form of global politics which took the so called "prisoner of conscience" as its subject, Ngugi wa Thiong'O, Kim Chi Ha, Bryten Breytenbach, Seamus Heaney, Harold Pinter, Jean Paul Sartre, Margaret Atwood, Louisa Valenzuela, and J.M. Coetzee. Long held ideas about the writer's freedom are shown to have helped inspire the human rights movement in the 1960s and 1970s. In turn, the intervention of human rights organizations helped free imprisoned writers globally, but in doing so, also permanently influenced the dynamics of world literature, arrogating cultural power and prestige to the imprisoned bard, with longstanding effects on how writers, in and outside the prison, negotiated and articulated their relative freedoms and responsibilities.

Chapter 4 (the witness) advances the dissertation's work on the responsibility of the writer. The most genealogical of the all the chapters, it traces a somewhat counterintuitive history of the witness as an anti-foundational character or ethos. This history begins with the renouncement of the witness by Jean Paul Sartre in his seminal *What is Literature?* and ends at the end of twentieth-century, when the Nobel Prize in Literature celebrated its centenary with a celebration of "witness literature." In my chapter, the witness is studied far less as an actor's

[8] For a theory of humanitarianisms and human rights based on the separation of "bare life" from political life, a theory now commonly articulated as "biopolitical," see Agamben, *Homo Sacer.*

category — in the mode, say, of Holocaust witnesses, Primo Levi or Paul Celan, or Latin American *testimonio,* Rigoberto Menchu — than as a lived critical posture towards and violence on the one side, and aesthetic form on the other. An intellectual, literary, and political genealogy of the witness is traced, stretching from Simone Weil, through Albert Camus and Czeslaw Milosz, Nadine Gordimer and J.M. Coetzee. For those familiar with existing scholarship on the witness, this chapter will appear unfamiliar and partially revisionary. Yet like all of the chapters it aims to expand existing accounts and genealogies of our literary and political present.

§

In many ways, this is a study born in the archives of writers and institutions. As a result, the shape and argument of the chapters often take their inspiration from my discoveries of an archival grain where literary texts and thinking meet legal, political, humanitarian, and human rights institutions. My discovery of these intersecting grains was often happenstance. Looking at official government papers for information on how the language of human rights made its way into the United Nations Charter, I discovered literary fragments; looking for information on literary work in the archives of PEN International, I discovered a long forgotten humanitarian project. What began as a series of chance discoveries, however, coalesced into a method for doing the literary history of human rights. In my archival work I have sought out open edges between institutions and texts. I have tried to think of each archive, whether that of PEN's Writers in Prison Committee or Coetzee's personal notebooks as "archives of the human."

Of course, each figure of my study is available to my method in distinct ways, lending the chapters individual character. For instance, many of the characters in my story were themselves

prisoners and refugees, and the textual experiments they produced under the duress of displacement and incarceration form the crux of these respective chapters. By contrast, there are few true lawmakers in my chapter on the legislator, and so here the heaviest load is carried by the figural connotations of legislation and deep archival research and explication of those archives. By contrast, the witness chapter departs from archival sources and moves across many writers, texts, and periods in an attempt to trace a long, literary and intellectual genealogy. Some chapters, particularly those on the prisoner and the refugee, unfold, in part, as institutional and archival histories, of Amnesty International and PEN International respectively. In my chapter on the refugee, for example, I reveal the origins of refugees in transforming the mission of PEN from one of late-Victorian disengagement to international activism. In my chapter on the prisoner I unearth and analyze the formative place of the Angolan poet and politician, Agostinho Neto, in the founding campaign of Amnesty International. Ultimately, however, the chapters should not be read as discrete but rather overlapping histories. My aim is to reveal various points of intersection, with the effect being kaleidoscopic rather than chronologically ordered. Refugees are often prisoners. To bear witness has legal dimensions and can bleed into and overturn legislation.

LITERARY HISTORY AND THE NEW HISTORY OF HUMAN RIGHTS

As I've noted, the past decade has seen a growing shelf of studies on human rights and literature. For those familiar with the major voices and governing debates in the field, the present study will guide you into new ground. For those who are less versed in the history, and

especially the literary history, of human rights, I will outline these histories here so as to situate the reader, and this dissertation, within the field as it stands at present.

While the idea of human rights might be very old, efforts to chart their history are a recent undertaking. Indeed, the first synthetic histories appeared only over the last decade. And as long as there has been a historiography of human rights, there has been an interest in its literary history. One of the first and most influential histories on the topic, Lynn Hunt's *Inventing Human Rights* (2007), traces their origins to the rise of the novel in the eighteenth-century. The engine of Hunt's history of human rights is *empathy*, through which, she argues, the idea of universal human rights took hold of the modern political imagination. Reading novels, Hunt argues, helped reorganize "social and political life" by "creating new individual experiences (empathy), which in turn made possible new social and political concepts (human rights)."[9] "What might be termed the 'imagined empathy,'" Hunt contends, "serves as the foundation of human rights rather than of nationalism."[10] In many ways, Hunt's history pivots on a conventional argument about the "emotional absorption" engendered by the novel. The epistolary novel, she writes, "could produce such striking psychological effects because its narrative form facilitated the development of a 'character,' that is, a person with an inner self" (43). But the real novelty of her history arises from the leap she makes between "narrative form," the way a novel models social life, and political history, the way social life is itself transformed. Over the course of the eighteenth-century, Hunt contends, reading publics translated their private attachments to novelistic characters into political declarations of inalienable rights. This

[9] Hunt, *Inventing Human Right*, 30.
[10] Ibid., 31-32.

correlation is apparent, she finally contends, because the birth of "'novel reading' coincides chronologically with the birth of human rights."[11]

Hunt's novelistic genealogy of human rights is compelling for literary scholars in particular because it so openly avows the importance of literary narratives in political history. More importantly, however, Hunt's account has gained wide traction because it harmonizes with a much broader and diffuse belief that human rights have historically been the outcome of emotions, or what Martha Nussbaum specifically calls "political emotions:" the kind that lead to right moral judgment, and social justice.[12] Nussbaum and Hunt are only a few of the most prominent scholars who see direct causal connections between literary forms, socially progressive attitudes in individual human beings, and the development of equitable laws and political institutions.[13] The "literature imagination," as Nussbaum puts it, builds a "bridge to social justice."[14] Asserting a causal link between literature and social justice is an ancient argument, dating back to the Greeks. But it was the American philosopher Richard Rorty who perhaps first made the argument that narratives lead directly to the belief and transmission of human rights. Speaking on behalf of Amnesty International in 1993, Rorty attributed the success of human rights to the creation and circulation of "sad stories."[15] A belief in human rights, Rory opined, "seems to owe nothing to increased moral knowledge, and everything to hearing sad and sentimental stories."[16] Rorty suggested that for Amnesty to have continued success, it would need to generate the "the sort of reaction that the Athenians had more of after seeing Aeschylus's

---

[11] Ibid., 41, 43.
[12] Martha Nussbaum, *Political Emotions: Why Love Matters for Justice* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012).
[13] A classic and still very relevant and persuasive argument is found in Wayne C. Booth, *The Company we Keep: An Ethics of Fiction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).
[14] Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice*, 106.
[15] Richard Rorty, "Human Rights, Rationality, and Sentimentality" in Stephen Shute and Susan L. Hurley, eds., *On Human Rights: The Oxford Amnesty Lectures 1993* (New York: Basic Books, 1993), 116
[16] Ibid., 188-119.

The Persians than before, the sort that White Americans had more of after reading *Uncle Toms's cabin* than before."[17] Amnesty, in other words, would need to do the work historically done by a literature.

Very much in line with Rorty, there is a broad consensus, inside and outside the field of literary studies, that *narratives* are the lifeblood of human rights. For Sidone Smith and Kay Shaffer, for instance, the spread of human rights as an idea and lived ideal does not necessarily depend on the sadness of stories, but more foundationally, on the production and reception of "narrated lives."[18] A life narrated, recorded, and circulated hails our recognition as "ethical subjects" and in turn allows the speaker to come into being as a narrative subject recognized by others and the law. Recognition in and through one's narrative, in turn, serves as the precondition for the positive acquisition of community and rights, and thus also, potentially, of justice and redress. One way the literary history of human rights has begun to be written, then, is by studying how varying genres of narratives — the epistolary novel, the *bildungsroman,* graphic novels, Holocaust testimonies, survivor narratives, Latin American *testimonio,* truth and reconciliation hearings — have emerged historically and affected political and legal cultures at different moments.[19] One begins to get at the literary history of human rights by writing the history of genres and forms that have generated and sustained them legally, culturally and emotionally.

---

[17] Ibid., 125.
[18] Sidonie Smith and Kay Shaffer, *Human Rights and Narrated Lives: The Ethics of Recognition* (New York: Palgrave, 2004).
[19] Hilary Chute *Disaster Drawn: Visual Witness, Comics, and Documentary Form* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016). John Beverley, *Against Literature* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1993), *Testimonio: On the Politics of Truth* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2004). Catherine M. Cole, *Performing South Africa's Truth Commission* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009), Paul Rae, *Theatre and Human Rights* (London: Palgrave, 2009). Annette Wieviorka, *The Era of Witness* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006), Shoshana Feldman and Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (London: Routledge, 1992).

What might be called the history by *genre* method has been most thoroughly taken up by Joseph Slaughter in his seminal *Human Rights Inc: The World Novel, Narrative Form, and International Law* (2007). Not unlike Hunt, Slaughter seeks a literary genealogy for human rights and thus tells his own origin story. But whereas Hunt traces a causal relation between the eighteenth-century epistolary novel the emotional spark and foundation for the "Rights of Man" and contemporary human rights, Slaughter locates the origins of "contemporary human rights law" in the nineteenth-century *bildungsroman,* or novel of development. Human rights law and the *bildungsroman,* Slaughter argues, share a "plot," a normative path from dependence and immaturity to self-possession and full "personhood." By these lights, to be recognized by international law as a "person" with rights, a human being must become "novelistic," adapting their story to the generic "plot" of human rights law. The "human rights plot is novelistic," Slaughter writes, and this plot, as he sees it, is fundamentally conservative and "anti-revolutionary," aligned "with various predatory developmental projects and processes of globalization — eg., colonialism, (neo)imperialisms, and consumer capitalism."[20] If Hunt's literary history is idealistic, framing the novel as the foundation for expansive and boundary crossing moral feeling, Slaughter's is anchored in a traditional ideology critique, casting the history of the novel as a vessel for normative and imperial Western values, of which human rights is the most powerful present iteration.

While enriched by these currents of thought, the chapters that follow diverge fundamentally from existing models. Perhaps most importantly, I do not seek to trace the origins of human rights. My task is not to prove that any one tradition, genre, or form of literature either works or takes precedence as the foundation of human rights as they have been claimed in the

[20] Slaughter, *Human Rights Inc,* 313.

past or are lived today. That is to say, I am not after proof that literature is the historical progenitor of human rights, as are Hunt, Rorty, Slaughter and others. While Hunt and Rorty take the foundations of human rights as emotional, Slaughter argues that they are legal. But a claim about foundations ultimately persists. My story pursues no *single* foundation. Yet this is not to say that I am unconcerned with ideas about how the foundations and grounds of human rights have been imagined by writers in the twentieth-century. To the contrary, each of my chapters deals directly with the lived search for foundations, through the work and lives of writers at different historical moments. My focus is on varying negotiations with the promise and challenge of human rights. In each chapter, different foundations are claimed, sought, and contested. What links these pursuits is not a common end or foundation, but rather a shared fidelity to addressing the problem of rightlessness.

This study also departs from previous work in that no single genre or narrative form is made the subject of analysis. As I've noted, to date, work on literature and human rights has been intensely focused on single forms, whether it be the epistolary novel, the "world novel," the *bildungsroman,* or life writing, to name just a few. In these pages the reader will find many forms and genres, but none take precedent as the privileged conduit of or window into human rights. Moreover, there are very few "sad stories" in the pages that follow. This is not a history of emotions and their textual or representational progenitors, or an account of literature's causal transformation and entanglement with law. Instead, it is a history of changing ideas about human rights and the human in the twentieth–century, histories that cannot be told without recourse to their generation and gestation in literary and cultural forms.

Moreover, this is a history *of* literature in an age of human rights abuses and human rights claims. Across the chapters I ask how the problems and possibilities of human rights have shaped

the most fundamental questions that writers asked themselves and their readers: what literature is, what it can do (by nature), and what it should do (by historical necessity or ethical injunction). My critical attention and objects include literary texts themselves, but also the expository forms these questions take when writers act as critics and public intellectuals — essay, declarations, speeches, and the themes and proceedings of conferences and symposiums. In tracing the movement and myriad expressions of fundamental ideas about literature, the intellectual side of my history connects at points to what literary scholars would recognize as the history of form: the shifting strategies and capacities of literature to organize social life in a new unique ways.[21]

§

While this dissertation departs in fundamental ways from existing literary studies of human rights, it is greatly indebted to recent work in human rights history. My study comes at the end of a decade of remarkable histories that have fundamentally remapped our understanding of human rights, especially as they took distinct shape in the twentieth-century. Though I follow no single historical view, much of what follows either responds to or has in some ways been enabled by this new historical landscape, which I will briefly outline here, only as it pertains to the focus of my chapters.[22]

---

[21] For recent arguments in historical formalism see Caroline Levine, *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015).

[22] These histories include Elizabeth Borgwardt, *A New Deal for the World: America's Vision for Human Rights* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), Mark Phillip Bradley, *The World Reimagined : Americans and Human Rights in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), Roland Burke *Decolonization and the Evolution of International Human Rights* (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania University Press, 2010), Stefan-Ludwig Hoffmann ed., *Human Rights in the Twentieth-Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), Stephen Hopgood, *Keepers of the Flame: Understanding Amnesty International* (Ithaca: Cornell Universuty Press, 2006), Steven B. Jensen , *The Making of International Human Rights: The 1960s, Decolonization, and the Reconstruction of Global*

Until very recently, two orthodoxies governed the popular and scholarly understanding of human rights history. The first orthodoxy holds that human rights in the twentieth-century — which emerged during World War II, were consecrated in the United Nations Charter (1945) and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), and entered mainstream politics through organizations such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch in the 1970s and 1980s – – are a continuation of the eighteenth-century "Rights of Man." In this view, sometimes referred to as the "rise and rise" thesis, the history of human rights is narrated as the teleological growth of a single and uncontested universal principle. A second orthodoxy pertains to the Holocaust. Specifically, until very recently it was widely believed that the facts of the Nazi genocide of Jews was the direct impetus for the resurgence of the language of universal rights and human rights following World War II, and therefore that the UDHR and its premises were inspired by the horrors of the concentration camp.[23]

Over the last decade, however, historians have labored to separate twentieth-century human rights from histories and events previously taken as direct precursors and provocations. Subsequently, the historical and philosophical links between contemporary human rights and the eighteenth-century "Rights of Man," and between postwar human rights and the Holocaust, have been complicated and in some cases fully contested. This new outlook was in many ways provoked by a series of critical interventions and iconoclastic revisions by the intellectual historian Samuel Moyn, whose work, *The Last Utopia* (2010) introduced an alternative history of

---

Values (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016) Barbara Keys, *Reclaiming American Virtue: The Human Rights Revolution in the 1960s* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012); Samuel Moyn, *The Last Utopia: Human Rights in History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010),

[23] This theory is spread across much postwar history of the last fifty years wherever the question of human rights is broached (though it rarely was). For specific historical accounts of human rights that stress the causality of the Holocaust, see Johannes Morsink, *The Universal Declaration of Human Rights: Origins, Drafting, Intent* (1999), and Sharon Sliwinski, *Human Rights in Camera* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).

human rights that has quickly and ironically become a rigid orthodoxy. In Moyn's view, neither the eighteenth-century quest to fulfill the "Rights of Man" nor the mid-twentieth-century rebirth of human rights in the United Nations Charter and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) marked the true inception of our present understanding or application of human rights globally. This "breakthrough," Moyn insists, occurred in the mid-1970s, when politicians in the West such as the American president Jimmy Carter began using the language of human rights, thus echoing the sentiment and the rhetoric, as well as raising the profile, of fledgling human rights NGOS like Amnesty International and Helsinki Watch (later Human Rights Watch).[24]

One vital upshot of these revisions for the story I tell, is that the twentieth-century history of human rights has been made more distinct, more contested, and more political in nature — no longer contained to a single, long history of moral universalism. Immediately following World War II, the language of "reaffirmation" in human rights was pervasive, as if these rights were a universal concept to which the world might simply return.[25] In reality, however, this world was in flux, as new, postcolonial nations proliferated. As Steven Jensen attests, during the immediate postwar era, "universality was promoted and contested, codified and rejected — but above all it was negotiated."[26] As I argue, the literature of this period was an important site of negotiation. My chapter on the witness, for instance, addresses a tension between the "Rights of Man" as a revolutionary tradition —with afterlives in the politics of liberation — and human rights as a movement and ethos that refuses to condone or justify violence against individuals and populations, including decolonizing violence. As the political scientist Robert Meister holds,

---

[24] See Moyn, *The Last Utopia*, and Samuel Moyn and Jan Eckel eds., *The Breakthrough: Human Rights in the 1970s* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013).
[25] The language of a return to and reaffirmation of human rights is central to both the United Nations Charter (1945) and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948).
[26] Jensen, *The Making of International Human Rights, The 1960s, Decolonization, and the Reconstruction of Global Values* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 4.

whereas eighteenth-century Republicanism was a revolutionary tradition, anchored in collective struggle and revolt against tyrannical power, twentieth-century human rights are far more individualist, seeking to maintain order and "avoid evil."[27] In my chapter on the witness, I consider how writers from Albert Camus to J.M. Coetzee stood in relation to anticolonial movements and the politics of liberation, and develop an original account of the literary witness as a figure caught between the afterlives of the revolutionary "Rights of Man" and the post-revolutionary ideals of the 1970s.

Differently, my chapter on the legislator intervenes in a shifting understanding of the link between the Holocaust and human rights. As Moyn and others have shown, the resurgence in the language of human rights predates World War II and the Holocaust, emerging instead in the doctrine of interwar Catholicism, specifically the conservative philosophy of natural law known as Personalism.[28] Indeed, there is little evidence that the Holocaust had any substantial bearing on the deliberations during the drafting of the UDHR. These deliberations centered far more on questions of philosophical anthropology, not on historical atrocity. If the Holocaust is to be used as a frame for reading the UDHR, it needs to be taken as a conspicuous absence rather than an omnipresent influence. My chapter uses undiscovered archival sources from the founding of the United Nations to show how Archibald MacLeish used poetry to work through the felt insufficiencies of these founding declarations.

§

[27] Robert Meister, *After Evil: A Politics of Human Rights* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 19.
[28] Samuel Moyn, *Christian Human Rights* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015).

Another important facet of the recent history of human rights has been a new emphasis on the sociology of international activism and the work of human rights and humanitarian NGOs.[29] Two institutions play a very important role in my story: PEN International and Amnesty International. Across many of my chapters, I consider how these institutions have transformed the politics and sociology of literature globally. I show, too, how they have shaped the form and criticism of literature. Here, I sketch a brief history of the organizations with regards to their impact on the themes of this study.

PEN International was formed 1921 in London as little more than a late Victorian dinner club. Its original 1922 charter states that the organization stands for "literature in the sense of Art (not journalism or propaganda) and for the diffusion of art from country to country."[30] PEN's origins reflected the upsurge of popular internationalism that followed World War I and the founding of the League of Nations; but it also wed this impulse in public affairs to a philosophy of aesthetic autonomy, mounting an effort to promote the principle of literature's universalism as a model for global civic relations. Although the early PEN organization fashioned itself above all politics, by the mid-1930s, amid the rise of totalitarianism and violent nationalism, its second president, H.G. Wells, made it clear that he saw the laws of free literary creation and circulation as ways forward for politics, a radically cosmopolitan politics above national boundaries, founded in universal laws of humanity. During the years in which Wells was president of PEN,

---

[29] Hopgood, *Keepers of the Flame,* Margaret E. Keck and Kathryn Sikkink, *Activists Beyond Borders: Advocacy Networks in International Politics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998), Ann Marie Clark, *Diplomacy of Conscience: Amnesty International and Changing Human Rights Norms* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), Tom Buchanan, "'The Truth Will Set you Free:' The Making of Amnesty International," *Journal of Contemporary History.* Vol. 37, No. 4 (October, 2002), pp. 575-597.

[30] "PEN Charter" Organization Newsletter, June 1922. Governance, Box 5, Folder 4. PEN English Centre Archives, Box 8 Folder: No. 6-12, 1922-1925 Harry Ransom Research Center, University of Texas, Austin, TX. *Hereafter cited parenthetically as* PEN Archive, HRC.

1933-1939, he did not shy away from his duties as the world's foremost advocate and theorist of world government. In his inaugural presidential speech at PEN's 1933 conference in Dubrovnik, Wells stated: "For centuries we have been talking of the 'Republic of the human mind' – a world republic of letters and science and of creative effort…This is something that is only just coming into existence. Are we of PEN simply trying to sustain something or are we trying to evoke something? I suggest to you that we are trying to evoke something, a mental community throughout the earth….we stand for the world commonwealth."[31] In 1940, while Wells was still the most public figurehead for PEN, he drafted his own "Declaration of the Rights of Man," which was eventually printed and translated to be used by the allied war effort, including dropping Wells' declaration behind enemy lines. Wells' declaration echoed the PEN charter. Article 5, for instance, reads: "Every man has a right to the utmost freedom of expression, discussion, association and worship."[32] Tagged with the moniker "What are we fighting for?" the wartime Penguin edition of Wells's *The Rights of Man,* folded a cosmopolitan vision of a single humanity into the allied war effort and its attendant claims for human rights.

Meanwhile, during the lead up to World War II, PEN members had begun to take sides in the ideological and political battle for Europe, forced from their studied neutrality by Nazism's assaults on writers, intellectuals, and cultural freedom. The Nazi book burnings signaled one early symbolic attack on the principles of PEN, and the organization responded by creating a special library in London for the books burned in Berlin. More important to the organization's wartime transformation was the sudden emergence of refugees fleeing the continent, some of

[31] H.G. Wells, Presidential Speech, PEN Congress Dubrovnik, PEN Congress Dubrovnik, 1933. Series III., Box 3, Folder 3:10-11: International Pen Congresses, 1-11. PEN Archive, HRC.

[31] H.G. Wells, *The Rights of Man* (London, Penguin, 1943), 13.

them PEN members. Galvanized by exiled and refugee writers, wartime PEN began to take its contemporary form as a megaphone for writers to broadcast their opinions on international politics while claiming the now thoroughly institutionalized high ground of a shared humanity. Following the war, PEN formed its PEN in Exile Center, founded in 1955, and eventually the PEN Writers in Prison Committee in 1960, which cleared the way for PEN's earnest entry into the field of international human rights.

The formation of the PEN Writers in Prison Committee in 1960 marked an important point of departure for the future of human rights politics. Since 1961, the committee has published a bi-annual list of imprisoned writers from around the world, raising funds for the their legal fees and care, as well as translating and publishing work by imprisoned writers. In the coming decades, internationally renowned writers like Arthur Miller, Harold Pinter, Susan Sontag, Joseph Brodsky, and Czeslaw Milosz would make up the rank and file of the committee, lending new legitimacy and profile to a worldwide struggle for freedom of expression, information, and conscience. Importantly, one of the first alliances forged by the PEN Writers in Prison Committee in the early 1960s was with a fledgling organization called Amnesty International, founded the year after PEN's prison committee.

Like its literary predecessor, Amnesty International focused on raising awareness and attaining release for prisoners in all nations and regions of the world who have been persecuted for reasons of artistic or intellectual expression, religious choices and non-violent political dissent. Amnesty called these "prisoners of conscience." The immediate concern with incarceration, censorship, and freedom of conscience shared by PEN and Amnesty testified to an emerging shift in the focus and popular understanding of human rights. If the crisis of violent displacement and refugees had captured imaginations from the late 1930s until the end of the

1950s, then the figure of the prisoner, the torture victim, and the Gulag dweller captured it beginning in the 1960s. Amnesty's founder, an idealistic British lawyer named Peter Benenson, had been inspired and encouraged by the early successes of PEN's campaigns for imprisoned writers, naming one such success — the case of the Hungarian novelist Tibor Dery — in Amnesty's inaugural "appeal."[33] Benenson, a Catholic convert who fused the language of human rights and the UDHR to a tradition of Christian witness and martyrdom, hoped to heal a feeling of "impotence" amongst global publics seeking a noble cause by appealing to universal humanity in the form of the "prisoner of conscience." As I discuss in chapter three, from the outset of Amnesty's career, long held ideas about the writer's freedom helped guide and ground Amnesty's central idea of "conscience." One of Amnesty's first six prisoners of conscience was a poet, the Angolan Agostinho Neto, and countless writers from around the world have been named prisoners of conscience since.

At the same time, the relation of Amnesty International to literature in the twentieth-century goes beyond the organization's specific work on the part of imprisoned and persecuted writers. For instance, Amnesty began publishing and translating works of literature beginning in the mid-1970s on their own Human Rights Publishing press. Around the same time, major publishing presses like the American Farrar Strauss and Giroux and the French Gallimard began publishing Amnesty's groundbreaking torture reports for the world literary marketplace. Furthermore, many writers over the years joined Amnesty, headlined fundraisers, edited and appeared in anthologies, and even worked for the organization. In turn, the culture and sociology of contemporary global literature has been variously influenced by the organization's ethos and practice. For instance, the organization collected data, legal analysis, and individual testimonies,

[33] Peter Benenson, "The Forgotten Prisoners," *Observer,* May 28th, 1961.

and fused them into a new "literary form" — the human rights report. These reports went on to influence literary production and theory. In the late 1970s, for instance, the literary critic Elaine Scarry used a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities to conduct research and interviews at Amnesty's headquarters. Scarry's resulting work, the seminal *The Body in Pain* (1985), is both one of the most influential works of literary and philological criticism of the past decades and the first to take seriously Amnesty's research as literature.[34]

Both the raw information, the testimonial forms, and the tone of human rights reports found their way into literary work beginning in the late 1980s. Human rights reports appear as inter and paratextual forms in the work of the late 1970s and 1980s by Julio Cortazar, Ariel Dorfman, Margaret Atwood, Carolyn Forché, and Denise Levertov. In some cases, these writers worked directly for Amnesty and integrated their work into their writings. For instance, after fleeing Argentina in 1973, Dorfman worked as a researcher and interviewer for the organization, who translated and published his first book of poems, *Pruebas al canto* (1979) (literally "Poetic Evidence" or A Test of Poetry), which drew on transcriptions of interviews that he had conducted with victims of torture. The same year Amnesty published Dorfman's poems, the American poet Carolyn Forché departed for El Salvador as a researcher, collecting the narratives for what would become *The Country Between Us* (1983), which helped spark a widespread movement in Anglo-American poetry towards the paradigm of witnessing. Forché's work with Amnesty helped bring about the first international conference on literature and human rights in 1981, held in Toronto as a benefit for Amnesty, and featuring Nadine Gordimer, Wole Soyinka, Margaret Atwood, Joseph Brodsky, Susan Sontag, Carolyn Forché, and Allen Ginsberg.[35] A decade later, in 1992, Amnesty was behind the first academic conference on human rights, the

[34] Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985).
[35] The proceedings from this conference were published as Rosemary Sullivan, ed. *Human Rights and the Writer* (New York: Doubleday, 1983).

inaugural Oxford Amnesty Lectures, where Edward Said, Jacques Derrida, Helen Cixous, Julia Kristeva, and Wayne Booth spoke.[36] The Oxford Amnesty lectures have since become the premier forum where literary scholarship and theoretical work on human rights is presented in a context of the public intellectual.

§

The history that follows is greatly concerned with the lived experience of seeking human rights in the twentieth-century. I imagine this collective experience as a part of what Hannah Arendt famously called the "perplexities of the 'Rights of Man,'" but which I will call the perplexities of human rights. My understanding and use of this term and its meaning is somewhat idiosyncratic, and so, by way of a closing, I should unpack both Arendt's original meaning and my elaboration of the term here, since it lays the foundation for the first two chapters to follow.

In the eighteenth-century, Arendt wrote in *The Origins of Totalitarianism,* the "Rights of Man were proclaimed to be 'inalienable,' irreducible to and undecidable from other rights or law, no authority was invoked for their establishment; Man himself was their source as well as their ultimate goal." But even if "Man himself" was claimed as the source of rights, Man alone could offer no protection. Thus no sooner were they claimed as universal, than the "Rights of Man" became the rights of *men* to found nations and achieve sovereignty. "The whole question of human rights, therefore, was quickly and inextricably blended with the question of national emancipation; only the emancipated sovereignty of the people, of one's own people, seemed to be able to insure them." For a century or so, the "rights of man" could appear fulfilled as the

[36] Barbara Johnson ed. *Freedom and Interpretation: The Oxford Amnesty Lectures.* (New York: Basic Books, 1992).

"rights of peoples" in the "European nation-state system."[37] Yet the two world wars of the twentieth-century "exploded" this assumption, leading, as Arendt's famous chapter on subject calls it, to the "decline of the nation state and the end of the rights of man."[38] As tens of millions of European peoples were expelled from their nations, they became stateless, stripped of the rights and protections of citizenship. Able to claim only their human rights, these stateless peoples, Arendt amongst them, discovered that the "inalienable" "rights of man" had no basis or jurisdiction outside the nation. Millions of were rendered rightless, the merely human. The inability or unwillingness of the international community, including the drafters of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), to confront the problem of statelessness was what Arendt called the "perplexities of the Rights of Man."[39]

This study shows that what Arendt called the "perplexities of the Rights of Man" is a description of the lived realities of the twentieth-century and of our historical present, realities that Arendt clearly and strongly identified with as a refugee. These perplexities are not going to be solved through the perfection of human or governmental actions. They are, instead, problems that are continuously lived. Perplexities are difficulties or situations that resist clear resolution, and cause confusion. As such, they magnetize intellectual and physical energy. When a perplexity is as complex and vital as the perplexity of human rights, there is, of course, no prospect of a complete resolution. Consequently, addressing the perplexities of human rights should be understood as a vast and ongoing project that both enlists and constitutes humanity as whole.

[37] Arendt, *Origins* 290-291.
[38] Ibid., 267.
[39] Ibid., 293

CHAPTER ONE

THE LEGISLATOR

> *It is a mortal error to expect from poetry the supersubstantial nourishment of man.*
>
> Jacques Maritain, *Frontiers of Poetry* (192)

Sometime around the end of May 1945, during the founding of the United Nations in San Francisco, the poet and politician Archibald MacLeish sat down to reimagine the grounds of postwar universalism. He had arrived in San Francisco as the late Franklin Delano Roosevelt's personal choice as Assistant Secretary of State for Cultural and Public Relations. Shortly before his death, Roosevelt had elected and tasked his old friend MacLeish with running the publicity campaign surrounding the creation of a new world governmental body. Roosevelt, it seems, had judged it fitting that a poet should be the one to sell world government by casting the idea in a poetic light. And in San Francisco, the press did not let the symbolism go unnoticed, relishing the opportunity to cast MacLeish as Plato's "stargazer" and thus imaging the UN as the fabled "ship of state" captained by the stargazing poet.[1] When the task of writing a declaration of rights in the form of a preamble to the United Nations Charter (UNC) arose, the stargazing MacLeish was a clear choice of authors. And MacLeish took up the task with enormous energy, drafting several preambles and declarations of rights over the course of May and June 1945, just as some

[1] "The Stargazer," *San Francisco Chronicle*, May 18, 1945.

of the first images of the liberated Nazi concentration camps appeared in the press.[2] As I will discuss further on, the facts of the Holocaust weighed heavily on MacLeish's abilities to imagine a rights based universalism for the postwar. Yet, as a corrective to a long held belief that the shock of the concentration camps led the UN's founders to unequivocally "reaffirm faith" in universal human rights, this chapter elucidates how fraught this reaffirmation was for writers and thinkers who looked head on at the events of the Holocaust. Before moving on to the particular shape and claims of the chapter at hand, though, I want to stay with MacLeish at the founding of the UN for a moment.

Figure 3. Archibald MacLeish, Preamble to the United Nations Charter, Undated Draft. Courtesy of the Library of Congress Manuscripts Division. Washington D.C

MacLeish's first draft of the preamble to the UNC is a remarkable document, which

[2] On the historical conjuncture of the founding of the UN and the appearance of images from the concentration camps, see Sliwinski, *Human Rights in Camera,* Chapter 3, "Roliiflex Witness, 1945."

speaks not only to the central ideas of this chapter but also many of the driving ideas of the dissertation as a whole [fig 1]. I turn to it here as a broad introduction to the chapter and dissertation that follows. The first thing to note about the document is that it is a palimpsest, scrawled above, across, and in the interstices of a printed copy of the preamble to the American Declaration of Independence. I'll call it the "declaration draft." This draft captures MacLeish in a process of historical mining common to literary modernism, digging into the past and its traditions in an effort, as his mentor and antagonist Ezra Pound once put it, to "make it new."

In this process of literally remaking or "making new" the American declaration, we glean, in a new light, one illustrative aspect of the history of twentieth-century human rights as a whole. Around the years of World War II, the long dormant ideas and language of the universal "Rights of Man" were reassessed, resuscitated, revised, and rewritten in response to the political catastrophes of the century. Mid-century thinkers, ranging from philosophers to politicians and theologians, returned to the founding documents of Republicanism and the Atlantic Revolution in an attempt to salvage a vision of universal "Man," humanity, and dignity. We might look at MacLeish's palimpsestic preamble and declaration of rights as an especially acute and material manifestation of this widespread return to and revision of the "Rights of Man" in the decades surrounding World War II. One aim of this chapter, and also this dissertation, is to explore how writers participated in and were influenced by this return to the premises of universal rights.

Turning back to MacLeish's draft, now with a little closer attention to its content and context, we begin to perceive the finer details and difficulties that stood behind the reclamation of the "Rights of Man." In particular, we can discern uncertainties around the support and articulation of humanistic universalism, especially the prospect of declaring universal, pre-political rights in the wake of war and genocide, when the most basic rights of tens of millions of

people had disappeared with disastrous consequences. Although MacLeish clearly turns to the document for inspiration, it is difficult to discern exactly how he perceived the contemporary relevance and resonances of the Republican tradition. Consider, for instance, the fact that MacLeish categorically avoids the defining concepts of American declaration, "self-evident" and "inalienable," or any approximate terms. Instead, MacLeish crafts a long paratactic line of iambs that is ostensibly intended to do the work of declaring and defining personhood: "the rights of men to live like men in dignity and decency and order and under the rule of justice and of law, are rights common to all men everywhere."[3] Here, it's worth comparing the evolution of declarations over time in order to track MacLeish's intervention with finer subtlety. I list them here, beginning with Thomas Jefferson's first draft, and highlight the central and evolving terms.

> *We hold these truths to be sacred & undeniable; that all men are created equal & independant, that from that equal creation they derive rights inherent & inalienable, among which are the preservation of life, & liberty, & the pursuit of happiness*.

Jefferson's final draft:

> *We hold these Truths to be self-evident, that all Men are created equal, that their Creator with certain unalienable Rights endows them, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness*.[4]

[3] Archibald MacLeish, "United Nations Preamble Draft 'Declaration Draft.'" Undated. Subject box 55, Archibald MacLeish Papers. Lib. of Cong., Washington, DC.

[4]Draft and originals are found in the appendix to Hunt, *Inventing Human Rights,* 222-229.

Jan Smuts' first draft to the UN preamble:

> *To reestablish the faith of man and women in fundamental human rights, in the sacredness, essential worth and integrity of the human personality.*[5]

The final draft of the UN preamble (close to Smuts' but altered by MacLeish):

> *To reffirm faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person, in the equal rights of men and women and of nations large and small.*

MacLeish's first draft:

> *The rights of men to live like men in dignity and decency and order and under the rule of justice and of law, are rights common to all men everywhere*[6]

MacLeish's draft is remarkable for its exclusions. It clearly exhibits a conviction that metaphysical or heteronomous language needed to be expunged from a future declaration. Declarations of divine rights, by "creation," and natural rights, which are "self-evident" and "inalienable," "inherent" and "undeniable," characterize the eighteenth-century declarations. In the later declarations such a the UNC and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), "human rights" are bestowed by "sacredness," and "essential worth," and inhere in the "dignity" and "integrity" of the virtual figure: the "human person." By contrast, MacLeish includes none of the defining concepts or figures from the discourses of natural or human rights. As I discuss

---

[5] Draft Preamble." 26 April 1945. Subject box 55, Archibald MacLeish Papers. Lib. of Cong., Washington, DC. *Hereafter cited parenthetically as* MacLeish Papers, LOC.

[5] MacLeish, "Declaration Draft," 1.

further in this chapter, MacLeish truly believed in the need to attain universal human rights. However, his rejection of the tradition of natural law led him to seek out and articulate alternative foundations for human rights, and to do so in poetry.

Figure 4. Detail of Archibald MacLeish's "Declaration Draft." Courtesy of the Library of Congress Manuscripts Division. Washington D.C

MacLeish's reworking of the foundations of human rights leads me to a third aspect of the "declaration draft" that opens onto the ideas of this dissertation as a whole: the act of writing and reading between the lines. In the above detail [fig. 2] we see MacLeish literally writing between the lines of the American declaration. The palimpsestic quality of the document makes visible and constellates two historical moments: the Republican revolutions of the eighteenth-century, and the global reconstruction and reordering of the mid-twentieth-century. Captured in this aspect, the founding ideals and conceits of American and French republicanism, couched in universalisms and eternal "laws of nature," are situated alongside their real-time reimaging in the shadow of the catastrophes of the twentieth-century. This contrast captures something of the felt contradictions as well as the open possibilities of generating and then occupying the terrain of contested universals. Think of how MacLeish is caught here writing with, against, and between

the grain of the American declaration. This tripartite action is finely illustrative of how the effort of testing and contesting universals so often takes the shape of rewriting — realized here as the literal writing over and "in-between" the universalisms in question. In the juxtaposition of the eighteenth-century dictates and MacLeish's interlinear reworking, the challenge posed to the universal ideas of natural rights by the ideas and events of the twentieth-century is condensed. The space afforded "between the lines" is both literal and figural. On one hand, it is the physical space on the page where MacLeish experiments with alternative wording and conceptualization for declaring universal rights. On the other, it is the figural space cleaved open between universal principles and lived particulars, the terrain on which contending universals clash and generate space for new voices and unexpected possibilities.

It is possible, I think, to dilate from MacLeish's "declaration draft" to imagine the space "between the lines" as a framework for thinking more generally, if also abstractly, about the contributions of writers and literature to the history of human rights. While the writers you will encounter in this dissertation may have contributed little to the declarations, covenants, and laws that are so often the subject of human rights histories, their ideas and actions exist between the lines of more rational and structurally enforceable documents, national constitutions, legal rulings, and international covenants. In this sense, the space between the lines of laws and universal declarations marks out the territory of lived relation to these more prescribed and codified ideals; this is a space of potentiality and new meanings, of future readings, interpretations, and translations. As I've noted, interlinear space can be interpreted as the terrain of competing and evolving universalisms. Yet we might also think of the space "between the lines" as the terrain of extra-semantic meaning and play in language. In literary texts themselves, the space between can describe the working of prosody and poetic form, which arranges

language to generate signification beyond the basic meanings of words. Mapped onto the history of human rights more broadly, this space of the extra-semantic would translate into the role played by writers and their texts in arranging language and ideas central to human rights — "conscience," "life," "freedom," "dignity," and perhaps most importantly "human" — in the world outside of law and official politics. Somewhat differently, we can imagine the work done "between the lines" as the sociological and cultural factors that generate declarations, ratify constitutions, or otherwise inform those political and legal actors who adapt the law to historical events and their lived ramifications. To imagine the work and force of literary actors and texts in shaping human rights as occurring between the lines of the legal and political of also accurately evinces a factor of perpetuity. There is always a space from which what is not seen or remains silent (or does not directly signify, as in the literal interlinear space) springs into action and transforms the horizons of possibility and justice. This, I have been suggesting, is the space "between the lines," the space of MacLeish's reimagining of the American Declaration of Independence, and also the space of the writer in the history of human rights. But, of course, this space of possibility and contested universalism might also go by another name: the space of the human.

§

This chapter traces the untold history of MacLeish's efforts to declare human rights after World War II, first in the form of the preamble to the UNC, and later in the poetry that he began during the founding of the UN in San Francisco. As I've already begun to explain, this is a history that occurred very much "between-the lines" of the official history of human rights at

mid-century. Yet it is by no means a marginal story. In fact, this history includes the under-examined literary ideals shared by two of the period's most influential advocates and philosophers of human rights: Jan Christian Smuts, a South African statesmen and disciple of Walt Whitman, and the man greatly responsible for bringing the language of human rights and the "human person" into the UN mandate, and Jacques Maritain, the Catholic philosopher of aesthetics and natural law who popularized the language of human rights in France and the United States during World War II.[7] I take up the story of MacLeish, Maritain, and Smuts under the heading of the "legislator," since they were each devoted to pursuing the deeper (or higher) laws that uphold human value and ground human rights. The title of the chapter also means to invoke both the older Romantic ideal of "poetic legislation" put forward by Percy Shelley (himself the author of a declaration of human rights), and the "laws" of poetry more broadly.

Although MacLeish is widely known as a celebrated poet of the early twentieth-century, much less is known about his wartime political career, and absolutely nothing has been written about his involvement in human rights. Yet between 1945 and 1948, MacLeish participated in the founding of the United Nations and its Commission on Human Rights and helped draft the century's two most important declarations of human rights: the preamble to the United Nations Charter (UNC) and the preamble to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). As an esteemed writer, rhetorician, and public intellectual, MacLeish was called on at different times to articulate the mission of the UN and human rights to a global public.[8] Yet the archive assembled

[7] For Smuts' impact on human rights at mid-century, see Mark Mazower, *No Enchanted Palace*: *The End of Empire and the Origins of the United Nations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008); for Maritain's influence see, most recently, Moyn, *Christian Human Rights.*

[8] For an overview of MacLeish's poetry, see Signi Lenea Falk, *Archibald MacLeish* (1965); for his journalism, see Robert Vanderlan, *Intellectuals Incorporated: Henry Luce's Media Empire* (2010): chapter three; for his radio work, see Neil Verma, *Theater of the Mind* (2013): chapter three and Gerd Horten, *Radio Goes to War* (2002): 43-50; for his work on American foreign policy, see Justin Hart,

in this chapter—a selection of poems, preambles, notebook entries, and written fragments—reveals how, in each case, the institutional responsibility of declaring rights led MacLeish to explore alternative political and philosophical foundations for postwar justice. Tasked with fine-tuning the declarations, MacLeish came to question the very grounds of postwar universalism. Like his contemporary, the German social theorist and refugee Hannah Arendt, MacLeish refused to look past what the philosopher called the "perplexities" of claiming universal human rights in the wake of World War II, the Holocaust, and the continued plight of the stateless and rightless (*Origins* 290).[9] Also like Arendt, he set himself the formidable task of imagining ontological grounds for universal rights that did not rely on the tradition of natural and divine law.[10] Yet whereas Arendt engaged the task of rethinking human rights through political theory, MacLeish pursued alternatives *in* and *through* poetry.

Buried in MacLeish's official papers from the founding of the UN are assorted literary fragments and formal anomalies: preambles written as poems and poem fragments scribbled in the stolen moments between his official duties as Assistant Secretary of State.[11] These neglected or forgotten writings cleave open space between the institutions codifying human rights and the abstract objects that these institutions rendered. This space allows us to consider more soberly

---

Empire of Ideas: The Origins of Public Diplomacy and the Transformation of U.S Foreign Policy (2013): introduction and chapters 1-3.

[9] In *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Arendt speaks of the "perplexities of the 'Rights of Man'" (290) to elaborate on the gap between the political and civil rights of national citizens and universal human rights, which are purported to precede politics. In comparing these two orders of rights, a perplexity emerges, since the human being, stripped of citizenship and left only with their human rights, appears to have no rights at all. Human rights "coincide with the instant when a person becomes a human being in general—without profession, without citizenship, without an opinion, without a deed by which to identify and specify himself" (306).

[10] Arendt was a staunch critic of natural law and natural rights and argued against the tradition across her shorter writings of the 1940s, culminating in "The Decline of the Nation State and the End of the Rights of Man" in *The Origins of Totalitarianism.*

[11] These can be found in Box 51, Folder: "United Nations," Archibald MacLeish Papers. Lib. of Cong. Washington, DC.

the felt compatibility between lived historical moments and the categories and concepts that emerged to give order and meaning to a society reeling from catastrophe. The first sections of this chapter read these fragments as evidence of poetic thinking that the challenge of articulating absolute human value in the wake of war and genocide occasioned. "Actfive," MacLeish's last modernist long-poem, emerged from these fragments and is the focus of the second part of the chapter. Begun on a scrap of paper during the UN's founding and completed while MacLeish was at work on the UDHR, "Actfive" represents a critical point of convergence among literary modernism, postwar universalism, and the history and politics of human rights.

ON POETRY AND THE HUMAN PERSON

> *While the State can do much, both negatively and positively, for the culture of the personality, literature can do far more.*
>
> Jan Smuts, *Walt Whitman: A Study in the Evolution of Personality* (1895)

The historical arc of this chapter follows MacLeish as he navigates the abstractions on which human rights were founded at the UN. His goal, I argue, is to ground radical human value without recourse to the intrinsic worth of a "person" before the law (whether national, international, or divine). Yet to get a sense of the scale of human life that MacLeish's writings sought to make available for subjective encounter, we may first touch on the exceptions sown into the language and philosophy of human rights and the "human person" at midcentury. More importantly for our specific purpose, I also survey the literary forms underwriting the distinctions between humans and persons encoded in the century's founding documents of human rights.

The preambles to the UNC and the UDHR both turn on the same promissory, ex post facto promise to "reaffirm faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person."[12] Few sentences have had more of an impact on the politics of our time, yet few are less straightforward in their meaning. The "human person" of human rights law is not, strictly speaking, the human as such. The English "person" derives from the Latin *persona* and the Ancient Greek *prosopon,* meaning an actor's mask, later the actor themselves, and finally a human being recognized by some form of law, whether divine, natural, national, or international.[13] While we tend instinctively to consider all humans persons, the "person," as John Dewey noted in 1926, is only a "synonym for a rights-and-duty-bearing unit. Any such unit would be a person" (663). "Human rights law," as Joseph Slaughter explains, is thus "something of a misnomer," since the human "cited in the title of the UDHR is not a human as such" but a "particular kind of human activated as a legal and moral unit with rights" (38). Insofar as it bears a stable definition, the "human person" simply possesses value and, with it, the capacity to be a bearer of rights. The philosopher Roberto Esposito thus maintains that "[i]n order to be able to assert what we call subjective rights—to life, to well-being, to dignity—we must first enter into the enclosed space of the person."[14]

Ever since human rights emerged as the "lingua franca of global moral thought" at the end of the Cold War, literary studies have shown an increasing interest in the "person" of human

[12] Preamble to the United Nations Charter, 1945.
[13] Thomas D. Williams. *Who is my Neighbor: Personalism and the Foundation of Human Rights* (Washington DC, Catholic University of America Press, 2005), 121.
[14] Roberto Esposito, *The Third Person: The Politics of Life and the Philosophy of the Impersonal* (London: Polity, 2012), 5.

rights law and discourse.[15] The topic, however, has thus far been approached almost exclusively by way of narrative fiction. In the early 1990s Wayne Booth laid the groundwork for much later work on literature and human rights when he posited that the emplotted "social self" delivered in the realist novel best represented the "human" of the human rights imaginary. Locked into the social network of narrative fiction, Booth reasoned, a fictional character assumes multiple, contingent selves that we recognize as paramount to the universal constitution of personhood.[16] Slaughter has since thickened the ties between literary and legal emplotment, reasoning that what we recognize as the "human person" described in the 30 articles of the UDHR has come down to us via the European bildungsroman and its emphasis on character development. In connecting the novel to human rights, Slaughter cites a remarkable literary debate that took place during the proceedings of the United Nations Commission on Human Rights (UNCHR)—a debate centering on Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719). Unable to reach a consensus on the relative autonomy or social contingency of the "human personality," delegates turned to these fictional adventures to debate the universal nature of "Man." Accordingly, Slaughter makes a case for viewing the novel form and human rights as "mutually enabling fictions," since "each projects an image of the human personality that ratifies the other's idealistic vision."[17]

But while the histories of human rights and of the novel are increasingly understood as entwined, scholars of have had much less to say about poetry. A curious omission, since one need not dig too deep in the history of human rights to find poetry—in fact, to find Walt Whitman.

---

[15] Michael Ignatieff, *Human Rights as Politics and Idolatry,* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 153.
[16] Wayne Booth, "Individualims and the Mystery of the Social Self: Or Does Amnesty Have a Leg to Stand On?" in Barbara Johnson ed., *Freedom and Interpretation: The Oxford Amnesty Lectures* (New York: Basic Books, 1992), 30.
[17] Slaughter, *Human Rights Inc.,* 120-125, 4.

The author of the preamble to the UNC, which introduced both the language of human rights and the human person into the mandate of the UN, was Jan Christian Smuts, former prime minister of South Africa and a close friend of Winston Churchill. An inveterate racist, imperialist, and theorist of global white supremacy, Smuts was also a learned polymath with monographs ranging from Hegelian philosophy and ecology to Romantic poetry. In April 1945, Smuts tabled his first draft preamble and declaration of human rights, which began:

> The high contracting parties: determined to prevent a recurrence of fratricidal strife which has twice in our generation brought untold sorrow and losses on mankind, and to reestablish the faith of man and women in fundamental human rights, in the sacredness, essential worth and integrity of the *human personality*.[18]

Here were the rudiments of the sentence we began with: to "reaffirm faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person." But what exactly did the bigoted Smuts mean when he declared the "human rights" and "essential worth" of the "human personality?"

As it took shape in the late nineteenth-century, Smuts's vision of the "human personality" grew out of a theory of the greater Romantic lyric, elaborated on in his first of many works on global order: *Walt Whitman: A Study in the Evolution of Personality* (1895). This idiosyncratic book took up Whitman's life and poetry in order to ground what Smuts referred to as a "general philosophic theory of the personality."[19] Lingering on major works like "Song of Myself," the future prime minister of South Africa mined Whitman's poetry for the substantiation of "human personality" at the highest stage of development. The "personality," he explained, was a

[18] Jan Smuts, "Draft Preamble: South African Delegation," April 26th, 1945. Subject box 55, Folder: United Nations, Archibald MacLeish Papers, LOC.
[19] Jan Smuts, *Walt Whitman: A Study in the Evolution of Personality* (New York: Berg, 1977), 76.

"distinct, single, indivisible unity of life in each individual," which evolved within the greater "social organism" that was civilization.[20] All human beings possessed personalities, yet, owing to an unevenness of human development (between white Europeans and inhabitants of the Global South), not all personalities were of equal "worth." Instead, only a select portion of "personalities" —such as Whitman's poetry evinces—ever fully evolved.

Staking his philosophy of human rights and human value on this imputed asymmetry, Smuts developed an elaborate theory of global racial difference, which he implemented with varying degrees of success through his influence at the League of Nations, the British Commonwealth, and the UN.[21] While a deeper exploration of his racial views (and the role of these views in the theory of human rights) is beyond the scope of the present discussion, what I want to emphasize here is the axiomatic place of lyric personhood within the genealogy of Smuts's philosophy of human rights.[22] Lyric poetry—especially a lyric voice as capacious as Whitman's—struck Smuts as offering "a history, not only of experience, but also of personality" (73). Possessed of what Smuts called a "universalizing extensivity," Whitman's lyric powers testified to the poet's superior position at the highest stage of human personality development, or what the diplomat called, with no little odor of his racist outlook, the "highest manifestation of life in this world" (73).

NATURAL LAW AND THE LAWS OF POETRY

[20] Ibid., 46, 80.
[21] For an account of Smuts's influence on global governmentality, see Mark Mazower, *No Enchanted Palace,* Chapter 1.
[22] The most thorough discussion of Smuts's work on Whitman and his theory of rights can be found in Peder Anker, *Imperial Ecology: Environmental Order in the British Empire: 1895-1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), Chapters 2 and 5. For the best overview of Smuts's life and politics leading up to the founding of the United Nations, see Bill Schwarz, *White Man's World: Memories of Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), Chapter 5.

While forgotten today, Smuts' Whitmanesque philosophy of human personality represents an explicit link between literary history and the political philosophy of human rights as it was enshrined at the UN. Yet Smuts was not alone at midcentury in assuming the supreme value of the "personality" over the human; nor was he the only influential proponent of human rights to theorize poetry and rights together. The French Catholic philosopher Jacques Maritain was arguably the period's most important philosopher of human rights and the human personality. And like Smuts, Maritain arrived at many of his ideas about human rights by way of an exploration of poetic personality.

Widely read and translated, Maritain's seminal works included *The Rights of Man and Natural Law* (1942), *Man and State* (1951), *Christianity and Democracy* (1944), and his 1947 introduction to UNESCO's "Human Rights: Comments and Interpretations." Beginning in early 1940s France, Maritain adumbrated a theory of human rights grounded in the doctrine that God grants all humans prepolitical, natural rights, which could be activated or claimed by each "human person." Maritain's doctrine was one of many iterations of the broader philosophical movement known as Personalism, of which he was the leading voice. As the historian Samuel Moyn suggests, Maritain was "the most prominent thinker of any kind across the world to champion rights in the postwar moment."[23] In Maritain's influential view, human rights were realized through a "dynamism which impels the unwritten law to flower forth in human law."[24] Only when the "temporal order" of human life came to harmonize with the "perfect" laws made by God would all humans truly be "persons," making universal human rights a reality on earth.[25]

[23] Moyn, *Christian Human Rights,* 90.
[24] Jacques Maritain, *Christianity and Democracy, and The Rights of Man and Natural Law*. (Washington, DC: Ignatius Press, 2012), 82.
[25] Ibid., 124.

Before Maritain emerged as the leading philosopher of human rights during World War II his principal field of study was aesthetics, on which he published *Art and Scholasticism* (1920), the 1933 essay "The Frontiers of Poetry," and *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry* (1953). Much like Smuts, Maritain harbored a vision of poetry as a privileged conduit of "personality." At the same time, there were important distinctions in the way that the two philosophers imagined poetic creation as a basis for human rights. Smuts was a Social Darwinist at heart, and the lyric self he discerned in Whitman appeared to him a marker of biological and spiritual development whose course determined the creation of the rights bearing "personality." While for Maritain, the creative impulse distilled into a poem brings the human closer to God's intentions for the species, and this harmony between divine plan and human action leads to the realization of human rights on earth.

"Poetry (like metaphysics)," Maritain wrote in *The Frontiers of Poetry,* "is spiritual nourishment."[26] It possessed the power to carry humanity in moments of crisis by nurturing the human spirit for creation. At the same time, poetry was also "of a savor which has been created and which is insufficient.[27] Concerned about a drift towards nihilism in the arts, Maritain argued that modern poetry had grown bold and idolatrous in bidding to make itself "the means of life" While modern poetry fostered an ethics based on one's relationship to the art object, Maritain warned that poetry could function only as a "counterfeit of the supernatural." It was therefore "a mortal error to expect from poetry the supersubstantial nourishment of man."[28]

Yet for Maritain, poetry *could* affirm the spiritual core of the human, but only insofar as the poem becomes a conduit for the "personality" guided by both "creative intuition" and "poetic

[26] Jacques Maritain, *Frontiers of Poetry* (London: PL Poetry Editions, 1945), 20.
[27] Ibid.,18.
[28] Ibid., 30.

sense."[29] In each human being, a "creative intuition" turns the mind and hands towards the process of making new things—things that reflect God's original creations while never equaling them. "God's ideas precede things, they create them."[30] As the material artifact of a higher sense, Maritain saw art objects as the worldly crystallizations of God's creative intentions. A poem resplendent in authorial personality was a fabrication of God's ways on earth. Just as human rights showed God's law "flowering forth" in human law, poetry resonated with the agency of a higher spiritual force brought down to the "temporal world" of human making.[31]

Since he so strictly believed that poetry's value was as a conduit of the "personality," Maritain took particular issue with the poetics of "impersonality" pursued most influentially by T. S. Eliot and, later, MacLeish.[32] On more than one occasion Maritain took up MacLeish's poem "Ars Poetica" to convey the fallacy of modern poetry in rejecting the metaphysical. Here is the famous final stanza of MacLeish's poem:

> A poem should be equal to:
>
> Not true.
>
> For all the history of grief
>
> An empty doorway and a maple leaf.
>
> For love

[29] For an elaboration of Maritain's notion of "poetic sense," see "The Poetic Sense" *Poetry* 81. 6 (March 1953): 369-83. For his definition of "creative intuition," see *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry* (1953), introduction and chapter 1.
[30] Jacques Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism and Other Essays*, (Newark: FQ Classics, 2007), 10.
[31] Maritain, *Christianity and Democracy*, 125.
[32] Eliot's "Tradition and the Individual Talent" is the classic text of modernist impersonality.For a contextualization within a longer history of the concept, see Sharon Cameron, *Impersonality: Seven Essays* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), Chapter 6.

The leaning grass and two lights above the sea —

A poem should not mean

But be.[33]

This seemed to Maritain the ultimate expression of modern poetry's denial of its own metaphysical substance. "A poem must only be, yes" Maritain explained, "but it cannot be except through the poetic sense; and some intelligible meaning, subordinate or evanescent as it may be, at least some atmosphere of clarity is part of the poetic sense" (*Creative* 51). What the philosopher was ultimately protesting in MacLeish's poem is the claim that ontology alone grounds poetry's value. He challenges poetry's *being in itself*: its significance as a marker of human action on earth. Poetry "cannot be," Maritain insists, without affecting a trace of the metaphysical "poetic sense." And when "poetic sense" is effaced poetry is severed not only from its conditions of intelligibility but, more crucially, from its source of value. Devoid of "personality," he reasoned, a poem becomes a profane thing and a metonym for a fallen world.

MacLeish, by contrast, assigned value to poetry precisely where Maritain found it wanting. Even as he later revised the ideas expressed in "Ars Poetica," MacLeish never gave up on the highest value of poetry as ontology. What changed over the course of the 1930s—when economic crisis at home and fascism abroad came to animate his work—was his view of poetic making as a historically and politically conditioned *action*. A poem, MacLeish wrote in "Public Speech and Private Speech in Poetry," is "an action on this earth" like "a war or an edict."[34] While a poem may only "be," its coming into the world leaves behind an artifact "committed to

[33] Archibald MacLeish, *Collected Poems: 1917-1982* (New York: Mariner Press, 1985), 95. *Hereafter cited parenthetically as* CP.
[34] Archibald MacLeish, "Public Speech and Private Speech in Poetry." *The Yale Review* (August 1937): 56.

this earth, confined within the shallow water of this air."[35] Whereas Maritain discerned "a mortal error to expect from poetry the supersubstantial nourishment of man," MacLeish understood poetry as correcting the error of seeking human nourishment in the "supersubtantial."

Most likely, the conflicting views of poetry held by Smuts, Maritain, and MacLeish would have remained solely in the realm of aesthetics had Smuts and MacLeish not crossed paths in 1945, each tasked with imagining and declaring absolute human value in the preamble to the UNC. What would likely have remained a disagreement among theorists concerning the relation of human value to art became, for MacLeish, the foundational principle on which the terms and forms of postwar universalism were debated and worked through.

A POEM AND A PREAMBLE

In the spring of 1945, as delegates assembled in San Francisco to charter the United Nations Organization, aesthetics was scarcely among the subjects debated. Yet MacLeish's partisanship of the impersonal over the personal, and the ontological over the metaphysical, can at least partially explain why he was moved to anger by the language and philosophy of Smuts's preamble. We will recall that the South African's first draft of the preamble promised to restore "faith" in "fundamental human rights" and the "sacredness, essential worth and integrity of the human personality. A few days after Smuts tabled the draft, MacLeish, acting as Assistant Secretary of State, delivered a letter of protest to President Truman. Avowing never to have seen "a more complete literary and intellectual abortion," MacLeish called the preamble a "cross word puzzle" constructed out of "political and academic odds and ends." The preamble had to be

[35] Ibid., 55.

rewritten and rephrased, he reasoned, if the aims of the nascent organization were to achieve a "human perspective."[36]

Long buried in his papers at the Library of Congress, MacLeish's alternative preambles and declarations of rights bear witness to a very literal search for foundations in a period of global crisis and reorganization. They remind us of just how fluid and unpredictable the language and ethos of universalism coming out of World War II was. For neither the idea of "human rights" nor the language of the inalienable "dignity" of the "human person" was the inevitable outcome of a world shocked by total war and genocide. MacLeish's preambles, however, bespeak more than a semantic conflict with the Personalist philosophy of Smuts and Maritain. They also bespeak his anxiety over working within the declaration form itself, revealing a turn to poetic thinking and formal experiments that cut across the generic confines of the declaration form.

MacLeish first began work on his preamble and alternative declaration of rights with the palimpsestic exercise we began with, written literally on top of and in the interstices of a printed copy of the preamble to the American Declaration of Independence (Fig. 6). To begin with that celebrated document was only logical. Historians of rights such as David Armitage and Lynn Hunt trace the "literary genre" of declarations of rights to its prefatory paragraphs.[37] Hunt likewise begins her seminal history of human rights by noting the significance of Thomas Jefferson's final inclusion of the term "self–evident" in transforming the conceptual grounds of the human.[38] "With this one sentence" she explains, Jefferson transformed a "typical eighteenth-

[36] Archibald MacLeish, "Letter to Edward Stettinius," June 2nd, 1945. Correspondence box 21, Folder "E," Archibald MacLeish Papers, LOC.
[37] See David Armitage, *The Declaration of Independence: A Global History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), 13-20 on the origins of the declaration of rights as a distinct literary "form" and "genre."
[38] See Lynn Hunt, *Inventing Human Rights,* 15-25.

century document about political grievances into a lasting proclamation of human rights," and all future declarations of human rights would come to rest "on a claim of self-evidence" (21).

As I noted in the introduction, however, MacLeish appeared disinclined to rescript those claims for the post-1945 era. Instead, he categorically avoided defining concepts like "self-evident" and "inalienable," as well as "human rights," the "human person," and the "human personality." In their place, he declared rights as such: "The rights of men to live like men in dignity and decency and order and under the rule of justice and of law, are rights common to all men everywhere."[39] More than just avoiding the defining terms, the poet's first formulation exhibits a clear conviction that all heteronomous concepts should be expunged. Nothing in MacLeish's preamble is "sacred" or "fundamental" —nothing precedes politics. Whereas eighteenth-century declarations drew on the authority of "creation" to ground "self-evident," "inalienable," "inherent" and "undeniable" rights, and twentieth-century declarations of human rights rest on concepts like "sacredness," "essential worth," and the inviolable "dignity" and "integrity" of the "human person," for MacLeish neither God, nature, the "human" nor the "human person" should be the foundation of the "rule of justice and of law."[40]

[39] MacLeish, "Declaration Draft,"1.
[40] For a recent survey of the conflicting foundation of human rights, see Connor Gearty "Human Rights: the necessary quest for foundations," *The Meaning of Rights: The Philosophy and Social Theory of Rights* (2014), ed. Costas Douzinas and Connor Gearty, 21-38.

Figure 5. Archibald MacLeish's undated draft of the preamble to the United Nations Charter, undated. Courtesy of the Library of Congress Manuscripts Division. Washington D.C

Figure 6. Archibald MacLeish's draft of the preamble to the United Nations Charter, June 19, 1945. Courtesy of the Library of Congress Manuscripts Division. Washington D.C.

MacLeish's "declaration draft" marked the beginning of a concentrated project to reimagine the rhetorical underpinnings of the declaration form, and with it the philosophical

grounds of human value. Over the next weeks, MacLeish drafted nearly 20 declarations of rights, none employing either the language of "human rights" or Smuts's and Maritain's Personalist rhetoric. The draft that most concerns us appeared late in the sequence. Dated 16 June 1945, this version is a fully lineated poem/preamble (see Figure 7):

We the Peoples of the United Nations

Resolved by uniting our strength
to save ourselves and our children
from the scourge of war which twice
in our time has brought untold war
to mankind,

Persuaded that men and nations
can live together as good neighbors
by the common undertaking and purpose
of them all,

Believing in the worth and dignity
of man and in the rule of law
and justice among nations,

Convinced that only a common ef-
fort can improve the conditions of the

common man,

Through the representatives designated by our

govern–

ments and furnished with full powers

found to be in good due form

agree in conference at San Francisco to the present

CHARTER OF THE UNITED NATIONS.[41]

If earlier drafts excluded "human rights" and any mention of the "person," this draft does away with the language of rights altogether. The pivotal term here is "common," and its subject is the "common man." In an unpublished poem fragment from 1945-1946 titled "The Common Man," MacLeish defines the term through a paratactic linkage of "you + I + him + her," suggesting a potentially infinite chain of impersonal encounters.[42] Significantly, MacLeish defined the subject of his declarations only in a poetic fragment; moreover, the use of parataxis to braid "you + I + him + her" projects an image of human life in many ways unavailable to preambular language and form.[43] While parataxis creates semantic disorder, preambular language smooths over conceptual and semantic antagonism, imposing order and coherence. MacLeish's impulse to

[41] Archibald MacLeish, "Preamble to the United Nations Charter," June 16th, 1945. Subject box 55, folder "San Francisco Conference." Archibald MacLeish Papers, LOC.
[42] Archibald MacLeish, "The Common Man." Undated. Miscellaneous box 61, Folder "1940s." Archibald MacLeish Papers, LOC.
[43] Parataxis is, for Susan Stanford Friedman, a strategy central to literary modernism, remapping the "possible correspondences or resonances between the disjunctive and the fragmentary" (37). See "Cultural Parataxis and Transnational Landscapes of Reading," *Modernism, Vol 1* (2007), ed. Astrudur Eysteinsson and Vivian Liska, 35-52.

bring poetry and preambularity together in his poem/preamble may well express a cognate effort to overcome the limitations on thought and language inherent to the preamble form.

The question is whether we may read the *form* of the poem/preamble as a contributing to—perhaps even marking the fundamental quality—of MacLeish's political philosophy. To introduce rhythmic prosody into a declaration of universal rights stages a particularly freighted encounter between the legal and the literary. The text's imperfectly enjambed lines reorganize the preamble semantically and affectively; it is no longer merely a statement of intent but a temporally conditioned meeting place between reader and writer whose anticipation of the line break is mutual. This intersubjective dimension of poetic rhythm has been variously described by poetry theorists and seems to have some bearing on the twinned intentions of a poem/preamble. For the New Critics, this enjambment was a marker of subjectivity; for Susan Stewart, being in time or "in number" is a form of extra-semantic communication of human sense experience;[44] for Mutlu Blasing "the individuating and intentionalizing function of rhythm . . . renders audible an intending subject," or "virtual subjectivity."[45]

With MacLeish's poem/preamble before us legible as a poem, we do acknowledge an intending force—a maker—whose energy is felt at the edges of meaning and sound. Yet this abstract poet/maker is too sparse to speak or be claimed as a "person" or "personality." It is, in a word, impersonal. Read as dichotomous indices of human value, the impersonal poet/maker of MacLeish's poem/preamble and the "human personality" of Smuts's declaration become especially notable. Smuts had found in Whitman's lyric poetry an archive of the fully formed "human personality" whose rights are "fundamental" and "sacred." By contrast, MacLeish's poetics placed value in human intention, action, and possibility, sources of humanness posterior

[44] Susan Stewart, *Poetry and the Fate of the Senses* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 23.
[45] Mutu Blasing, *Lyric Poetry: The Pain and Pleasure of Words* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 10.

to the formation of personhood but fundamental to the fabrication of things in the world. In this way, the incommensurability of MacLeish's poet/maker and Smuts's "human personality" reminds us of the depersonalized quotients of human life that precede the legal or metaphysical abstraction of the rights-bearing person. From a slightly different angle, this impersonal humanness might also stand as the general criterion of a more radically open idea of "what a person is," as Oren Izenberg has recently argued. Izenberg contends that poets at midcentury responded to the "upheavals of decolonization and nation formation . . . and above all, genocide and the specter of total annihilation" not always in a poem but in "something through or by poetry."[46] Yet by "poetry" he means "not so much the expression of the imagination as a revelation that the imagination is the fundamental, value-bearing aspect of our nature." For Izeneberg, "poetry in the general sense" precedes the act of composing a poem, and might therefore be understood as the use of a specific "faculty," which intends to "reveal, exemplify, or make manifest a potential or 'power' that minimally distinguishes what a person is."[47] Either way, whether we understand poetry as an act of making or as a human faculty, encountering MacLeish's preamble *as* poetry supplements and expands upon its capacities to locate, make sensible, and otherwise ground the value of human life.

MacLeish, however, could not have intended the preamble to be read or encountered as a poem. Since his final version of the preamble was not lineated, we can assume that the poem/preamble was only an experiment. But an experiment in what? It was an experiment, no doubt, in imagining, articulating, and grounding human value in the wake of war and genocide. What the poem/preamble makes definitely available to us then is an occasion of *poetic thinking* provoked by historical catastrophe. As Simon Jarvis defines it, "poetic thinking" can describe a

[46] Oren Izenberg, *Being Numerous: Poetry and the Grounds of Social Life.* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), 2-3.
[47] Ibid., 17, 23.

"thinking-through-making which happens in the composition of poems which prompts us to expand our idea of what persons can do and can be."[48] In making a poem, Jarvis suggests, one imagines plural others in a way radically open and irreducible to the imagined reader. For Izenberg, however, "poetic thinking" may also precede the act of making, existing only as an intention to be with and towards plural others. Keeping both these definitions in mind, in MacLeish's poem/preamble we get the sense that in placing his words in time he was both writing for nobody and for somebody, concurrent intentions making the parameters of this *somebody* radically undeterminable. Charles Bernstein describes something like this when he counsels that we take note of "the collective and dialogic nature of poetry without necessarily defining the nature of this collectivity—call it a virtual collectivity."[49] Although any variety of poetic deposit might be read as a communion with a "virtual collectivity," there is an especially freighted significance to the act of thinking poetry and preambularity together as MacLeish did, and when he did.

In bringing MacLeish's preamble drafts to the foreground, then, I aim to demonstrate how his institutional responsibility to imagine and articulate universal rights opened onto a dialectic between poetic thinking and human valuing. By this I mean that MacLeish began writing poetry again (after a six-year hiatus) at the very moment when he was tasked with ascribing value to all human beings; and in doing so he serendipitously reimagined the nature of declaring human rights by moving beyond the simple act of ascription. In MacLeish's hybrid preambles, the work of valuing ceases to be entirely reducible to a semantic register and ramifies into the interstices of form and content. Take for instance a declarative stanza of MacLeish's poem/preamble:

---

[48] Simon Jarvis, "Comentary on Oren Izenberg's *Being Numerous.*" *Nonsite.org*
[49] Charles Bernstein, "Poetics of the Americas." *Modernism/Modernity* 3.3 (Sep. 1996), 5.

Believing in the worth and dignity
of man and in the rule of law
and justice among nations,
Convinced that only a common ef-
fort can improve the conditions of the
common man.[50]

"Common effort" is the text's distinct and dynamic force. Importantly, the emphasis on effort distinguishes MacLeish's preamble from Smuts' initial declaration, which by contrast rests assured in the givenness of the human personality's rights. For Smuts and Maritain, respective proponents of natural law, effort (or even agency) does not catalyze the human's acquisition of human rights. Instead, as we have seen, they rest their philosophies on a kind of pre-political harmony between the individual and a higher power. Yet for MacLeish, so much hinges on effort — or rather, "common ef/ fort," the broken line that anchors the stanza. With this broken and aborted line break we encounter a threshold between MacLeish's impulse to proceed in metrical time or capitulate to semantic cohesion; or in other words, a threshold between poetic thinking and public responsibility.

Small aberrations of form and sense run through MacLeish's preambles. In isolation they might appear as little more than quirks: elective constraints the poet assumed in private. Yet when you aggregate and consider them as composite parts of something larger, they adduce not only the common expressive project of achieving something like a poem's mixture of meaning and sense, but also a way of thinking about others that is demanded by poetry. For this reason, the dichotomy between "poetry" and poems drawn by Izenberg becomes an especially apt way of

[50] MacLeish, "Preamble," 1.

deriving meaning from the formal ambiguity of the poem/preamble. Rather than assume the text is a poem, we might more accurately and fruitfully take it up as the material deposit of "poetry in the general sense," as evidence, that is, of a faculty acting to express or ground some fundamental aspect of being human.[51]

To compose a poem is to think in terms of others who cannot be identified or defined. In the difference between "common ef/fort" and "common effort," we see how words to be signified ("common effort") become a sound to be communicated ("common ef/fort"), and, in turn, how an idea to be declared (universal human value) becomes a concept to be grounded in the act of poetic making. Importance accrues to the poem/preamble as a disturbance or disruption in thinking (ours and MacLeish's) about how to imagine what a value-bearing human is and can do. The poem/preamble marks an aberration of *poesis* into the history of human rights, interrupting the administrative and procedural flow of postwar reconstruction that helps reframe our sense of imagining and articulating human value without exceptions.

WHAT IS MAN?

I've been exploring how MacLeish's preambles to the UNC comprised an attempt to reshape the philosophy of the declaration of rights from the inside, while necessarily and circumstantially keeping within the preamble form. The poetry that MacLeish produced during the years to follow more directly reveals the inadequacy of the declaration to announce and ground absolute human value fully. Before I turn to that poetry, let me briefly trace MacLeish's career through the immediate years of the postwar.

[51] Izenberg, *Being Numerous*, 2.

At war's end, human rights and the "human person" triumphed. Smuts's preamble was ratified with minimal edits, and few, save W.E.B Du Bois, found any reason to object to the fact that one of the century's foremost racists headed the drive for human rights. Amidst the fanfare, MacLeish's discontent might have appeared to put him on the wrong side of history. But the immediate postwar decades proved inhospitable to human rights as a moral or political ideal. As the UN and UNESCO started ambitious and large-scale projects to address the question, "What is a human?" many of the period's writers and intellectuals repudiated the idea that such questions should be left up to institutions. To be sure, countless writers and intellectuals addressed the question of fundamental anthropology at midcentury. But scarce few took up the problem of human rights until the 1970s. By the early 1950s, Eliot, among the era's most important writers and moralists, could lambast human rights as erstwhile "verbiage" used "during the war as moral stimulant."[52] On a similar note, the influential cultural critic, Dwight Macdonald, cast efforts to draft an international bill of human rights as the naive work of "global backwoodsmen."[53] Search the premier literary journals of the period, on both sides of the Atlantic, and one seldom encounters evidence of a "human rights revolution," beyond Arendt's bracing and foundational critiques.[9] "No one will deny that the discussion of poetry is one of the highest proofs of civilization that a society can give," wrote a critic in the *Partisan Review* in 1945 (Schwartz 50); one would have been hard pressed to find the same said about human rights.

In the early postwar years, MacLeish worked as the principal conduit between UNESCO and the new UNCHR. In June 1947, during the commission's inaugural planning sessions in Lake Success, New York, MacLeish attended the meetings as UNESCO's official representative, tasked with gathering data for the organization's 1948 landmark study, "Human Rights:

[52] T.S. Eliot, "Introduction" in Simone Weil, *The Need for Roots* (London: Routledge, 1997), 12.
[53] Dwight Macdonald, "Henry Wallace." *Politics* (May-June 1942), 99.

Comments and Interpretations." Since little attention was paid to the actual substance of human rights during the founding of the UN, the human rights commission was convened to establish the meaning and foundation of universal human rights. During his two weeks attending the commission, MacLeish witnessed what historians of human rights consider to be among the most protean and contentious of the sessions. Looming was the question of anthropological universalism. For the Lebanese delegate, Charles Malik, a Catholic philosopher and a partisan of Maritain's Thomist philosophy, the clear purpose of the commission was to define the human. "The Bill of Rights," Malik later announced, "must define the nature and essence of man… It will, in essence, be an answer to the question: What is man? It will be the United Nations' answer to this question."[54] By many accounts Malik's prescriptive agenda and emphasis on fundamental anthropology set the tone for the Lake Success sessions. As the Canadian delegate John Humphrey recounted, Malik "believed in natural law" and felt his "chosen philosophy provided the answers to most, if not all, questions, and his thinking was apt to carry him to rigid conclusions."[55] In Malik's narrow terms, human rights were rights to a private sphere of being unmolested by collective life, or "the tyranny of the state and the tyranny of systems."[56]

Although Malik's vision of human rights found abundant expression across the articles of the UDHR, it did not go uncontested. On the opening day of the commission, the Chinese delegate, P. C. Chang, wondered if the very terms of the commission's focus shouldn't be rethought. "Are we not speaking of obligations and the experience of man?" Chang asked,

[54] Charles Malik, "Speeches and Writings," in *Ambassador Charles Malik and the Universal Declaration of Human Right* n.d. Web.
[55] John Peter Humphrey, *Human Rights and the United Nations: A Great Adventure* (New York: Transnational Publishers, 1984), 209.
[56] Malik, "Speeches," 8.

suggesting, "Rights without obligations is tyranny. Obligations without rights is tyranny."[57] Chang, a student of Dewey, held a view of human life much closer to MacLeish's, whose language of the "common" also echoed Dewey. Contrary to Malik's faith in a single human nature, Chang's philosophy of humanness was fundamentally pluralist, blending pragmatism and Confucianism out of which came a keen emphasis on social contingency, education, and human plurality as the prerequisites for living the ideal of human rights.

According to historian Lydia Liu, Chang worked diligently, though unsuccessfully, during the later drafting sessions of the UDHR to translate and include the written character 仁 (*ren*)—which combines the character 人 (human) and 二 (the number "two"). While Chang suggested a transliteration of 仁 (*ren*) as "two-mindedness," the final drafters settled on the thoroughly inadequate estimation of "reason and conscience" ("Shadow" 412). MacLeish's preambles had pursued a philosophy very similar to Chang's. Much like his "common man" defined as "you + I + him + her," Chang's notion of 仁 (*ren*) imagines a humanness irreducible to the "dignity" of a singular being. In their own ways, Chang and MacLeish had sought pragmatist alternatives to the principles of Christian natural law, and each had ultimately failed. There must then have been a tinge of irony for MacLeish when Eleanor Roosevelt called on him to draft the final preamble to the UDHR. In a letter passed over in all major histories of the UDHR's drafting, she wrote:

> The preamble to the Human Rights Declaration was based on three drafts French, British, and United States–with a few extra ideas and phrases thrown in. On behalf of the United States, we had withdrawn

[57] "Minutes of United Nations Human Rights Commission." Subject file box 20. Folder "UNHRC" Charles Malik Papers. Lib. of Cong., Washington DC, 65.

> our previous draft and put in the one you sent me (after a certain amount of editing, relating only to the substantive elements). I do not know how pleased or shocked you will be with the compromise results; but I do thank you for the very real contribution.[58]

RIDDLES AND PERPLEXITIES

Along with his work on the UDHR, 1948 saw MacLeish officially return to poetry with the publication of *Actfive and other Poems*, after nearly a decade of silence. "Actfive," the long title poem, is a mock epic in three acts in which he returns to the form and themes of interwar modernism, however ironically. The poem, as previously noted, was actually begun during the founding of the UN in 1945, while MacLeish worked on the preamble to the charter. The first iteration of the poem is found on a piece of scrap paper located amongst his papers from the San Francisco conference. In this initial draft we can see in the upper left corner the poem's guiding apostrophe, "who is the hero?"

Figure 7. First Undated Draft Fragment of MacLeish's "Actfive." Courtesy of the Library of Congress Manuscripts Division. Washington D.C

[58] Eleanor Roosevelt, "Letter to Archibald MacLeish," June 28th, 1945. Corresspondance box 14, Folder "R." Archibald MacLeish Papers, LOC.

Set against the ruins of World War II, "Actfive" begins after action unseen: "The Stage all Blood,"

> Whereat – the King unthroned, the God
>
> Departed with his leopards serpents
>
> Fish, and on the forestage Man
>
> Murdered, his wounds like words so many wounds (*Collected* 330).

With all sources of authority abandoned, the poem's speaker apostrophizes into the void: "who will play the hero?" Part theater and part wartime cinema-reel, the setting and atmosphere of the poem also resemble the space of the human rights commission itself (Fig. 8). To reimagine the circular boardroom at Lake Success as a theater is not difficult, especially when considering Malik's frequent oratories on the "nature and essence of man." (Was this not already the stuff of Shakespeare?) Neither is it difficult to imagine the room as blood-soaked, saturated by a recent history whose atrocious acts of violence—the concentration camps, and the Allied bombing campaigns, including Hiroshima and Nagasaki — were collectively and consensually repressed. The war had given way to endless tragic theaters, sites of helplessness and delusion in the face of fathomless inhumanity. And MacLeish may very well have imagined the UNHRC this way.

Figure 9. United Nations Commission on Human Rights. Lake Success, New York, June 1947. Courtesy of the United Nations.

While critics praised the volume's shorter lyrics, they unanimously excoriated "Actfive." Judged simply "a failure" by Hayden Carruth, the poem was largely faulted on two counts: its thematic overreach and its incoherence.[59] A review in *Time*, for instance, faulted "Actfive" for "echoing the big, pretentiously philosophical tones for which [MacLeish's] poetic equipment is essentially unsuited" ("If Autumn Ended . . ."). The *American Mercury* observed that while the poem "deals with the present critical condition of the world," its "words and phrases are so abstruse and so childishly punctuated that the poem reads like gibberish." Selden Rodman, in turn, found the poem "a curious spectacle," noting both "genuine alarm" and surprise at "this frantic wringing of the hands, this gall of disillusionment . . . coming from the once-sanguine MacLeish" (63). "Actfive" left Rodman less "shocked by our postwar world than by the emotional instability of its prophets" (65). "Gibberish," "disillusionment," and "emotional instability" strike one as odd assessments of a poet who had so recently been called upon to work on, indeed to *clarify*, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. But the discord is illuminating. For the previous decade to have read or heard him was greatly to have encountered the sanitized propaganda of the American Warfare State. Yet now, with the war won, he saw the world "Abandoned by guardians and gods" (*Collected* 340).

In the conference room at Lake Success, MacLeish had heard heated debates over the relative merits of rights and duties. Echoing these, "Actfive" begins by asking to whom or to what do we owe the duty by which a corresponding right will be ensured. The epigraph poses the question as a kind of riddle:

[59] Hayden Caruth, Rev. *Active and Other Poems,* by Archibald MacLeish. *Poetry* (June 1948),

> With no one to whom the duty could be owed and still to owe the
> duty — no one here or elsewhere: even the noble image of ourselves
> in which we trusted broken and destroyed. (330).

MacLeish's prefatory riddle is a sort of declaration of its own. A duty is categorically owed, but a duty to nothing or no one. In this way, his question reimagines the form and philosophy of the preamble in general, and the human rights preamble in particular, by replacing coherence with obscurity. Preambles by nature rest on tautology—their generic marker is the use of the conjunction "whereas," denoting a given fact. And while preambles deal in tautology, human rights preambles work in the tautology of the human. They assume that we know what a human is.

By contrast, riddles traffic in obscurity. If preambles articulate the "self-evident," riddles make strange and defamiliarize what cannot rise to self-evidence. As Daniel Tiffany observes, the difficulty and incoherence of riddles (themselves one of the oldest forms of poetry) connect historically to poetry's "obscurity effects": "Rather than being the principal impediment to poetry's social relevance," he reasons, "obscurity effects" are an active though repressed aspect of poetry's contribution to sociological knowledge.[60] If we take poetry's "obscurity effect" as part of its claim to social utility, then cultivating obscurity and striving for legibility are not opposing actions per se but dichotomous and potentially complimentary forms of knowledge production. Every preamble may need its riddle or poem, since poetic obscurity and preambular tautology provoke very different courses of thought when turned toward the same burden of articulation. If preambles announce inclusion and coherence, poetic obscurity cultivates semantic and even social disruption while enjoining us to attune ourselves and to value what is excluded

[60] Daniel Tiffany, *Infidel Poetics: Riddles, Nightlife, Substance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 16.

from plain view or uncritical thought. Riddles and poetic obscurity strategically mobilize opacity, oriented toward provoking attention to the excluded, marginalized, difficult, dark, and incoherent aspects of language, knowledge, and social life.

The epistemological value of cultivated obscurity is one way that MacLeish used "Actfive" to lodge his claims against the official institutional discourses that occasioned the poem. While declarations of human rights frame their object as an inalienable truth, poetic obscurity renders the world momentarily unrecognizable, placing its lesson beyond the pale of rational, inherited thought or feeling. In *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951), Arendt launched the first sustained critique of human rights by taking as her subject the "perplexities of the rights of man" (306). World War II and the Holocaust had thrown the absolute vulnerability of the "mere human being" into stark relief.[61] Refusing to ignore the disjuncture between human and citizen, the most productive critical work in the Arendtian tradition has addressed such knotty contradictions and critical impasses. "Human rights have only paradoxes to offer," writes Costas Douzinas, the "paradoxical, the aporetic, the contradictory are not peripheral distractions awaiting to be ironed out by the theorist. Paradox is the organizing principle of human rights."[62] Yet facing up to the deep perplexities of human rights neither makes achieving them impossible or pursuing them foolhardy. Along these lines, the political scientist Ayten Gündoğdu rightly surmises that the riddle of human rights will not be definitively solved, due to the plurality of human life and the unpredictability of historical forces. "The task," however, "is neither to provide the discourse of human rights with a coherence that it originally lacked nor to call on alternative emancipatory languages. . . . It is instead to come to grips with the perplexities of

[61] Peg Birmingham, *Hannah Arendt and Human Rights* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 2006), 95.
[62] Costas Douzinas, *Human Rights and Empire: The Political Philosophy of Empire* (London: Routledge, 2007), 16.

human rights for the purposes of rethinking these rights in response to challenging problems of rightlessness."[63] In this sense, riddles and paradoxes provoke live critical thinking occasioned by the challenges that rightlessness poses.

THE SHAPE OF FLESH AND BONE

In "Actfive" the redeeming "hero" raises paradox to an epistemology, even a philosophical anthropology. Not or not-yet human, the "hero" of "Actfive" is a "shape," the "shape of flesh and bone" (405). In contrast to the "dignity" of the "human person, "flesh and bone" invoke the sublime and the abject. For instance, at different moments the "flesh and bone" are beaten and brutalized, yet they remain a conspicuously unsentimental object. Their formlessness renders them unreceptive to sympathy or pity. Without the features and contours necessary for human expression, the mute "shape" appears to lack all humanity. In a way, the recursive apostrophe, "who will play the hero?", proves to be a catachresis, invoking a too fully humanized or anthropomorphized "hero." It hence becomes part of the ongoing riddle of "Actfive" that we ask after the ontology and substance of the "hero": Is it singular or plural? Dead or alive? Human or nonhuman? How can one owe a duty to a thing that seems less than alive? And how can one's rights be guaranteed through a duty to a mere shape?

While a formless "hero" seems abstract, an obligation to face the reality of a life beyond the human was very real in 1948. In "Actfive" we are told that the speaker is situated "Years afterwards in peace and better times." Yet hanging over the postwar moment is the specter of

[63] Ayten Gundogdu, *Rightlessness in an Age of Rights: Hannah Arendt and the Contemporary Struggles of Migrants* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 159.

"The huge injustice: the intolerable wrong" wherein "Multitudes mingled together in one death."

> Death–camp cities where beneath the night
>
> The faceless figures wander without names
>
> Fenced by the barbed and icy stars, and stare
>
> Beyond them at the memory of their lives:
>
> Vastness overwhelming all with its ignorance![64]

Very few writers, and fewer poets, in the US had come near the topic of the Nazi concentration camps in 1948. Indeed, consciousness of the Holocaust and support for the veracity of victims' claims were shockingly scarce at the time. Nor was sympathy for the living or dead readily expressed; in 1945, General George Patton characterized Jewish displaced persons as "lower than animals . . . sub-human species. By 1948, Arendt observed that evidence of the Holocaust was met "everywhere with the skeptical shrug that greets ineffectual propaganda." "Despite overwhelming proofs," she avers, "anyone speaking or writing about concentration camps is still regarded as suspect."[65]

In the figure of the "flesh and bone," however, "Actfive" makes clear the importance of finding language to represent the difficult facts of life *beyond* the "human person." In turning to the camps, MacLeish makes a case for the ethical responsibility of literature to take up the job of attending to human life in all forms, especially during a period of widespread denial regarding sovereign power's capacity for dehumanization. In following an imperative to fit into language forms of life that do not ratify the discourse of human rights, MacLeish comes closest to Arendt. As Ira Katznelson has emphasized, it was above all Arendt who "pointed to the importance of

[64] Archibald MacLeish, *Collected Poems 1931-1985* (New York: Mariner Books, 1985), 399.
[65] Hannah Arendt, "The Concentration Camps." *The Partisan Review* 15.7 (July 1948), 755.

linguistic invention to find means to say what ordinarily is outside the realm of human speech."[66] Ethics hence becomes, in part, a matter of description. This ethical task often took the form of translating visual evidence into words. As Arendt noted, however, this was neither an easy nor much esteemed activity in the immediate postwar era. "To the unprejudiced observer," she wrote of images of the concentration camps, "they are just about as convincing as the pictures of mysterious substances taken at spiritualist séances."[67] Not only did early postwar publics not want to dwell on images of the Holocaust, but, more importantly, this natural aversion was also transmuted into forms of disavowal. MacLeish and Arendt undertook to create a kind of realism of the unreal, an attempt to turn ectoplasm into "flesh and bone."

Clearly drawing on photographs of the newly liberated camps, MacLeish imagined "death camp cities" where "multitudes mingled together in on death" closely resembles what Arendt, after encountering a photo of the camps, deemed "the image of hell":

> They all died together, the young and the old, the weak and the strong, the sick and the healthy; not as people, not as men and women, children and adults, boys and girls, not as good and bad, beautiful and ugly – but brought down to the lowest common denominator of organic life itself, plunged into the darkest and deepest abyss of primal equality, like cattle, like matter, like things that had neither body or soul, nor even physiognomy upon which death could stamp its seal.[68]

[66] Ira Katznelson, *Desolation and Enlightenment* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 19.
[67] Arendt, "The Concentration Camps," 361.
[68] Arendt, *Origins*, 302.

What Arendt mines from the image of the concentration camps is an inverse course of development as that elaborated in the bildungsroman that Slaughter discusses in his literary genealogy of the "human person." Where in the latter, the person becomes a subject of rights through the normative growth of human qualities, Arendt's meditation plots a devolving trajectory from "man" to "matter," from the recognition of human qualities to the "lowest common denominator of organic life." The logic of legibility remains the same, however. Just as human rights are made legible in narratives of development, only in the destitute state of "primal equality" does the human come to be defined by the human rights they possess, for Arendt. Her critique of the discourse of human rights is predicated on its denial of this stark biopolitical reality: that, if formulated as natural rights, human rights are the rights of those with no rights at all. In other words, human rights "coincide with the instant when a person becomes a human being in general – without profession, without citizenship, without an opinion, without a deed by which to identify and specify himself."[69]

Arendt was nonetheless resolute that a system of recognition and protection for *all* humans should be the vital pursuit of philosophy and politics. She imagined this system as a "new law on earth" securing "the right to have rights." Such rights were what was absent from the UDHR and an enumerative definition of the human, which, in cataloguing the positive traits and eternal possessions of the "human person," will leave as their outside "the abstract nakedness" of being human. Because of its abstract nature, the "nakedness" of human life was beyond existing legal and political frameworks. Yet as Werner Hamacher notes, "this mere existence is the only source of law for the right to rights, in Arendt's well known formulation."[70] For Hamacher, "the right to have rights is a *privi-legium* in the strictest sense, a prelegal premise,

[69] Ibid., 90, 302, 304, 306.
[70] Werner Hamacher, "The Right to Have Rights (Four-and-a-half Remarks)." *South Atlantic Quarterly* 103 2/3 (2003), 349.

a proto-right, in which it is left open, *what* a human may be, *who* a human may be."[71] Attempts to determine the characteristics of the subject of rights would "resist the right to have rights" as "every given determination of man breaks with his right of belonging to humanity, because only the humanity and humaneness that are *not yet given* would be able to determine what or who a human is" Paradoxically, Arendt's "right to have rights" can be extended only to the "not-yet human," every predetermination of what or who a human is bars them from these fundamental rights to have rights.[72]

Understandably, it is the specific nature of this "not yet" or "not yet given" that has troubled scholars in concretizing Arendt's views on human rights. If the concreteness of the human is always deferred, then how can a stable definition of humanity be attained? According to Seyla Benhabib, "by withholding a philosophical engagement with the justification of human rights . . . Arendt also leaves us with a disquiet about the normative foundations of her own political philosophy."[73] Yet neither humanity nor human rights rests, for Arendt, on a stable foundation. To the contrary, both are open to and contingent on the event of "natality" and the "startling unexpectedness" that it introduces into the world of human action.[74] In Arendt's account of the "human condition," natality represents the beginning (*arche*) and basic principle of humanity: "What saves the act of beginning from its own arbitrariness is that it carries its own principle within itself or, to be more precise, that beginning and principle, *principium* and principle, are not only related to each other, but are coeval. . . . For the Greek word for beginning

---

[71] Ibid., 353.
[72] For Arendt's previous critiques of human rights, see "The Concentration Camps" (1948) and "The Rights of Man: What are They?" *Modern Review* 3.1 (1949): 24-37.

[73] Seyla Benhabib, *The Reluctant Modenism of Hannah Arendt* (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publishing, 1996), 83.
[74] Arendt, *Human*, 178.

is *arche,* and *arche* means both beginning and principle."[75] But while natality is both the beginning and defining principle of human freedom, it can never "explain what we are or answer the question of who we are for the simple reason that [it] can never condition us absolutely." As Peg Birmingham observes, the "who" of Arendt's subject of rights "does not possess an enduring fixed nature but is instead inherently marked by contingency and unpredictability," which are the only features of the human that "provide an ontological foundation for human rights."[76] How may we figure a rights bearing entity that is neither a "what" nor a "who"? Perhaps as a "shape."

THE POETICS OF THE HUMAN

Like MacLeish's "Actfive," Arendt's philosophy of natality hinges on the "startling unexpectedness" of her own unnamed and unformed "hero." The unpredictable shape of each human born into the world, in Arendt's terms, is "the miracle that saves the world."[77] For both MacLeish and Arendt, an ethics and politics of human rights will turn on the deferral of "who" or "what" a human can be. It is axiomatic then that "shape" acts both as a noun and a verb in "Actfive," often with ambiguous simultaneity. "Shape" is both an undetermined form of life as well as form-giving action: "There what flesh and bone attend / Shapes the world that shapes its end (*Collected* 401). Together, the "shape of flesh and bone" and the act of shaping itself represent a twinned *principium*—both imply and mark a beginning, and a beginning without a fixed course or end. Since Plato's quarrel with the poets, the idea of the poet as shaping, rather than creating, has been fundamental to distinctions between idealist philosophy and literature.

[75] Hannah Ardent, *On Revolution* (New York: Penguin, 2003), 212.
[76] Arendt, *Human,* 11, 12.
[77] Ibid., 92.

"The poet is a shaper who shapes forms," Stanthis Gourgouris asserts, "but for Plato, shaping forms is, in the last instance, inevitably misshaping, de-forming, hence his alarm about the poet as a shaper who transforms morals."[78] As a shaper, the poet opposes Plato's philosopher who instead seeks stability within invariable truths and forms: "Plato's concern is warranted from the standpoint of what will become the philosophical (and later, theological) desire to harness an unalterable, inalienable truth" (8). We see this ancient opposition to idealism in the myriad valences of "shape" in "Actfive." For to "shape" also invokes *poesis*, advocating an understanding of poetry as forming, rather than conforming to, higher laws.

> Where the word alone is left,
> Hard and secret as a shell
> That the grinding sea has ground,
>
> There what flesh and bone believe
> Shapes the world that whirls them round! (403).

Here shaping will entail, foremost, the tool of language: the "word alone." "[G]round" down to its bare rudiments, the "word" rebuilds the "world" by shaping what is already roiled in the process of material and historical flux. Both shaped by and shaping its environment, the "flesh and bone" figure an endless openness grounded in the faculty of action and speech.

Through the many valences of the "shape of flesh and bone," MacLeish makes tangible in language an image of humanness as an autopoetic and self-creating force. Following through with this logic means turning away from the human as a universal category in order to fully acknowledge both the untoward facts of dehumanization as well as the positive and poetic

[78] Stathis Gourgouris, *Lessons in Secular Criticism.* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013).

dimension of becoming a human that has never been before. It is the constitutive lack of concrete form that lends the "shape of flesh and bone" its transformative, or simply formative, power. Its resistances to being contoured to the image of "Man" or the "person" allows "the shape of flesh and bone" to realize a potentially endless capacity to give form to history, the world, the future. Hence, by withstanding definitive form itself, MacLeish's patently unsentimental "hero" holds out its specific purchase and promise: the potential to take an unexpected form rather than itself being shaped by preexisting categories of value and identity.

Some of the most stringent critics of human rights today agree that their potential lies in a capacity to be reshaped. Rather than hold to the UDHR as a culturally and historically invariant trove of self-evident truths, global publics and human rights organizations must be especially attuned to calls for amendment and rearticulation. "No human rights are self-evident," James Tully says in his 2012 Oxford Amnesty Lecture, "dialogue, negotiations, interpretation, contestation and revision emerge around human rights and continue forever. . . . Human rights gain their authority from being open to the reflective and critical enquiry and testing of the persons and peoples who hold them."[79] Tully's radically open vision of human rights demonstrates just how far the discourse has traveled since the human rights commission first met in 1947. To speak today of the "nature and essence of man," or of the grounds of human rights in a "Supreme being" or a "Lord of history" as Malik once did, seems not only atavistic but even in breach of the democratic principles of human rights. No longer the possessions of the "human person," human rights are increasingly claimed as a nexus of agency, tools to be used, abandoned, shaped, and reshaped. Seeing poetry as an escape from rather than a vehicle for

[79] James Tully, "Rethinking Human Rights and Enlightenment: A View from the Twenty-First Century." In Kate E. Tunstall ed. *Self Evident Truths: Human Rights and the Enlightenment* (London: Bloomsbury, 2011), 15.

bestowing upon us an “inalienable truth” thus enables a poetics of the human ever more crucial to the survival of human rights today.

CHAPTER TWO

THE REFUGEE

"When this ghastly war ends," Franklin Roosevelt speculated in 1939, "there may not be one million, but ten million or twenty million men, women, and children belonging to many races who will enter into the wide picture — the problem of the human refugee."[1] Yet when the war did end, the problem of the "human refugee" proved far greater than Roosevelt could have imagined. When the allied powers assembled in San Francisco in 1944 to found the United Nations, the world's refugee population was hovering at a staggering figure of 150 million, around 7.6% of the world's population.[2] Declaring universal human rights while millions of humans were stateless and rightless appeared to some observers as a grave hypocrisy. This was the opinion levied by Hannah Arendt, herself a refugee, as she eyed the founding the UN and the development of the UDHR. If MacLeish was the American insider, struggling with his hopes and doubts for human rights from within the halls of power, Arendt was the German refugee outsider, listening with a mixture of skepticism and anticipation to the rumblings about universal rights in San Francisco, Paris, and New York. Following the ratification of the UDHR, Arendt famously responded by lauding its "best-intentioned humanitarian attempts," but finally bemoaning the declaration's "lack of reality."[3] In levying her criticism, however, Arendt did not strictly take issue with the quest for a "new universalism." To the contrary, as she wrote less than a year after her initial remarks about the UN's declaration: "human dignity needs a new

[1] Quoted in "Long Range Plan for Refugee Care," *New York Times,* October 18, 1939. New York Times, 1939.
[2] Peter Gatrell, *The Making of the Modern Refugee* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 3.
[3] Hannah Arendt, "'The Rights of Man;' What are They" *Modern Review* 3, no. 1 (1949), 29.

guarantee…a new law on earth, whose validity this time must comprehend the whole of humanity."[4] Yet as Arendt saw it, in falling back on the principle of natural rights, the framers of the UDHR had failed to ground human rights in principles that where attentive and adequate to the "whole of humanity." The existence and realities of millions of stateless and rightless refugees left the "nations of the world with an inescapable and perplexing question: whether or not there really exist such 'human rights'"[5]

While the previous chapter offered the history of a single "legislator" as a case study in the way the perplexities of human rights were navigated in the task of *declaring* human rights, the pages that follow move into the heart of those perplexities as they were lived by the stateless and the rightless. From her very first essays in English, Arendt ascribed a radical existential and political novelty to the condition of statelessness.[6] Statelessness was perplexing to the project of human rights at mid-century because it was new, and being new it evaded inherited ideas about social life and human security. One objective of this chapter is to consider how this novel condition was imagined and represented by the first generation that experienced it. The first sections assemble an archive of refugee writing, which spans work by Arendt and her friends and interlocutors, including Bertolt Brecht, Arthur Koestler, and Walter Benjamin, as well as other writers who experienced displacement and took statelessness as their subject, such as Anna Seghers and B. Traven. This micro-canon of largely transnational literary and theoretical texts I call the *early literature of statelessness*. Strangely, early writings by and about the stateless have very rarely been read together as a genre. I read these texts as sources of active intelligence and

[4] Arendt, *Origins*, *ix*.
[5] Arendt, "Rights of Man," 35.
[6] Arendt's early ideas about statelessness can be found in Hannah Arendt, "'The Rights of Man;' What are They" *Modern Review* 3, no. 1 (1949): 25–37, Hannah Arendt, "The Stateless Peoples." *Contemporary Jewish Record* 8, no.2 (April 1945): 137-153, Hannah Arendt, "We Refugees." In *The Jewish Writings,* edited by Jerome Kohn and Ron H. Feldman, 264-274 (New York: Shocken Books, 2007).

inquiry into the dynamics of statelessness and the perplexities of human rights: these texts address directly what human rights are, are not, and what they must become. In paying attention to the way forms and genres organized themselves around the perplexities of human rights we can acquire further insight into those perplexities and gain purchase on how to work through them.

In *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Arendt concluded that the stateless human lost not only a nation or home but also "the entire social texture into which they were born and in which they established for themselves a distinct place in the world."[7] While *Origins* was largely a diagnostic and genealogical work, identifying both what had been lost and how, Arendt's later masterpiece, *The Human Condition* (1958), laid out a philosophy of human labor, work, and action, which detailed how the distinctly human world, or what Arendt calls the "common world," comes into being and therefore also how it can be reconstructed and regained. The "common world" is a shared space that humans help bring into being, and where humans can act and be recognized for their distinct qualities.[8] Although the *Human Condition* does not directly address statelessness or human rights, it focuses on how to build or rebuild the "common world" that has been lost by refugees, and where human rights are made possible. Specifically, it elaborates on the conditions that make life "specifically human," a life "full of events which ultimately can be told as a story" and "establish a biography."[9] The first sections of this chapter explore how the loss of rights and a common world were imagined. Later sections consider how refugee writers and refugee workers imagined the process of rebuilding the "common world" and reclaiming human rights.

[7] Arendt, *Origins,* 293.
[8] Arendt, *Human,* 6-24.
[9] Ibid., 96-97.

In these later sections I am interested in how the specific experience of refugee writers' generated ideas about what human rights are and how they can be attained and protected. To get at this idea, I also look at the refugee writer as a subject of institutional action. Here, I move outward from specific literary texts into the history and institutional archive of PEN International. At first glance, PEN, the world's largest writer's organization, might appear a strange institution to include in the history of the refugee. PEN was founded in London in 1921 as a cosmopolitan dinner club, devoted to cultivating "hospitable friendliness between writers, in their own countries, and with the writers of all other countries."[10] Yet with the coming of World War II, PEN's mandate was dramatically transformed by refugee writers whose expulsion from community disintegrated the possibilities and conditions of literary creation and exchange. Without language, publics, and even the material resources of writing (paper, typewriters, and ribbon), the writer's capacity for contributing to the world was nearly extinguished. Even if humanitarian aid succeeded in keeping these refugees alive, their loss of the material and social necessities of narration seemed to strip them of the dignity and capacities of human life. As PEN responded to the needs of refugee writers, it also rethought the realities of the universal humanism it once stood for. Rather than abandon it, it rethought humanism from the perspective of the refugee. The result was the emergence of PEN as we know it today: a global human rights and humanitarian NGO.

[10] PEN Charter 1922, Series III.,Box 3, Folder 3:10-11: Charters 1-11. PEN Archive, HRC.

IMAGINING STATELESSNESS

> *In any civilized country he who has no passport is nobody. He does not exist for us or for anybody else.*
>
> B. Traven, *The Death Ship* (1926).

If a single idea has attached to the condition of statelessness since Arendt it is this: statelessness persistently evades thought. "Apparently nobody *wants to know*," Arendt wrote in 1943, in her deeply acerbic and personal essay, "We Refugees," "that contemporary history has created a new kind of human beings."[11] This resistance to confronting the realities of statelessness, whether the resistance is affective or ideological, represents a principle beam supporting the ongoing perplexities of human rights.[12] The unthinkability of the rightless and the stateless is the intellectual and political bedrock on which the project of human rights, at its broadest and most universal, continuously founders. What I aim to do in the next two sections is go back to the period of the modern refugee's emergence — the time of the invention of statelessness through the practices of population politics that followed on World War I. If statelessness evades thinking, then how, I ask, was it first represented and imagined. I trace the emergence of the refugee through literary writings, novels, essays, and memoirs. While many of the works I read uphold a view of statelessness as radically new and beyond present boundaries of thought, the form of the literary works themselves comprise active efforts to think what was unthinkable. These works can thus be read dialectically as the terrain of the concept's emergence. Put another way: the aesthetic objects I assemble here represent the process of statelessness being made into knowledge, even if that knowledge was immediately suppressed or

[11] Arendt "We Refugees," 264.
[12] Gündoğdu, *Rightlessness in an Age of Rights,* 25-42. Zygmut Bauman, "Humanity on the Move." In *Liquid Times: Living in an Age of Uncertainty* (London: Polity, 2007) 19-45.

forgotten, or if, coming as it does in fictions and literary fragments, it has not been given its rightful place in the history of human rights.

In turning to the early literary imagination of statelessness as a means of theorizing human rights, it is important that I am in some ways following the lead left unfinished by Arendt in her literary criticism. Scholarship on Arendt's vision of human rights (positive or negative) has focused on *Origins* and, to a lesser extent, *The Human Condition*. But she seems to have first glimpsed new possibilities for human rights in a novel: Franz Kafka's unfinished *The Castle* (1926). Arendt was probably the first (though certainly not the last) to read Kafka's protagonist K as a kind of proto refugee. In an essay on German Jewish writers, "The Jew as Pariah" (1944), she suggests that Kafka had early foreseen the full implications of statelessness, wherein any human being, deprived of a nation and a "common world," could be made into a "nobody."[13] Whereas the state of being a rightless pariah had previously befallen Jews, Kafka, by making his protagonists only ambiguously Jewish, showed that anybody could be ejected from "ranks of humanity" simply by dint of being made subject to the arbitrary power of law.[14] What in the nineteenth-century was a reality for Jews assumes in "Kafka's treatment" "a significance for the whole problem of mankind." While other Jewish writers chose to ignore this reality by writing characters that integrate into European society, Kafka's characters remain perennial outsiders, unable or unwilling to submit to the power of sovereignty and the rights it dispenses.[15] In doing so, however, they brought into relief the possibility of rights outside of, prior to, or beyond sovereign recognition and incorporation. This, at least, was how Arendt saw it.

Reading Kafka as a utopian author of universal rights is, to say the least, idiosyncratic.

---

[13] Arendt, "The Jew as Pariah," 283.
[14] Arendt "The Jew as Pariah," 280, 283, 290.
[15] Arendt's principle examples of Jewish writers who sought integration are Heinrich Heine and Stefan Zweig.

Yet nowhere did the philosopher speak more affirmatively of human rights than in her reading of *The Castle* as an allegorical tale about statelessness. Arendt's reading of *The Castle* can be quickly summarized. Having been summoned to the Castle, K only desires "a home, a position, real work to do," to "become a member of the community" — desires that Arendt refers to, at numerous points, as K's "basic human rights."[16] But the Castle rebuffs his claims for human rights; he is told: "You are not of the Castle and you are not of the village, you are nothing at all" Eventually, though, an official from the Castle offers K residency, recognition, and rights, but he does so only as a personal favor. K however cannot accept it as a favor and rejects the offer. Arendt equates the favor with the "divine authority" of the Castle, which "grants rights only as either favors or as privileges." She then reads the final pivot of the novel dialectically: K's refusal to accept rights from the Castle as an exception intimates that another form of rights exist, or should exist. These are the rights that K seeks: "a home, a position, real work to do." These rights, at least as Arendt sees them, would hinge only on the recognition and valuation of K's humanness: "Just because he seeks nothing more than his minimal human rights" he refuses to "regard his normal human rights as privileges bestowed by the 'powers that be.'" By refusing to accept his human rights as an exception, K both contests and advocates for their universality. K dies alone in the village, having gained neither entry into the Castle nor acceptance by the villagers; Kafka too would die before completing the novel. Nevertheless, Arendt reads K as a hero, who opens the villagers' (and readers') eyes to the injustice of being denied one's fundamental human rights. "In his insistence on human rights, the stranger (K) reveals himself to be the only one who still grasps, quite simply, what human life on earth is all about."[17]

[16] Arendt, "Jew as Pariah," 286.
[17] Ibid., 289, 290, 292

We are not accustomed to hearing Arendt speak so positively of human rights. And I do not intend here to hold her to her word and argue (against many commenters) that she was in fact an earnest believer in the reality of human rights. Rather, my interest lies in the question of why Arendt was led to envision human rights so *positively* in the ur-Kafkaesque scene of the man denied rights before the law. For if Kafka's fiction moved Arendt to think of human rights as a reality, indeed, as "what human life on earth is all about," then we might fruitfully look for some insight into the foundations of human rights (and not only their loss) in the literature of statelessness that followed in Kafka's wake.

§

In true Kafkaesque fashion, the early literature of statelessness imagines spaces where the citizen is made and unmade. Administrative departments, passport offices, humanitarian spaces, aid committees, prisons, camps, and ships are the unique environments of this literature, which vividly portrays a world of waning human rights. Here, human beings are pushed into the liminal legal and existential territory of being "undocumented" and "sans papier." If canonical modernism, with its themes of exile and alienation, is set in cultural metropolises like Paris, London, or New York, the early literature of refugee life gravitates towards the neglected outside of these cultural loci, cities like Marseille, Lisbon, or Rotterdam, where refugee populations bottleneck waiting to escape Nazi occupied Europe. In Arthur Koestler's, *The Scum of the Earth* (1942), his classic memoir of a year spent stateless and hunted by the SS and Stalin's goons, Marseille is a place where "the procession of despair went on and on, streaming through the last

open ports, Europe's gaping mouth, vomiting the contents of her poisoned stomach."[18] In Anna Seghers' semi autobiographical novel, *Transit* (1944), Marseille is a place where "armies of ragged men" just "pretending to be alive" plead and wait for "frizzy haired bureaucratic goblins" who dig out "dossiers from the walls of shelves with their little paws and red-lacquered claws" decide whether they will give you "a magic paper" on which your life depends.[19] Seghers' description suggests something else fundamental about this literature: it is set in worlds of paper. And in this sense, these early accounts of refugee life are paradigmatic scenes of modernity, in which "all that is solid melts into air:" passports are revoked or disappear, visas and transit papers expire, forgeries are purchased, everything rests on the whims of an officer. Everyone is subject to "This transit experience, this visa dance, all this consulate hocus pocus.[20]" Elsewhere, Seghers describes refugee experience as "transit sickness," capturing something of the anxiety and general state of disturbance introduced by modern population politics.

As Seghers' invocation of "magic paper" suggests, the early literature of statelessness is deeply connected to the historical appearance of the passport. Widely introduced during World War I, the passport was a wartime security measure that never went away. For Raymond Williams, this anxiety was what lay behind the forms and affects of literary modernism. The "unsettlement, homelessness, solitude…and impoverished independence" of modernism, Williams writes, was born of this period of "endless border-crossings at a time when the frontiers were starting to become much more strictly policed and when, with the First World War, the passport was instituted."[21] For all of modernism's alienated "border–crossings" though, the movement's major figures rarely confronted, directly at least, the implications of losing one's

[18] Arthur Koestler, *The Scum of the Earth* (New York: Eland Books, 2007), 232.
[19] Anna Seghers, *Transit* (New York: NYRB Classics, 2008), 101
[20] Seghers, *Transit*, 90
[21] Raymond Williams, *The Politics of* Modernism (London: Verso, 1988), 51.

legal place within the nation; this task fell to a more generically diverse literature of social and legal death.

The modern passport system is what gave new meaning to what it might feel like to be a "nobody" with nowhere to go, as in the case of Graham Greene's "whiskey priest," the protagonist of *The Power and the Glory* (1938), "a man without a passport who is turned away from every harbor."[22] One might imagine Greene's "whiskey priest" as the desperate speaker of W.H. Auden's "Refugee Blues" (1939):

> The consul banged the table and said,
>
> "If you've got no passport you're officially dead:"
>
> But we are still alive, my dear, but we are still alive.
>
> Went to a committee; they offered me a chair;
>
> Asked me politely to return next year:
>
> But where shall we go to-day, my dear, but where shall we go to-day[23]

For the generation first bearing witness to the refugee crisis in the 1930s and 1940s, the setting and scene of legal annihilation offered perhaps the most explicit way of addressing the perplexities of human rights. The passport captured the dire straits of the stateless, caught between the binary of rights bearing citizen and the "scum of the earth." The consul's stentorian

[22] Graham Greene, *The Power and the Glory* (London: Penguin, 1973), 69.
[23] W.H. Auden, *Collected Poems* (New York: Vintage, 1998), 116.

announcement, "if you've got no passport you're officially dead," invokes the nation state itself in its sovereign capacity to declare legal death. Brecht takes Auden's idea one absurdist step further in his unpublished "Refugee Conversations," written over a number of years while he was a refugee in Europe and America. Whereas Auden made the passport a synecdoche for the legal death of the person, Brecht used the passport to occasion a deeper reflection on the human condition. "The passport is the most noble part of the human being," Brecht wrote,

> It also does not come into existence in such a simple fashion as a human being does. A human being can come into the world anywhere, in the most careless way and for no good reason, but a passport never can. When it is good, the passport is also recognized for this quality, whereas a human being, no matter how good, can go unrecognized.[24]

In Brecht's telling, the human and the passport become two characters in a comic drama of recognition. He acerbically ascribes "qualities" to the passport, including the all important quality of birth or "coming into the world." Humans may "come into the world," but without a passport their human qualities will go "unrecognized." In Arendtian terms, the passport would thus herald the disappearance of the human as such, since to be human is to be judged for ones own actions and qualities. When passports take on the qualities of people, people take on the status of things. The passport reifies the human while animating the law and its material dispensation. Hence, Seghers' calls the pernicious documents that dictate refugee life "magic

[24] Bertolt Brecht, "Refugee Conversations," ufl.edu, 3.

paper," born of a period when the "whole earth was uncomfortable."[25] Indeed, as Paul Fussell notes, by the early 1920s the passport fed a sense of the "nasty dehumanization of everyone."[26]

The interwar appearance of the passport in literary narratives was a slightly late harbinger of what Arendt famously diagnosed, in a chapter of *Origins*, as the "decline of the nation state."[27] This decline is particularly discernible in the transnational grain of the literature of statelessness. With a striking consistency, the texts I look at here both depict transnational movement — what Seghers called "transit experience" — and were themselves composed and published across and between national boundaries. Seghers wrote much of *Transit* in Mexico, in German, but the novel was first published in English in New York. Koestler, initially a German language writer, but born in Hungary, wrote *The Scum of the Earth* as a stateless refugee, composed the book in English (his first work in the language), and published it shortly after release from detention in London. Drawing on their own "transit experience," refugee writers cultivated a fluid yet ominous transnational perspective — one that allowed them to animate and analyze the precarious spaces between nation states that the passport and modern population politics had brought into being.

This confluence of lived displacement and literary transnationalism is particularly notable in the case of B. Traven, author of the black comic adventure novel *The Death Ship* (1926). Traven's novel is arguably the first to take statelessness as it subject, and is certainly the first novel to use the passport as the animating (or deanimating) force of a literary narrative. And like his stateless characters, Traven lived a life between nations. Author of over thirty novels, including *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* (1929), Traven was most likely the pen name of Ret

[25]Seghers, *Transit,* 49.
[26] Paul Fussel *Abroad: British Literary Traeling Between the Wars* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), 28.
[27] Arendt, *Origins*, 288

Marut (born Otto Freige) a German army deserter, anarchist, socialist, stage actor, and impersonator. Born in 1882, in the Eastern regions of the German Empire that now belong to Poland, Traven was the product of the old multiethnic empires of Europe whose dissolution unleashed the crisis of modern statelessness.[28] Born citizen of an empire that disappeared in 1919, Traven's first encounter with modern "population politics" would have occurred at the end of the World War I, when the place of his birth shifted from a German to a Polish possession. By this time, however, Traven, a socialist and anti-capitalist agitator, had already become an "internal enemy" in the German state, rendering him all but rightless. During the short-lived declaration of the Bavarian Soviet Republic in 1918, Traven was elected press secretary of the worker's collective and later tried and sentenced to death for his activities. He escaped from Prison in Germany in 1920, and spent the next four years stateless, without a passport or legal nationality, and as a wanted political criminal. Immigration records collected from countless archives by Traven's biographers record him bouncing around Europe and the United Kingdom, unsuccessfully seeking refuge and apocryphally claiming American, British, Swiss, and Spanish citizenship, and creating varying personas and fabricated identities to do so. After finally landing in Mexico in 1924, he remained without legal citizenship until 1951. Traven was, quite literally, the Avant Garde of the stateless.

During the early 1920s, Traven bore witness to the disintegration of the European state system and its multinational empires. And *The Death Ship*, published the same year as Kafka's *The Castle*, offers a singularly unique window onto how the European refugee crisis was imagined from a transnational perspective in the decades before World War II. Written in Mexico, composed in German, and published by a socialist press in Berlin, it is a novel written

[28] See Gatrell, *Making of the Modern Refugee*, 13-29.

between nations. Collaterally, it takes as its subject the terror of being left out the nation, in a time when "the passport…and not the sun, is the center of the universe."[29] In the novel, an American sailor named Gerald Gales loses his passport and "sailor's card" while in port in France in the years following World War I. Lacking legal status, Gale wanders across the borders of Western Europe, unable even to turn himself over to the police. Gale's bathetic predicament eventually forces him to take a position on the "death ship" *Yorikke*. Yet, the *Yorikke* is less a merchant vessel than a carceral institution that conjures not only the eighteenth and nineteenth-century Atlantic slave ship but also the Nazi concentration camps. The "crew" of the *Yorikke* are "dead. Without a country. Without nationality. Without birth-certificates with which to prove that they had been born of a mother belonging to the human race. Men without passports by which to prove that they were citizens of the earth, given by the Lord to all animals and insects and all human beings" (172). Having fled Europe for Mexico in 1924, Traven, it would seem, looked back across the Atlantic to imagine Europe, still a decade away from Nazism's initial triumphs, as a massive factory of human expulsion: "Every night there is going on, at all European borders," Traven writes, "a lively exchange of unwelcome travelers. Men and women and children. The Germans kick their Jews, and their undesirable foreigners, and Bolshevists and communists and pacifists, across the Dutch, the Belgian, the French, the Polish, the Swiss, the Danish border just like nothing…. It's being done on such a great scale that it has become almost a legitimate procedure. Everybody knows it, yet nobody admits it."[30]

As perhaps the first novel of statelessness, *The Death Ship* brings us back to the issue with which this section began: the question of how statelessness was, or was not, imaginable at its inception. At times, Traven explicitly figures statelessness as an unwanted, unspeakable, and

[29] B. Traven, *The Death Ship* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 1991), 42.
[30] Traven, *The Death Ship,* 108.

unthinkable fact of modern politics. Nowhere is this more clear than in his conceptualization of the "death ship." Above the hold of the *Yorikke,* a placard reads: "he who enters here will no longer have existence" (88); and inscribed on the mast, there is a nihilistic dirge that doubles as definition of statelessness:

> He is nothing and never.
> He is too great for infinity,
> Too small for a grain of sand,
> Which, however small,
> Has its place in the universe.
> He is what has never been
> And never thought.[31]

The ominous message on the mast of the *Yorikke* dramatically describes the state of being without a state, a realm of radical human oblivion. At the same time, even as statelessness is described here as beyond thought, the entire purpose of *The Death Ship* is to rescue it from oblivion, to make it present for metabolization. We might think of the *Yorikke* as the novel's outer skeleton — its form. Inside the confines of the "death ship," all previous foundations of human value are dissolved, and the vessel (form) of the *Yorikke* collects the dust and forms it into a new edifice called statelessness. For instance, although the *Yorikke* has a "crew," it lacks a commercial enterprise or an itinerary; it follows a desultory circuit around the continents, as if to represent the abstractness of globalized space and capital without the motor of labor or exchange.

[31] Ibid., 118.

These "men with no papers had to work here. They were not asked, they were ordered. They had to work so hard, they were chased about so mercilessly, that they forgot everything that can be forgotten" and they were never paid To labor without pay is to be a slave; but to be a slave is also to possess some value, either on a market or as sources of labor power. But as if to staunch the analogy between the slave — at least as it had been previously thought — and the crew of the crew of the *Yorrikke*, we are told early on that the ship is populated by "slaves that are not bought and cannot be sold" — that is, slaves without value. Aboard the *Yorikke*, all value is extinguished from human actions, no matter how good or how bad.[32]

Across the novel, Traven repeatedly sets up scenes that have no other purpose than to dramatize the paradox of being a human without value, without rights, without even the most basic capacity for legal recognition. Having wandered across the border from France into Belgium, Gale spots the police and, rationally, he attempts to evade them out of fear of jail. The police apprehend him and ask for his identification; and after explaining his situation, they respond: "We cannot shoot you like a dog with a disease, or drown you in the sea, although I am not so sure that but sooner or later such a law will be passed in every country, above all in every civilized country."[33] They don't shoot Gale, yet nor do they arrest him. He is so beyond the pale of positive law that he doesn't register as a criminal. In the encounter between Gale and the police (which repeats with different variations in the novel) we come in many ways to the ur-Kafkaesque encounter between the human and the law. And in Traven's hands, the scene takes on the feeling of a set piece: part Kafka and part Charlie Chaplin. The helpless and hapless man before the law, Gale is the classic comedic fool who believes himself more important than he is; and the update of the gag here is Gale's utter superflousness, the absolute, unbelievable depth of

[32] Traven, *The Death Ship,* 110, 178.
[33] Ibid., 47.

his expulsion from human society. He can be "shot like a dog" but not arrested. He has become, in Arendt's terms, a "nobody," the "scum of the earth."

The procession of these scenes is, strictly, speaking, the plot of *The Death Ship*. And the comic and episodic nature of the adventure story naturalizes this rhythm. Characters do not develop, and are not expected to. There is no *bildung* and no sympathy, no progress and little feeling. When we trace history of human rights culture, the tendency has been to look to the tradition of literary sentimentalism and cultures of sympathy, or to realism and novels of development. Yet Traven's novel suggests that we might also look for alternative generic patterns. Through the repetition of a literally dehumanizing gag, *The Death Ship* suggests that imagining statelessness in the first decades of its possibility might have a generic character, since the staged quality of the scene of the stateless supplicant before the law points towards a possible generic repetition. And indeed, as we've seen, the scene repeats across the literature of statelessness in various forms, from Kafka to Brecht, Seghers, and Auden. Yet unlike the conventional fictional dynamics we associate with human rights, the purpose of these scenes is not to generate sympathetic attachments or empathy. Instead, they traffic in a comic and cognitive dissonance arising from the human losing humanity, but then *living* and *speaking* on without being reduced to the status of a suffering innocent.

§

To claim the representation of the stateless as comedic will appear somewhat counterintuitive. When we imagine stateless refugees, they appear inextricably framed, or frozen, in the humanitarian gaze: helpless, supplicating, injured and innocent. As the anthropologist of humanitarianism Didier Fassin notes, "humanitarian reason" unfolds through "the interaction

between the suffering of one and the gaze of the other" in the service of a "common humanity."[34] In turn, when we historicize human rights as the product of cultural forms, we seek out instantiations of this interplay of damaged and reconstituted humanity, most often found in forms and cultures of sentimentalism. But my claim begins to make sense if we consider that comedy is historically the genre of the low, the godless, and the ignoble. Hegel, who valued the comedy as the highest form of aesthetics, wrote that "Belief in gods, laws, and moral customs" are robbed of their validity in the comedy.[35] If the Greek epic featured mortals and gods, and tragedy called for a hero, in comedy neither the Gods nor the hero take the stage. Every value is open to condensation and laughter. "Comedy," Alenka Zupancic notes, "exposes to laughter one after another, all the figures of the universal essence and its powers (gods, morals, state institutions, universal ideas, and so on)."[36] But unlike the denouement of the tragedy, where pity reinstates some equilibrium, or the sentimental narrative, where a degraded humanity can be recuperated through moral ardor and right feeling, comedy holds fast to the damage it does to universals.

While comedy exposes inalienable truths to laughter and denigration, it does not abandon its characters to a groundless moral void. When comedy lays waste to universal ideals, "it does so," Zupancic writes, "from the standpoint of the concrete and the subjective" (69). Laughed at and denigrated, the comedic actor, stripped of the ability to claim personhood and dignity, no longer represents the universal ideals projected in epic and tragedy. But in turn, the comedic actor assumes the position of a new universal, one that is no longer grounded in a representation. The comedic actor "is a universal which is no longer (re)presented as being in action, but *is* in

[34] Didier Fassin, *Humanitarian Reason: A Moral History of the Present* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 70
[35] G.W.F Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art Volume II,* (London: Clarendon Press, 1998), 294.
[36] Alenka Zupancic, *The Odd One In* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2008), 61.

action."[37]

Of course, in the literature of statelessness, the human is the universal ideal that is opened up to laughter, and the stateless figure is the comedic actor. Whether it is the stateless sailor Gales, the desperate speaker of Auden's "Refugee Blues," Brecht's refugee conversationalists, battling for recognition with the passport, Koestler's "scum of the earth," or Seghers' refugees gripped by "transit sickness," the stateless character serves as the comedic actor human *par excellence*. They are repeatedly thwarted and scorned in their attempts to gain recognition as a human. They are cast out of society, stripped of humanity, and made to recalibrate their entire existence to a social environment where every exalted ideal of human dignity and value are subverted. The passports and sailor's cards they once held insured their status as human beings. Thus the passport arises in scene after scene as the conduit of the human, a representation (or reproduction) that doubles as the grounds of the universal. Wherever it appears (or is simply evoked) in this literature, the passport has the effect of killing the universal human, or splitting off the human from the legal person. As Brecht suggests so succinctly in his attribution of "qualities" to the passport, in order to regain the status of the human — to have one's own human qualities recognized and judged — a refugee is impelled to first gain or regain legal recognition. Without the passport, the refugee becomes, as Auden writes, "officially dead." But in these literary examples, their official death does not reduce them to a figure of humanitarian sympathy. I have already noted that while humanitarian reason adduces compassion as the means of reconstituting humanity after its denigration, comedy offers no route to reclaiming the degraded universal. In the case of the comedy of statelessness, this point becomes the crux of a

[37] Zupanic, *Odd One In,* 180.

refusal to recapitulate to the old European state system. The universalism that is held up to denigration is literarily paper-thin. It cannot be rightfully reclaimed.

To bring my discussion of comedy to a head: it is the persistent ability for the stateless, "officially dead" character to live on without the crux of compassion and sympathy that is owed to the generic conventions of comedy. The comedic opens up a narrative space, or posture, that allows the degraded, dehumanized figure to represent themselves without falling back on the identity of the supplicating innocent. Hence, for instance, Koestler (and Arendt after him) continues to self-identify as the "scum of the earth," and to speak of his fellow refugees in a wholly unsentimental and comic manner: "three hundred thousand pounds of democratic flesh, all labeled, alive, and only slightly damaged."[38] Humanity and the human do not finally appear in these works as a lost universal to be reclaimed, but as unstable categories to be reshaped from the concrete perspective of the refugee. The philosopher Jonathan Lear sees a similar dynamic at play in the philosophical discourse of the human reaching back to Socrates. To make his case, Lear cites Soren Kierkegaard on Socrates. While other Greek citizens "were perfectly sure of being human and knowing what it means to be a human being," Kierkegaard writes, "Socrates was beneath them (ironically) and occupied himself with the problem — what does it mean to be a human being…Socrates doubted that one is a human being by birth; to become human or to learn what it means to be human does not come that easily.[39] Following Socrates, Lear offers his theory of "irony" as a kind of practice — a practice of living and self-authoring in a way that questions the unstable category of the human. This practice opens a place —simply "below" — from which to interrogate the premises of those who believe humanity to be a natural possession of all human beings.

[38] Koestler, *Scum,*140.
[39] Quoted in Jonathan Lear, *The Case for Irony* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), 6.

If we accept the function of comedy to be both the discrediting (through laughter) of "universal ideals" *and* the introduction of a new universalism in the form of the comic actor, then through the various scenes of legal death that undergird the literature of statelessness, the refugee adopts the position of the universal. Yet, attributing universal status to refugees is, admittedly, not in itself a novel view. Humanitarianism, as I (and many others) have noted, does exactly this. As the anthropologist Liisa Malkki argues, refugees, when made the subject of humanitarian governance, may "stop being specific persons and become pure victims in general: universal man, universal woman." But my archive points to a very different route to the universal. Within the comedic structure of the early literature of statelessness, refugees adopt the concreteness of the universal not as victims to be rehumanized and repatriated into the "party of humanity" but as the embodiment of a resistance to the ideals of humanity that have allowed them to become stateless in the first place. The characters in this literature, many of them based on the author's own experiences, do not resolve their crises of displacement by being rescued or recognized as a humans after all (as do many contemporary accounts of refugee life). These narratives end in limbo, with the refugee living, often irreverently, into an uncertain future. Some of these narratives, most notably Brecht's "Refugee Conversations" and Kafka's *The Castle*, were not completed at all. Nearly without fail, these texts leave the refugee at the edge of the polity and without achieving personhood, even when, in the case of Brecht, or Traven, or Seghers (or Arendt for that matter) their authors reached their destination of refuge.

On this note, what is so important about Arendt's reading of *The Castle*, is that it interprets K's death in a state of limbo (neither accepted in the village nor granted legal status in the Castle) as an act of protest for his human rights. While the other refugee characters we've looked at clamber at the gates of the polity, K refuses entry because he feels the conditions of his

admittance to rest on unstable or unjust foundations. But ultimately, Kafka makes common cause with Brecht, Koestler, Seghers, and other refugee writers whose imaginative works seek precisely to illuminate the unstable foundation of citizenship and legal personhood. Each leaves their characters at the edge of personhood and citizenship as if in protest against the very basis of these constructs. Having revealed the paper-thin foundation of citizenship, the refugee on the outside adopts in some manner, the status of a new *foundation*, but a foundation for something yet to come. This is why Arendt referred to Kafka's fictions as models for the future. "Kafka's technique," she wrote, "could best be compared to the construction of models. Just as a man who wants to build a house or evaluate its stability would draw up a blueprint of the building, Kafka practically devises the blueprints of the existing world." Yet blueprints only project a semblance of the future structure. "In order to understand these models, the same power of imagination is demanded of the reader as went into creating them.… For the first time in literary history, a writer requires his readers to engage in the very same activity that upholds both him and his work." Kafka's fictions remain unformed: they are skeletons, merely "blueprints," waiting to be fully constructed through the active intervention and labor of the reader, which, Arendt writes, is "none other than the power of imagination." [40]

At the same time, while the reader is asked to "construct" Kafka's fictions, Kafka's fictions show the reader how to construct a better world. In her conclusion to "The Jew as Pariah," Arendt writes of Kafka: "Kafka envisioned a possible world that human beings would construct in which the actions of man depend on nothing but himself and his spontaneity, and in which human society is governed by laws prescribed my man himself rather than by mysterious forces, whether they be interpreted as emanating from above of from below." Just as we as

[40] Arendt, "Jew as Pariah," 287, 289.

readers are called on to construct the "models" left by Kafka through our imagination, Kafka "envisions" (imagines) a world in which "human beings would *construct*…laws prescribed by man himself rather than mysterious forces."[41] Importantly, the laws "prescribed by man himself" sound a great deal like the laws that Arendt will call for some years later in in *Origins*: a "new law on earth, whose validity this time must comprehend the whole of humanity."[42] Yet before she formulates this vision of a "new law on earth" in her social theory, Arendt gleans its conditions of possibility in the interaction between reader and text, the labor of the imagination, and the disclosures and dynamics of literary narrative and literary form, or what she calls "Kafka's technique."

When Arendt calls Kafka's fictions "models" or "blueprints" that we "construct" through the imagination and through reading, she brings out and emphasizes a point about the necessity of human action in creating the "common world." We will recall that the "common world" is both what Arendt believed was lost with statelessness as well as being the foundation for human rights. Neither the "common world" nor human rights exist before human action brings them into being — that is, before we "construct" them. Reading Kafka squarely in the middle of World War II, as a refugee, Arendt finds in his writings the staging ground for the "construction," or in the case of the stateless, the future reconstruction of the "common world" and human rights. On the level of content, Kafka's fiction envisions and anticipates human rights as the outcome of human action, a " possible world" where "human beings would construct…laws prescribed by man himself rather than mysterious forces." On the level of form, "Kafka's technique" prefigures and engenders our active construction of his text, turning his readers into actors and co-creators

[41] Arendt, "Jew As Pariah," 290.
[42] Arendt, *Origins*, xi.

in his vision for human rights. On this view, the act of reading is coterminous with the act of "constructing" the model in which the human would construct human rights.

This double action unfolds quite succinctly in *The Castle,* at least as imagined by Arendt. What is unrealized, not yet "constructed," in the novel are K's human rights. K never receives these rights in the course of the novel; and he dies without rights or recognition at the edge of the Castle, and Kafka himself died before ever completing the book. Despite, or in a sense because, of this chain of uncompleted actions, we (or Arendt's reader in 1943) step in to realize Kafka's model, to construct his blueprint and see that K's actions are a form of human rights protest. And in doing, we (or the wartime Americans she addressed) might also come to see that human rights will only be realized through ongoing actions and imaginative labors that recognize and welcome the stateless and rightless peoples who minute by minute arrive at our (their) borders asking, as Arendt wrote of K, only for "a home, a position, real work to do," to "become a member of the community."[43]

In informing her readers that their own labor of "imagination was necessary to salvage Kafka's incomplete fiction about human rights, Arendt herself imagined enlisting them — the liberal class of wartime America — as partners in a project to "construct" a "new law on earth." She hoped her readers would see K as she sees K, because to do so would have put them on the path to right thinking and action with respect to the crisis of human displacement out of which she wrote. She puts her reader — and the potential reader of Kafka — in the place of the citizen whose action will help determine not only if K's human rights are recognized and granted but also her own human rights and those of her fellow refugees.

[43] Ibid., 284.

THE HUMANISM OF THE SUITCASE

> *For thirty nights I slept with a small suitcase by my bed, ready to go to prison at any moment.*
>
> Arthur Koestler, *The Scum of the Earth* (1942)

Arendt held out Kafka's fiction as a kind of pedagogical "model" or "blueprint" to mid-century readers for achieving a solid ground for humanity and human rights. His fictions were incitements to action, and her criticism was the required response. When read together, though, the entire archive of works that I am calling the early literature of statelessness reveals itself to be engaged in the same project, displaying and tweaking the dynamics and generic features of the Kafkaesque, but uniformly holding out against the sentimental as ready-made rout to humanization. In my discussion so far, I have aimed to trace the generic character of this literature in order to answer how — at the broadest level — statelessness was imagined by the first generation subject to its violence. By resisting the narrative and affective structures of sympathy, the stateless characters in this genre are not rehumanized and redeemed, nor brought back within the ambit of humanity through the emotional pyrotechnics of the reader. Obstinately, these characters remain "the scum of the earth."

The generic character of this literature represents a countercurrent that pushes against a historical resistance to thinking the conditions of statelessness. This tradition renders statelessness thinkable but also refuses to resolve its perplexities by absorbing the refugee back into the protective enclosure of the state. This literature makes sure statelessness is thought by refusing to think it away. In continuing with my discussion of how statelessness was imagined

and thought, in the present section I want to look at a different feature of this archive. Whereas the previous section analyzed what we might call the generic aspect, here I want to flesh out a metatextual pattern: the place of literary texts within the literature of statelessness. As I see it, this pattern reveals how refugee writers theorized their own potential agency in creating new foundations for human community and human rights.

We have already looked at Anna Seghers' novel *Transit* for its representative setting in the visa offices and consulates of Marseille during the fall of France. Collated within the array of legal documents and "magic paper" that animate the narrative, there is another important textual document. In *Transit*, a suitcase saves the refugee protagonist's life. After escaping a concentration camp and fleeing to Paris, the protagonist comes into possession of a dead man's suitcase. The suitcase, it turns out, belongs to a famous German writer named Fransceso Weidel, and is filled with his unfinished novel and his passport. Through its contents, the suitcase thus becomes a talisman and a lifeline for the otherwise undocumented narrator, who adopts Weidel's identity and becomes both a novelist (imputed author of the suitcase novel) and a storyteller (who narrates *Transit* in the second person). The suitcase, with its conspicuously dichotomous contents of a novel and passport also serves as an allegorical site for comparing the relative value of cultural and legal documents. The novel within the suitcase (also the novel within the novel) becomes a symbolic counterweight and intellectual escape from the masses of paper that Seghers and her fellow refugees so desperately depended on as they fled Nazism.

Seghers employs well worn conventions of novelistic metextuality — the novel within the novel, the fluid identity of authorship, the blurred borders between text and reality — but then situates them within a radically new and unstable setting: the refugee world. She leads us to consider literature's role as a counterforce to legal annihilation and existential oblivion. Finding

the suitcase saves the stateless narrator's life because it contains legal documents that literally reconstitute him as a person and allow him to move on to Marseille and make legal claims to exit Europe. However, the novel saves his life in a different, and eventually more important manner. His reading of the novel (of which he will claim authorship when he claims Weidel's identity) is an act of communion and restitution in the midst of Nazism's upheavals of language and culture. "*This* was my own language my mother tongue, and it flowed into me like milk into a baby. It didn't rasp and grate like the language that came from the throat of the Nazis."[44] Subsequently, he returns again and again to the novel as a source of relief and possibility. Yet because the novel is unfinished and unpublished, the narrator also saves the novel from oblivion and transforms the life of Weidel, the dead author, by bringing his last story into the world, not by publishing it, but by living with it as reminder of literature's power to resist fascism's attack on the diversity of human life.

Beyond Segers' novel, the suitcase occupies a special place in the history and imagination of displacement. On the surface, the space of the suitcase readily offers itself as a mobile archive of *a* life. "For thirty nights I slept with a small suitcase by my bed, ready to go to prison at any moment," Koestler writes in *The Scum of the Earth*.[45] When left behind (after loss or death) a suitcase might appear a pre–curated index of identity, a deposit of disparate clues from which to reconstruct a story: a record of living in excess of biological life. But what if the suitcase itself contains a story? When one reads across the early literature of the refugee and the stateless, one finds that alongside the legal documentation dispensed and withheld by embassies, passport offices, and consulates, there are also novels and literary fragments, stories written and carried by refugees as bulwarks against oblivion. Seghers' suitcase novel in *Transit* is one of

[44] Seghers, *Transit*, 60.
[45] Koestler, *Scum of the Earth*, 49.

many instances of this trope. Other examples include Brecht's "Refugee Conversations," where a character carries (in a suitcase) a mass of papers he calls both a "memoir" and a "novel," and Koestler's *The Scum of the Earth*, in which Koestler clutches and composes the manuscript of *Darkness at Noon* in concentration camps and cramped Parisian quarters (next to his neighbor Walter Benjamin). If the legal documents that populate all of these works, documents engendered by the state, carry the weight of a final judgment — "If you've got no passport you're officially dead" — then the literary fragments form a wedge that keeps open final judgment and challenges sovereign power from the open channels of democracy, culture, and interpretation.

This reading will appear all the more plausible if we consider that perhaps the two most famous suitcases possessed by refugees happened also to be carried by philologists, refugees trained in the arts and politics of interpretation. The first suitcase belonged to Walter Benjamin, containing the unfinished manuscript of the *Arcades Project,* which was handed over to Georges Bataille for safekeeping. The second suitcase belonged to Erich Auerbach during his flight to Istanbul, purportedly containing the dozen or so books that he would use to write *Mimesis*.[46] The poignancy and power of Auerbach's story (which we know now to be an embellishment) stems form the idea that he used the few items he could carry as persecuted refugee to so greatly advance the project of humanism.[47] Subject to the inhumanity of Nazism, stripped of legal status (a "paper one" as Arendt notes of K), Auerbach collected what he could in his suitcase and translated it into a study on the shared grounds of human reality. The myth of Auerbach's suitcase captures a dynamic staged repeatedly in the literature of statelessness itself, one in

[46] See Edward Said, "Introduction" in Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007).
[47] For correction to the story see Kader Konuk, *East West Mimesis* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010).

which the worldly value of literature takes on a new aspect and weight when contrasted with the political and existential void of statelessness.

The suitcase works as both a real and allegorical site for exploring and demonstrating this dynamic. In and around the suitcase, early refugee writers expressed ideas about literature's precarious place within, but also possible resistance to, the oblivion and loss of a world that followed on expulsion from community. This literature's recursive play on the oppressions of the passport and paper — the paper universe of Marseille, Lisbon, and the consulate — finds its counterpoint in a thematic pattern of metatextuallity: novels within novels within suitcases that point to an ongoing struggle of ideas about identity and the foundations of life. As we've seen, in Brecht's "Refugee Conversations," the human is set into a comic battle of recognition with the passport, which possesses the universal "qualities" once ascribed to the human. In Brecht's (only slightly) hypothetical thought experiment, the refugee, *sans papier,* must acquire a passport in order to be recognized for his actions and deeds. Without a passport, in other words, the refugee cannot be a "who," cannot have a story. And so it makes perfect dialectical sense that one of Brecht's refugees, Ziffel, carries a story with him in his suitcase, a mass of paper that he refers to both as memoir and a novel. Ziffel reveals the content of his suitcase to Kalle, his fellow refugee, and begins to read:

> Vesper bells of Santa Anna. Getting beer. The coachman in the Klauckestrasse has hung himself. Little Marie sat on *a* stone. Knifing pains in the finger joints, in the elbow, in the chin, in the head, in the shoulder. The knife can also go off course into the ground. He wrote something with chalk on the stable door. The police are informed. Five pfennig pieces. The five pfennig piece was

> thrown at the house wall. How far it bounces off. He bounced off and left her. The murderers are in the dog house. With chalk, where he got her? Pimples. Short, pointed stakes are driven into the ground, are hewed out by other stakes. [...] Indians, Teutons, Russians, Japanese, knights, Napoleon, Bavarians, Romans. Tutor. You old yokel, you should have known. Dog. Dung-head. Shit-in-the-pants. Little[48]

Why did Brecht make Ziffel's refugee's "memoir" an unintelligible paroxysm of raw information? And how do we read this formal character as a response to the refugee's loss of human world and human qualities? At first glance, Ziffel's text scans like high modernist experimentation, a literal stream of consciousness, an unsorted index of events and impressions. Did Ziffel record his life in this way as a protest against the regimentation of an eclipsed realism? Or is its form an index of trauma, the raw experience of violent displacement? In this latter sense, he would appear a kind of transparent eyeball, recording the destruction of Old Europe in all its disorienting detail. But Ziffel has doubts about the form of his memoir. He asks Kalle whether he should collect the mass of information into something more coherent. To which Kalle responds with a profound diagnosis of the relation between writing and living. "You can't worry about that," Kalle councils, "humankind as such is outdated too. Thinking is outdated, life is outdated, eating is outdated. I think you can write what you want because printing is also outdated." Put another way: Kalle suggests that human life as we know it might be "outdated," and certainly that communicable stories are outdated. In Kalle's eyes — and perhaps Brecht's, writing as a stateless German in the late 1930s — Ziffel simply has no reason to collect his

[48] Brecht, "Refugee Conversations," 1, 3.

biography into a coherent story, because in losing his place in a world, he has also lost a kind of faculty that compelled and allowed him to situate one's life in time and space, and therefore to share it with others. Thus the form of Ziffel's memoir — or maybe it's a novel? — tells its own story about the loss of the connective, interactive, and world-making power of stories.

When Brecht dramatizes the loss of storytelling in his "Refugee Conversations," he restages the earlier ideas of his friend and fellow refugee, Walter Benjamin. In Benjamin's powerful and elegiac essay "The Storyteller" (1936), he argues that "the ability to exchange experiences" — a condition of human life that had once been "inalienable" — had been taken from humans in the years around World War I. This seemingly "inalienable" faculty he called "storytelling," and he augured its imminent disappearance in a zero sum game with "information." Whereas storytelling is marked by an openness to interpretation, information is defined by its reduction to "prompt verification." In contrast to information's immediate verification, a story's meaning unfolds in time, modulated by the course of its transmission across other human lives, and by practices of humanistic inquiry, such translation and interpretation (philology). Humanistic labor attunes human attention so as to dilate the life of a story from the moment of telling and writing into an uncertain future.[49] In Benjamin's telling, the openness of a story's meaning both invites engaged judgment, but also delays final judgment, of the storyteller. In turn, a person who tells a story can rely on the twin horizons of future interaction and interpretation. By contrast, a person who is restricted to the communication of information is subject to the immediate judgment of verification.

Famously, Benjamin cites the "newspaper" and electronic communications as examples of information's hegemony. Yet he might just as easily have used the passport, a product of

[49] Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations* (New York: Shocken, 2011), 112, 114, 116.

World War I. After all, what could be a more ominous a sign of the hegemony of "prompt verification" than the passport? Moreover, the passport ostensibly verifies the very humanness to which Benjamin ascribes the fundamental characteristic of storytelling. In Brecht's refugee setting, stories and passports are dichotomous indices of the human. I've noted how the scrambled, incomprehensible form of Ziffel's memoir in "Refugees Conversation" might be read dialectically as signifying his lack of a passport — the passport whose "qualities" alone, Brecht suggests, would make Ziffel legible as a narrative subject. Without legal documentation to "verify" himself as a citizen, a person, or a human being of value, Ziffel loses the right and capacity for self-authorship and storytelling. The form of Ziffel's memoir acutely reflects the breakdown of the world as he moves further away from the supports of a public with whom he could share the story. Ziffel seems only to record information without situating it in time: "The knife can also go off course into the ground. He wrote something with chalk on the stable door. The police are informed. Five pfennig pieces. The five pfennig piece was thrown at the house wall. How far it bounces off. He bounced off and left her. The murderers are in the dog house."[50] This passage feel like a story returning, or being dragged, back to a primordial form of information. Ziffel asks Kalle if he should collect the memoir "into chapters," to give it a beginning and end and make it legible as a story. But Kalle advises him against it. Thus Brecht implies, with a mixture of irony and dread, that no document, save the passport, will lift his character out of the void of undocumented humanity.

Information, of course, is nearly all refugees are asked to provide in the administrative world of borders, camps, and legal processing that they inhabit. Even when they are tasked with reconstructing a specific narrative of victimhood as the precondition for aid, their stories are

[50] Brecht, "Refugee Conversations," 4.

subject to countless forms of arbitrary verification. As Malkki has argued, both states and humanitarian actors too often "depolitisize the refugee category and construct in that depolitized space an ahistorical, universal humanitarian subject" that "can strip from them the authority to give credible narrative evidence or testimony about their own condition in politically and institutionally consequential forums."[51] The humanitarian policy expert, Arthur C. Helton, has a more sanguine view: refugees "are at the same time both invisible and storytellers. Refugees are neither seen nor heard, but they are everywhere. They are witnesses to the most awful things that people can do to each other, and they become storytellers simply by existing."[52] Helton's view, while poignant, takes for granted the conditions that foster and simply allow for storytelling. As Helton sees it, refugees are storytellers "simply by existing." Yet storytelling, as Brecht, Benjamin, Arendt, and Malkki assert in different registers, is not a matter of simply recording sharing disseminating experience, but rather requires forms of reciprocity, attention, authorization, space, and publicness. Storytelling, in a word, requires a "world" — a world that is often withheld in the systems and spaces of humanitarianism in which so much of refugee life is conducted. Against this banishment of the refugee from the world, the literature of statelessness smuggles literary texts and modes of storytelling into administrative and humanitarian spaces of information. In this way, refugee literatures makes a political intervention by turning spaces and idioms of information processing and administrative power into sites and occasions for storytelling.

Consider, for instance, that Segher's original German title for *Transit* was "Transit Visa," which makes entirely explicit the confluence of the literary and the legal document. During the

[51] Liisa Malkki, *Purity and Exile: Violence, Memory, and National Cosmology among Hutu Refugees in Tanzania* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 50.
[52] Arthur C Helton, *The Price of Indifference: Refugees and Humanitarian Action in the New Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 6.

mass exodus of refugees fleeing Europe in the late 1930s, one needed a transit visa to pass through fascist countries such as Portugal and Spain on the way to the United States or South America. The transit visa was thus very often the final step needed to escape. Yet the political regimes in Spain and Portugal, advised and influenced by the Germans, made it nearly impossible for enemies of fascism to acquire these necessary documents. In other words, the transit visa was a document denied to the writers and intellectuals who had expressed themselves in any way unacceptable to fascism; it was a pernicious little obstruction that made freedom of movement impossible as a punishment for free expression and free thought. When Seghers named her novel "Transit Visa" she imagined reversing this process, thus making her act of free expression and creation the basis for the right and freedom of movement.

Similarly, there is a moment of revelatory intervention at the very end of Koestler's *The Scum of the Earth,* when, after hundreds of pages of hyperactive, blow by blow storytelling and critical and personal reflection, he veers into a metafictional peregrination, suggesting that his memoir (his story) might have been a legal document all along, or at least a story in lieu of a passport. In *The Scum of the Earth*, Koestler carries an finished novel in a suitcase, working frantically on its completion in concentration camps and cramped Parisian quarters (next to his neighbor Walter Benjamin). Fittingly, the novel in question is Koestler's classic indictment of totalitarianism, *Darkness at Noon* (1940). But the turn of the dialectic at the end of *The Scum of the Earth* does not relate to *Darkness at Noon* (the text in the suitcase) but to the thing we hold in our hands, written in English (Koestler's first work in the language) in two frantic months after Koestler was released from prison in England. The last pages of the book take the form of a letter to "Colonel Blimp" of the British Home Office:

> Thank you for your letter of welcome to this country…Please excuse the delay in answering your letter, due to certain formalities (six weeks' imprisonment in Pentonville) through which I had to go after my arrival. It did not really matter; we have got into the habit, I and my like. But all this need not disturb you; for in this fight against the common enemy we are tied to you in life and death. If you perish, we perish. A strange historical constellation has tied us together, and we are mutually in the position of the Indian bride: If one of us dies, the other will be burnt alive with the corps, on the great funeral pyre of European civilization.[53]

By implying, however ironically, that the audience of his narrative is the authorities of the asylum granting nation, Koestler imposes the fullness of his story onto the more austere dynamic of stateless supplicant and state authority. In a way, Koestler situates himself as the Kafkaesque man before the law — and indeed, Koestler was a refugee in need of legal status. However, he does not supplicate or court sympathy so much as foster the very opposite: he announces to "Colonel Blimp" that his fate, and the fate of all of "the scum of the earth," are "tied" to the fate of Britain and European civilization. In doing so, he asks not to be raised up to the status of the human but for British society to recognize in itself the potentiality of becoming "scum." As I see it, Koestler intended for *The Scum of the Earth* to act as the story of this entanglement — a story of collective disenfranchisement and dehumanization that called for a fundamental reorientation

[53] Koestler, *Scum of the Earth,* 250.

of the idea of the human. Koestler's "letter" to the Home Office does not ask to be recognized as a human but rather announces to "Colonel Blimp" and all of Britain that they are, or might become, "scum." This reversal of logic (found across the literature of statelessness) is made possible by Koestler's self-characterization and posture, achieved in the black comedic form of his memoir — the document which he now presents to the Home Office in lieu of, or maybe in protest against (like K), the passport.

Koestler's shares this fantasy of replacing legal documentation with literary narration with nearly all the writers in this chapter. As I've noted, one way of conceiving of this fantasy is as a reversal of the transformations in human life and human society ruefully observed by Benjamin in "The Storyteller." As Benjamin saw it, at the beginning of the European refugee crisis around World War I, information and its logic of "prompt verification" had displaced storytelling, and with it, the possibilities for human life to unfold and be judged over time. In response, Koestler and his fellow refugee writers — storytellers who had fallen victim to the regime of information at its deadliest extreme — produced narratives and literary thought experiments in which storytelling strikes back. Koestler's insertion of his memoir into an imagined dialogue with the state is only one explicit example of this countermove on the part of storytellers. It is supremely fitting, then, that *The Scum of the Earth* is dedicated to Koestler's friend and neighbor in Paris, Walter Benjamin. For in forcing his story into the administrative space of information, Koestler momentarily redeems his fallen friend.

A HUMANITARIANISM OF THE PEN

How would Koestler or Seghers or Brecht's fantasies of replacing storytelling with information play out within an actual humanitarian crisis? This is the question I want to turn to now. Expanding outward from individual texts (while keeping in mind their constitutive character and themes), we now move into an institutional archive in order to study the impact of refugee writers on broader ideas of literature and life writ large. During the late 1930s, the mandate and institutional ethos of PEN International, the world's largest writers' organization, was transformed by the emergence of refugee writer within its ranks. What had once been a late–Victorian dinner club devoted to the unhindered exchange of culture became a unique humanitarian force. Cast in the light of PEN's first charter, writers were already stateless, but in a *transcendent* rather than *punitive* manner. Precisely because literature did not belong to any nation, it was optimistically cast as the possession and highest ideal of humanity as a whole, proof of a universal humanism invulnerable to the particularism of creeds, nations, and governments. Bu the refugee writer changed this outlook considerably. The transformation of PEN serves as a very concrete example of a how the refugee transformed a humanistic project, thus bearing out our discussion so far on the possibility of rethinking the human from the perspective of the refugee.

We begin with literary and intellectual life in wartime Britain. This habitués was greatly impacted by the truncated lives of the newly stateless populations fleeing Europe. Whether it was the modernists of the Bloomsbury group, or their "middlebrow" Edwardian counterparts like H.G. Wells and Rebecca West, refugees informed and disrupted not only daily life but ideas and assumptions about life itself. In February, 1939, Virginia Woolf spoke in her diary of

"Innumerable refugees to add to the tangle."[54] A year earlier, E.M Forster had established the Dorking District Refugee Committee to aid fleeing Germans; West personally housed refugees during the war and used her home as a meeting place and fundraising space for refugees. Koestler, J.B Priestly, and Graham Greene donated large portions of their royalties to refugee relief, and Greene even began work on a novel called *Refugee Ship* in 1939. But it was the leadership of PEN International, including Storm Jameson, Wells, and the German émigré Herman Ould, that worked most energetically to aid refugees, focusing almost entirely on refugee writers.

Writer refugees were a novel phenomenon, and pushed PEN and its members to revise long held ideas about writing, life, and the world that makes these basic elements of humanity possible. When PEN formed in 1921 it was far from a humanitarian endeavor. Genteel, cosmopolitan, and staunchly non-partisan, its aspirations did not lie in helping the needy and persecuted but rather in influencing the powerful. As an early member wrote, the organization marked an "attempt to make art serve the community" by offering "a model to politicians" of the understanding and thoughtfulness: "books for diplomats."[55] PEN was in many ways an institution caught between two centuries, yet belonging to neither. On the one hand, the idea of disinterested sphere of literature was nurtured by the lingering twilight of the nineteenth–century and its concert of nations. On the other hand, PEN's ambition to institutionalize the "world republic of letters" was part and parcel of the interwar turn to global institutions and governance. The early leaders of PEN synthesized these two views into the idea that a global writers' organization

[54] Quoted in Hermione Lee, *Virginia Woolf: A Biogrpahy* (New York: Vintage, 1999), 208.
[55] C.A. Dawson Scott to John Galsworthy 6/10/1924. PEN Letters, John Galsworthy, Box 15, Series II:Recipient. PEN English Center Archives, HRC.

might model the ideal of a universally inclusive and peaceful global community. And this idea became especially pronounced after H.G. Wells was elected president in 1933.

When Wells assumed the presidency of PEN, he was not only one of the world's preeminent authors, but also its most vocal advocate for a world government. Since the early century, Wells had produced a steady flow of stories, novels, articles, and book-length tracts on the possibility and benefit of a world federation, in which nations and nationality would be subsumed within a centralized cosmopolitan polity open to the free flow of peoples and ideas. This combination of literary fame and cosmopolitan vision made Wells an obvious choice to front an organization that self-consciously modeled itself on the cosmopolitan ideal of a "world republic of letters." Assuming the presidency in Dubrovnik, Wells made it clear that he saw the laws of free literary creation and circulation as ways forward for politics. In his inauguration speech, Wells wrote: "For centuries we have been talking of the 'Republic of the human mind' – – a world republic of letters and science and of creative effort…This is something that is only just coming into existence. Are we of PEN simply trying to sustain something or are we trying to evoke something? I suggest to you that we are trying to evoke something, a mental community throughout the earth….we stand for the world commonwealth."[56] During the course of the congress, however, Wells' idealistic vision was contested by the arrival of an unprecedented figure, the stateless German playwright, Ernst Toller. A Jewish socialist and former president of the short-lived Bavarian Socialist Republic (where B. Traven was press secretary), Toller had been hunted and stripped of citizenship after the Nazi's seized power in 1933, making his way to Dubrovnik to use the PEN congress as a forum for bringing attention to cultural repression under

[56] H.G. Wells, Presidential Speech, PEN Congress Dubrovnik, PEN Congress Dubrovnik, 1933. Series III., Box 3, Folder 3:10-11: International Pen Congresses, 1-11. PEN Archive, HRC.

Hitler. Toller's inspired speech at the congress marked the traumatic inclusion of the voice of the stateless writer within PEN's "world republic."[57]

Being without precedent, the refugee writer posed new challenges to PEN's avowed commitment to support the freedom and exchange of literature globally. The outbreak of World War II broke many of PEN's national chapters apart, as Nazism's march across Europe pushed thousands of writers and intellectual into urgent flight. The decades leading up to World War II had fostered a robust set of transnational literary and artistic movements, coteries, journals, styles, and schools of critical thought. In turn, the enormity of the expelled population reflected the rich cultural world of the interwar decades. The founders and practitioners of entire movements — from surrealism and Bauhaus to German expressionism and critical theory — were made exiles and refugees. Ironically, this class of writers, now expelled from the protection of nation states, were the very same who had spent the interwar years cultivating forms of cosmopolitan anti-nationalism, internationalism, and anti-identarian thought. Having spurned the narrow conditions of belonging to nation, creed, or empire, they now found themselves cast out indefinitely.

On October 14, 1938, shortly after the invasion of Czechoslovakia, Jameson published a letter of appeal in the British press signed by H.G. Wells, J.B. Priestly, Graham Greene, Rebecca West, and E.M. Forster, amongst others. The appeal inaugurated a practice that would soon come to define PEN's mission, calling on the British public to donate funds to assist the legion of Czech writers. Jameson's appeal included a letter of distress from the Prague PEN center itself. Jameson, sensing that an appeal to aid writers amongst so much other suffering might fall flat,

[57] Report of the Eleventh International Congress in Yugoslavia," in *P.E.N. News*, no. 56, June 1933. PEN American Center Archives, CO760, I. Governance, Box 11/1, Princeton.

turned to a tried and tested method of humanitarian reason: generate compassion by way of a lasting image of helplessness and suffering. The letter from the Prague PEN center was well suited to the task of generating sympathy. "It is our absolute responsibility to take care of the poorest writers in our midst. If we lack funds we are quite unable to fulfill this duty. We are therefore begging you to help us….Your help will be able to save us. If it comes in time."[58] Although appealing to the public for humanitarian aid was a standard practice following World War I, the call to support a very specific class of displaced persons, such as writers, was rare. A public appeal to aid writers was exceptional since the writer was so often cast as socially autonomous — itself a touchstone of PEN's aesthetical ideology. Now however, the appeals were made on the very opposite grounds — that the writer was inextricably bound up with collective fate.

While the most famous writers emigrated with relative ease, the vast majority lacked the means or profile to attract special attention and intervention on their behalf. It was these nameless and unknown writers, long shadowed by the great exile figures like Thomas Mann, that fell into PEN's care. "Our exiles were not famous writers," a PEN refugee worker later wrote, "these could make shift to live anywhere."[59] Serving the needs of these refugee writers produced a new set of practices that rested, consciously or not, on important philosophical convictions not only about what writing was but what life, both collective and individual, needed, in order to maintain its humanity. Humanitarianism of the writer conflated once incommensurable notions of humanism and humanitarianism; and it did this by way of a new view onto the bare facts and nature of survival.

---

[58]Storm Jameson, "Appeal" Part 37." Newspaper clippings PEN. Box 19 of uncatalogued materials, labeled "English Centre Papers – Early PEN." HRC.

[59] Storm Jameson, *Journey to the North* (London: Berger, 1946), 9.

PEN's turn to humanitarianism had two phases during the war. During the initial phase, PEN members, including Forster, West, and Koestler, spent months seeking contact with writers in the refugee internment camps established at the Isle of Man and in Australia. When writers were found in the camps, PEN put together appeals on their behalf to the British Council. In many cases, PEN simply kept a record and copies of all works published by interned refugee writers to be produced as evidence to the Home Office whenever necessary. Meanwhile, during the initial wave of refugee arrivals PEN used its limited funds to keep writers alive, providing funds for basic provisions and shelter. Due to the lack of existing aid networks, most of these writers had no other means of aid. Alongside small grants, PEN lobbied members to provide room and board for refugee writers — a call heeded by a remarkable number of London's high literary circle. And in October 1938 PEN officially created the Refugee Writers Fund (RWF). As part of the fund, a single refugee could receive twenty shillings a month and married couples twenty-five.[60] Yet the organization insisted that funds be used for the production of writing, and not be spent on basic necessities like food and housing. Amidst the general suffering and needs of tens of thousands of refugees, Jameson and her fellow members of the refugee committee understood that the gesture of canvasing for money to provide writers with the possibility to write could appear absurd and insensitive. Nonetheless, though, they held strong to the principle that the production and translation of literature should be a humanitarian concern, and, in turn, that a writer had a right to a public. With the creation of the new Refugee Writers Fund, PEN shifted its onus considerably, no longer focusing on the *life* of the refugee writers but on their *work*.

[60] Hermon Ould to PEN Membership, 6/4/1938, English Executive Committee Meetings, 1941-1947, HRC.

§

During PEN's 1941 congress, the British writer and refugee aid worker Peter Mendelssohn used the predicament of the refugee writer to arrive at more general theory of human life. To Mendelssohn, who spent the war at the forefront of varying refugee writer aid initiatives across London, "survival" came to be a matter of "words" as much as material nourishment. For Refugee writers arriving in England, Mendelssohn wrote,

> There is little space, literally little space, namely only a tiny scrap of the nation's paper quota, into which they can creep. If they are well known they may find a slightly larger scrap, and perhaps also a generous publisher who will put up the money for a translator…Consequently his, the refugee's problem as a writer is a problem of survival. Not only of material, but above all of spiritual survival…They who have suffered on behalf of the written word know that the written word cannot lie without them just as they cannot live without it. Through all their years of despair and failing and rising hope they will have worked through to their ultimate conviction: that they must have words in order to live, and that in order that it may live they must give words to the world.[61]

The "refugee's problem as a writer is a problem of survival," Mendelssohn notes, but a problem whose solution is the conditions of literary creations —paper, translators, words — rather than

[61] Minutes, PEN Congress London, 1941. Series III., Box 3, Folder 3:10-11: International Pen Congresses, 1-11. PEN Archive, HRC.

basic "material" provisions. With this assertion, he made explicit the underlying "conviction" of PEN's humanitarian project: the existence of a vital contingency between living, writing, and the creation of the shared "world." "Words" are needed in order for the writer to "live," but the "world" depends on the life-giving words of the writer. The contingencies between living and writing that he points to, while by no means exclusive to refugee writers, were nonetheless rendered especially palpable due to the specific predicament and privations of the displaced writers who flooded wartime Britain. By living with and seeking to aid refugee writers, those working in and around the PEN refugee committee were led to rethink and eventually to institutionalize a constitutive link between writing and living, or more accurately, writing and survival.

PEN received daily appeals for aid from refugee writers. As a result, PEN's archives are a vast store of petitions from writers of little historical note, figures of Weimar culture who did not have the profile of Thomas Mann, or Brecht, and arrived in England after time in concentration camps through Marseille or Lisbon. Detained as enemy aliens in prison camps along the English and Irish coast, or sometimes shipped to large refugee centers in Australia, the writers who depended on PEN's intervention were not far off in their situations from contemporary refugees. The case of a relatively unknown writer refugee, Ernst Angel, is standard case from the archive and helps demonstrate the way that this humanitarian network operated and developed. After escaping a German concentration camp in 1934 Angel moved west to Paris, fleeing for England from Marseille in March 1939. In May, Angel received his first grant from PEN's fund for twenty shillings. After receiving another grant a month later, Angel made the mistake of thanking PEN in the press for the grants he received. A few days later he was lightly reprimanded by a PEN volunteer for using the funds for purposes other than writing. "The PEN

grants, as you know, are intended to help writers with their expenses as writers ie with stationary, typewriters ribbons and so forth; and are not meant to be used for living expenses, which should be secured through the appropriate committee, but I gather from your letter to the journalists that you are now having to use our grants to pay for your board and lodging. Is there no possibility of your securing fresh hospitality (or hospitality allowance) through the German Jewish aid committee?[62]

Jameson and her fellow members at PEN were aware that the principle of aiding the writer and not the human would seem to exhibit an almost comical lack of compassion for the bare needs of suffering stateless people. Even today, it remains jarring and disorienting. Humanitarianism without compassion for misery is difficult to compass; we expect a suffering body, not an unwritten poem. As Jameson ran campaigns to aid refugee writers, she privately wrote to Ould of her frustrations and misgivings for appealing to the cause of writing as the world crumbled around her: "I see a future before us of opening fund after fund, as one country after another goes down, until the moment when our own fate is so close that we go to the bank to draw out the last two shillings to buy ourselves a ticket to the moon."[63] Yet Jameson was resolute in her feeling that PEN should aid the work of writers. Soon, she came to define the mandate of PEN in terms very different from that of inherited humanitarian reason, fixed within the call and response of bodily suffering and spectatorial compassion. In an article in the *Times Literary Supplement* published shortly after PEN began its refugee operations, Jameson defined

[62] Janet Frame to Ernst Angel, May 11th, 1939. Series III., Box 7, Folder 3: 44-46: Letters Sent 1-11. PEN Archive, HRC.

[63] Storm Jameson to Herman Ould, 8/16/1941, English Executive Committee Meetings, 1938-1947, HRC.

PEN's refugee work as a "reflection of a precise idea of human *dignity*."[64] Jameson's use of the qualification "precise" points to the reformist sprit in the humanitarian activities of PEN. She aimed to hone in on the "precise" character of the overly capacious and potentially meaningless pursuit of "human dignity.

Looking at the day-to-day dispensations of the PEN refugee fund helps us see more clearly what Jameson meant by a "precise" idea of dignity. PEN kept tabs on many of the writers they assisted, so the organization's internal records detail how a humanitarianism of the writer played out within the tangle of wartime Britain. Consider, for example, the story of J. Werner Cohn, a German Czech refugee who first came to PEN's attention when his sister wrote asking for assistance in securing his release from an internment camp in Australia. Like many "enemy aliens," Cohn had first been interned at the Isle of Man, but was later sent on an Antipodean journey to the larger refugee holding tanks on the west coast of Australia. His wife and two children, however, were kept back in Britain, and Cohn's sister hoped to have him returned to the interment camp in Britain to be reunited with his family. PEN made an appeal for his return and release, providing copies of Cohn's published works in German as evidence of his accomplishments as a writer. Cohn was soon allowed to return to Britain, and he and his family were released from internment in the winter of 1938. As was the case for nearly all refugees, though, survival in wartime Britain was challenging. Here is PEN's own internal account of their efforts to aid Cohn after his release.[65]

---

[64] Storm Jameson, "Fighting the Foes of Civilization: The Writer's Place in the Defense Line", *TLS,* 7/10/1939, Issue 1966, 571.

[65] J. Werner Cohn File, Series II., Box 5, Folder 8:22-40: Refugee Writers Committee 1-11. PEN Archive, HRC.

> On December 6, 1938 a grant of 25/- a week was made to him by the PEN fund; this allowance was continued for 6 weeks, and then the amount was reduced to 1/+. In April he asked for help in finding a translator for his book; he also said that he had been advised to submit philosophical articles to the Hibbert journal. Herman Ould sent him an introduction to its editors, and advised him to write to the Translators Guild. In October he was still searching for a translator, and asked of PEN would be willing to foot the bill of he should succeed in finding someone suitable. In January 1940 the final chapter of the book was translated, and for it the PEN paid the account 3–8–0. In September repairs to his typewriter were paid by for by the PEN fund.[66]

As we glean here, one notable feature of PEN's aid program was the upkeep of material conditions for writing, such as the typewriter. Indeed, soon after the fund was established, PEN began a successful drive to collect typewriters, ribbons, and paper in wartime London. Sometimes a single donated typewriter would make the rounds of an entire circuit of refugee writers, who were each entitled to one or two day's use before passing it along.

Thinking about typewriters as humanitarian resources invites comparisons with more traditional aid items like food and medicine. As we saw briefly in the case of Ernst Angel, PEN sometimes went so far as to reprimand its beneficiaries for using PEN funds to procure basic provisions like food and shelter. The strength of PEN's resolve might appear quixotic at best, and inhuman at worst. At the same time, the uneasiness generated by PEN's unorthodox refugee

---

[66] Ibid., 1-4.

work is instructive. PEN upheld a principle that the typewriter (which sustains cultural life) and food and shelter (which sustains biological life) were both means of human survival. This program carried wider implications for how the organization imagined and valued human life, since what counts as survival maps onto the forms of life we recognize as vital and worthy of protection, including emergency measures like humanitarian aid. Providing aid for writing materials and not food and medicine attributed equal value to cultural and biological life. This parity of biological and cultural life can, I think, be assumed as part what of Storm Jameson pointed to when justifying PEN's work as the upholding of a "precise idea of human dignity." In the tradition of natural rights, human beings are born equal in "dignity." Dignity, in these terms, is something innate to the biological human. By contrast, Jameson and PEN's "precise" vision of human dignity called for material supports, instruments that bring humans into sustained contact and relations of reciprocity with others, instruments like a typewriter, or processes like translation. As Cohn's record shows, along with material tools of survival, PEN offered financial support and contacts for refugees to translate their work into English. Among other limitations imposed on refugee writers, including access to an English language market, a lack of translation cut them off from a public. In procuring and paying for translations, PEN sought to construct the durable ligaments between the refugee outsider and the shared cultural sphere of Britain. Unlike the basic provisions needed for an individual to survive, translation is needed when the human steps beyond their bare biological life into the stream of other lives and other cultures. Typewriters and translation aid in the construction of the common world by extending human actions and intentions through the variables of durability, legibility, reproducibility, cultural and linguistic exchange They are instruments of authorship and self-presentation, and a way of writing oneself into the media of history as a bulwark against annihilation and erasure.

Writing much more recently, the anthropologist of humanitarianism Didier Fassin argues that translation might offer a starting point for expanding the boundaries of human life recognized by humanitarian actions. Fassin draws on Benjamin's essay "The Task of the Translator" to develop his argument for reforming humanitarianism's narrow focus on "life itself." As Fassin notes, Benjamin's vision of translation is notable for its disregard for the idea of fidelity to the original; "translation," he writes, "issues from the original — not so much from its life than from its afterlife."[67] Standing behind Benjamin's idea of translation is a deeper idea about the life (lives) that texts live as they shift and circulate in society. Thus Fassin rightly surmises that Benjamin's theory of translation marks a "shift from literary work to a more general reflection on life."[68] The same is true of PEN's humanitarianism. The practice of folding translation into humanitarian action, while presented as an activity related to the specific needs of the refugee writer, ultimately revealed the organization's commitment to human life and human survival as phenomena that cannot be reduced to the biological. Consider also the month in which PEN paid for repairs to J. Werner Cohn's typewriter: September of 1940, the first months of the Blitz. Even during the intensifying violence of total war in Britain, PEN doled out its limited funds to repair a typewriter for an unknown and untranslated refugee. Whether it was through repairing typewriters or procuring translations, PEN's humanitarian project operated under the conviction that human survival was bound, perhaps inextricably, to writing.

The decision to provide aid for *writing* rather than *living* was unique in its aims and philosophy. It bespoke two interwoven convictions. First, that there is a determinate relationship between writing and survival; and second, that human survival exceeds the prolongation of

[67] Didier Fassin, "Ethics of Survival: A Democratic Approach to the Politics of Life." *Humanity* Fall, 2010, 86.
[68] Ibid., 90.

biological life — meaning, in turn, that human life is a form of a life beyond or in excess of our biological functioning. To be sure, these ideas long preceded PEN's humanitarian work. However, the appearance of the refugee writer and efforts to redress their loss gave sharp relief to the permeable boundaries between biological and cultural forms of life. Working outward from the isolated body in crisis into the social world where stories, rather than mere life, are sustained, the outlook of the PEN Refugee Writers Committee marked a departure from the inherited logic of humanitarianism and a move into what we recognize today as the field and practice of human rights.

If humanitarianism is generally understood (and understands itself) to take the basic necessities of human survival as its field of protection, then human rights name and support a more robust vision of the "good life," founded in ideas such as "dignity" and "conscience." "Humanitarianism," Fassin has argued, is not about human rights in general, but about the right to live in particular: saving lives is its higher mission"[69] PEN's transition from humanitarianism to human rights unfolded on the terrain of the *literary work*, which, rather than depart entirely from the sphere of "life" that humanitarianism takes as its subject, opens up a bridge between *life* and *living*. PEN's humanitarianism took as its subject a form of life that Arendt called "specifically human," life that "is itself full of events which ultimately can be told as a story" and "establish a biography."[70] When what is recognized as life or human life is expanded to include the work and actions that bring a "common world" into being, then the boundaries between humanitarianism and human rights can be transgressed and "life itself" can take on a more human form. At present, Fassin and other scholars working at the boundaries of the humanities

[69] Didier Fassin, "Anotehr Politics of Life is Possible." *Theory, Culture, and Society* September 2009 Vol. 26 No. 5, 51
[70] Arendt, *Human*, 96-97.

and humanitarianism have taken up the project of enlarging what is recognized as "human life." Yet aspects of this project are discernible at the very highest echelon of global governance. During the world's first "World Humanitarian Summit" in May 2016, for instance, the United Nations released a general agenda bearing the title, "Restoring Humanity." It called for governments and other international actors to "commit to actions which will guarantee the minimum resources necessary to preserve life and dignity for people affected by conflict and disasters."[71] OF course, when we think of the notion of "minimum resources," it is much easier to imagine its application to the maintenance of "life." "Dignity" is more difficult; however, arriving at something like a basic list of resources for human dignity to be upheld is precisely what PEN's humanitarian program set out to do. The mandate of this year's humanitarian summit reflects a perceived need for humanitarian action to aim higher than "life" alone, and begin to uphold the standards of "dignity" that have long been the province of human rights

Fassin, who openly draws on a tradition of literary and philological work running from Benjamin to Arendt to Jacques Derrida, continues to work with a genealogy of humanistic thinking in his efforts to reform humanitarianism. This chapter has unearthed a parallel, and at times overlapping, genealogy of writers and thinkers whose work lends itself to the reform of humanitarianism today. Unlike Fassin, however, I have emphasized that this genealogy is itself a refugee genealogy: a tradition of writing produced from within the refugee experience itself. I have taken up the work and history of the refugee writer in three different aspects and modes. First, as chroniclers and analysts of statelessness in its early decades who lent the historical phenomenon a distinct and unexpected generic character. Second, as humanistic theorists who envisioned the grounds of their own humanization and future equality and recognition in a

[71] United Nations World Humanitarian Summit, Overview. United Nation.Org.

democratic public sphere. And finally, as subjects of humanitarian and human rights action that directly transformed the shape and stakes of international cultural politics through their impact on PEN International. This abbreviated history holds out a number of lessons for our historical present.

For the tens of millions of camp denizens and refugees who live under humanitarian administration today, life itself is too often unlivable and inhuman. When we speak "saving lives" or survival, we generally mean that someone is saved from death, kept alive. Giorgio Agamben has famously referred the life administered and sustained by humanitarian governance as "bare life," finding its paradigmatic embodiment in the modern refugee.[72] Yet PEN looked upon the refugee not as an isolated human whose "bare life" must be maintained, but as a human in need of a lost "common world." PEN ministered to the refugee's need for a world as if it was as urgent as basic sustenance, as if it too should be considered *life*. When it took cultural life as tantamount to biological life, it transgressed the boundaries of humanitarianism and opened an isthmus that linked humanitarianism to human rights. As I have been arguing, PEN was led to open up a raw edge between these two spheres of universalism due to the particular predicament and needs of refugee writers. Refugees who needed to write in order to live revealed something deeper about what makes human life irreducibly human. As Peter Mendelssohn had put it at PEN's 1941 London congress, the refugee writer came to reveal, not just for themselves but for all writers, "that they must have words in order to live, and that in order that it may live they must give words to the world.[73]

---

[72] See Agamben, *Homo Sacer* , 90.
[73] Minutes, PEN Congress London, 1941. Series III., Box 3, Folder 3:10-11: International Pen Congresses, 1-11. PEN Archive, HRC.

Speaking ten years later, at PEN's 1951 congress is Lausanne, Switzerland, the German chairman of wartime PEN, Herman Ould, remembered the impact of refugee writers on the organization's history and development. Ould began by paying homage to Ernest Toller, the German Jewish playwright and refugee who almost singlehandedly forced PEN to take a stand against Nazism during the 1933 congress in Dubrovnik. As Ould remembered, "In Yugoslavia, for the first time we found ourselves confronted with delegates…unable to express themselves freely…it was a dramatic moment in our history." Toller, as I've already noted, was the first refugee writer to have his voice heard within PEN. "For nearly twenty years the world has witnessed the displacement of all sorts and conditions of men, women and children," Ould remarked in Lausanne, yet this upheaval, he asserted, had "fallen with particular severity on writers." In addition to the "hardships and losses born by others," writers "have lost their most precious possession — their language, the very substance and soul of their craft… The trials and tribulations of refugee writers," Ould concluded, had remapped PEN's "republic of letters.[74]

Ould's words wore born out very recently, on Human Rights Day 2015, when over 1000 writers lent their names to a PEN International declaration in support of the "equal treatment of refugees." Nobel prize winners like Elfriede Jelinek and Gunter Grass joined together as members of PEN International in hopes that the European union could be "recognized as a common protective area for refugees."[75] In a short preamble to the declaration, PEN America's president, Jennifer Clement, framed PEN's initiative on behalf of refugees as natural outgrowth of the organization's mission: "our charter makes clear an obligation to populations at risk — we cannot separate our decades-long experience in protecting persecuted writers from our broader

[74] Hermon Ould, Speech at the 23rd International P.E.N. Congress in Lausanne, 1951. Box: 23rd Congress Lausanne, PEN Archive, HRC.

[75] "PEN Issues Declaration in Support of Refugees," PEN.Org.

humanitarian mandate aimed at creating peace, dialogue, and protecting those at risk." As the present history has shown, PEN has not always devoted itself to protecting populations at risk. It took last century's refugee crisis to provoke the organization out of its Victorian slumber and into the world of global politics.

CHAPTER THREE

THE PRISONER

In a late passage from *The Gulag Archipelago* (1974), Aleksander Solzhenitsyn asks his reader to shut their eyes and listen. Then he describes, in remarkably sensuous prose, what they might hear if they did:

> Shut your eyes, reader. Do you hear the thundering of wheels? Those are the Stolypin cars rolling on and on. Those are the red cows rolling. Every minute of the day. And every day of the year. And you can hear the water gurgling — those are prisoners' barges moving on and on. And the motors of the Black Marias roar. They are arresting someone all the time, cramming him in somewhere, moving him about. And what is that hum you hear? Overcrowded cells of the transit prisons. And that cry? The complaints of those who have been plundered, raped, beaten to within an inch of their lives.[1]

Solzhenitsyn asked his readers to *tune in* to the ever-present grinding of a prison system, depicted not so much as Stalin's Gulag per se, but instead as the immutable ambiance of political modernity: the "hum" of "overcrowded" cells, filling up "every minute of the day. And every

[1] Aleksander Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago*: *Volume I* (New York: Pantheon, 2008), 372.

day of the year." And indeed, more and more people *were* listening to the sounds and supplications of prisoners in these years. Which makes Solzhenitsyn's novel, here at least, feel less like a book about the Stalinist 1940s and 1950s, and more like a finely descriptive account of the human rights revolution of the 1970s and 1980s, when everyone, whether a partisan of the left or right, or denizen of the global north or south, could not help but heed the sounds of distant prisoners. By the early 1970s, with the backing and effort of organizations like PEN's Writers in Prison Committee, poems, novels, plays, manifestos, letters, and declarations flowed out of the world's prisons with increasing speed and in unprecedented numbers. Between 1970, when the former gulag prisoner Solzhenitsyn won the Nobel Prize, and 1986, when the former Nigerian political prisoner Wole Soyinka became the first non-Western writer to win the same award, it became increasingly difficult (and nearly impossible for Western liberals) to avoid entanglement with stories of prison life, hardship, torture, and resistance.[2]

The ubiquity of the prisoner in late-twentieth century international culture and politics can in part be traced to a 1961 article or "appeal" in the British press, written by the founder of Amnesty International, Peter Benenson. Titled "The Forgotten Prisoners," the article's famous opening reads like a page torn from *The Gulag Archipelago*.

> Open your newspaper any day of the week and you will find a report from somewhere in the world of someone being imprisoned, tortured or executed because his opinions or religion are unacceptable to his government. There are several million such people in prison — by no means all of them behind

[2] At the time of his reception of the Nobel Prize, Soyinka was arguably more famous as a political prisoner and dissident than as a novelist and playwright. For details on the nature of Soyinka's international fame and recognition vis-à-vis his status as a human rights activist and political prisoner see James English, *The Economy of Prestige* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), 295-310.

> the Iron and Bamboo Curtains — and their numbers are growing. The newspaper reader feels a sickening sense of impotence. Yet if these feelings of disgust all over the world could be united into common action, something effective could be done.[3]

Benenson founded Amnesty International the following year, and ever since, the organization's members have adopted individual "prisoners of conscience," and corresponded and supported these prisoners while lobbying governments in an attempt to secure their release. From the very start, Amnesty encouraged its members to cultivate a feeling of interdependence and intimate connection with prisoners. The act of adopting and communicating with distant prisoners was both a practical form of human rights work and a more capacious and self-reflexive experiment for individuals in the "free world" to think with and through the matrix of the prison and the experience of the prisoner. Accompanying Benenson's opening appeal, a large black and white drawing of an emaciated prisoner stared out blankly, meeting the eyes of the reader in an act of ethical injunction and interpellation [fig 1]. The prisoner's gaze seemed to invite a self-juxtaposition of oneself against or alongside the life of a prisoner. Members of Amnesty entered into a kinship with prisoners, one in which their freedom was given particular relief through an obverse image of the prisoner.

Figure 10. Peter Benenson, "The Forgotten Prisoners," May 28th, 1961.

[3] Peter Benenson, "The Forgotten Prisoners," *Observer*, May 28th, 1962.

Amnesty and Solzhenitsyn spoke with the same voice and the same message, entreating the free world, and those who simply possessed their freedom, to act, and ultimately to *write,* on behalf of the world's prisoners. Writing for the prisoner who could not write and speak on his or her own behalf could fill the void left by a feeling of "impotence," turning sickening "frustration" into right moral action. Vitally, Amnesty framed this pursuit in moral rather than political terms: writing for and about the human rights of prisoners was, in theory at least, an act of conscience, universal in character, transcending the ideological crudities and moral compromises of politics. The cause of the prisoner and human rights appealed especially strongly to writers during this period, since it harmonized with a desire to make their art and practice into a force of social good and social justice, without recourse to the partisanships of the Cold War. Furthermore, if Amnesty's "appeal" on behalf of prisoners attracted writers, writers also recognized themselves in the figure of the "prisoner of conscience." And they were right to do so. As I discuss later in the case of the poet and Amnesty POC Agostinho Neto, the foundation of Amnesty and its practice stemmed not only from its members' acts of writing, but also from the prisoner's act of writing under duress. What I call the "scene of carceral creation" circulated widely as a paradigmatic instance of human rights in action, that is: in writing. The prisoner's defiant act of writing and their claim to a "right to write" was mirrored by the free writer's injunction to write in the name of human rights.

Whether they were claiming their own freedom to write from prison, or advocating on behalf of the freedom of expression and conscience of others, global writers in the late twentieth-century were both deeply affected by and highly influential on the growth of an international politics of the prisoner. For those who were not prisoners themselves, writers in the global north

such as Margaret Atwood, C.K. Williams, Harold Pinter, and Muriel Rukeyser were often compelled to write about prisoners as a result of information provided by human rights organizations that they later joined and championed. Pinter and Rukeyser would go on to lead international human rights campaigns on behalf of prisoners; and Atwood hosted the first ever conference on writers and human rights in Toronto in 1980, where formerly imprisoned writers such as Jacabo Timerman and Soyinka convened with writer/advocates from the north like Allen Ginsberg and Susan Sontag. Other writers came to write about the prisoner because they hailed from nations and regions where the state openly, or clandestinely, tortured, abused, or otherwise mistreated prisoners. Seamus Heaney in Northern Ireland, and J.M. Coetzee and Nadine Gordimer in Sought Africa are prominent examples of major global writers who wrote seminal works on the carceral dynamics of the their home nation. Similarly, the writers of the Latin American "boom" generation acted both as global ambassadors of culture, putting modern Latin American and literature and culture on the map, and as de-facto human rights activists. Gabriel Garcia Marquez and Julio Cortazar both participated as judges and witnesses in Bertrand Russell's international war crimes tribunals, and the Argentinian novelist, Ernesto Sabato, led his country's truth and reconciliation committee, authoring its monumental work of human rights research and historical memory, *Nunca Mas* (1984). Yet no matter where they hailed from, these writers used the prisoner as a conduit to rethink ideas of moral conscience and aesthetic freedom, and often simply to consider why and how to write. The circulating voices of prisoners opened up new ways of conceiving of older questions about the capacity and responsibility of the writer in global society.

A ubiquitous image in human rights visual culture captures something of the impact of the human rights movement and the prisoner on the idea and ethics of writing: the barbed wire

pen [Fig. 10]. The image invokes Amnesty's ever-burning barbed-wire candle, and I intended to represent the activity of writing carried out by the individual members of the organization. In an Amnesty publicity poster from the mid-1980s, this activity is promoted in a headline that reads "Freedom Writers," but the iconography itself suggests the opposite — the act of writing imprisoned. It is in this sense that the graphic coupling of the pen and the barbed wire crystalize an important dynamic within global literary culture, in which the act of writing is understood to be, in some way, less free, figuratively tangled in barded wire. In campaign protest poster for Nigerian writer and activist Ken Saro Wiwa, a hand grasps the barbed-wire pen, but it is unclear if the hand is meant to be Saro Wiwa's, who wrote two stirring prison memoirs, or the hands of the human rights advocates writing on his behalf [fig.11]

Figure 10. "Freedom Writers." Amnesty Campaign, 1988

Figure 11. PEN International Campaign Poster. Courtesy of Harry Ransom Center

As both human rights and writers' organizations began circulating information about political prisoners and imprisoned writers, long held ideas about the freedom to write came under a new kind of self-scrutiny provoked by feelings of global connection and interdependence. For instance, throughout her poem sequence from the early 1980s, "Notes Towards a Poem that Can Never be Written," Margret Atwood intimates that the freedom to write in the West (in Canada in Atwood's case) might be understood and also put to better use as the inverse or opposite of the silencing of bodies and minds around the world, in prisons and under torture. To get at this idea

in her poetry, Atwood tries to imagine the act of composing a poem about a women being tortured as a kind of co-authorship:

> The women lies on the wet cement floor
> under the unending light,
> needle marks on her arms put there
> to kill the brain
> and wonders why she is dying.
>
> She is dying because she said.
> She is dying for the sake of the word.
> It is her body, silent
> and fingerless, writing this poem.[4]

Atwood was moved to write this series after joining Amnesty in the late 1970s; and in fact, the poems from "Notes Towards a Poem that cannot be Written," are often referred to as her "Amnesty poems." Amnesty asked its members to experience one's own freedom in dialectical relation to a prisoner's bondage. Proprietors of aesthetic freedom understood themselves to be especially free, and so the negotiation of their freedom vis-à-vis the prisoner's bondage (or silence) became particularly meaningful and influential for the politics and ethics of writing. The barbed wire pen reflects this negotiation.

[4] Margaret Atwood, *Selected Poems II: 1976-1986* Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1988), 67.

§

From the grim perspective of the late 1940s, the insecurities of the refugee struck some as a new universal human condition. In 1948, W.H. Auden wondered if "everybody" would not at one point be "reduced to the anxious status of a shady character or a displaced person."[5] Yet within a few decades, the commanding importance of displacement gave way to the primacy of the prisoner. "It may be that our century is the century of camps, of prisoners," the German novelist Heinrich Boll wrote in 1972, "and whoever has never been imprisoned, whether he boasts or is ashamed of his good or bad fortune — has been spared the experience of the century."[6] Glimpsed from the perspectives of Auden and Boll, the gravest human rights violations of the last century appear the result of two oscillating forces. First there were the waves of forced migration and displacement charted in the last chapter, followed by an era of arbitrary arrest, mass incarceration, disappearance, torture, and the Gulag. And indeed, at different moments, displacement and incarceration have has served as a dominant structure of feeling dictating how human rights are understood and represented. This chapter leaves the era of the refugee and displacement behind, and turns to the era of incarceration and the prisoner. This pivot also entails moving into the period of a fully realized human rights movement. While the refugee magnetized human rights thinking around mid-century, and does so again today, as the historian Barbara Key's point out, "Two key issues that came to dominate the liberal human

[5] Age of anxiety 6
[6] Heinrich Boll, "The Imprisoned World of Solzhenitsyn's *The First Circle,*" in *Alexander Solhenitsyn: Critical Essays and Documentary Materials,* ed. John B Dunlop, Richard Haugh, and Alexis Klimoff (Belmon: Nordland, 1973), 227.

rights agenda in the 1970s: political imprisonment and torture."[7] These issues are the foci of this chapter.

Just as the last chapter assembled an archive of stateless writing, the pages that follow take up a number of writers who were prisoners or were compelled to write about and act on the prisoner's behalf. Yet this chapter is not strictly a study of "prison writing," a task that has already been ably accomplished.[8] Instead, it is a two-layered account of how the imprisoned writer helped give rise to and sustain the human rights movement, and how the human rights movement in turn transformed global literatures, in great part by raising up the status and profile of the prisoner. In important ways, this chapter advances lines of inquiry opened in the previous one. It continues to work with the history and archives of PEN International, following the organization as it transitions from a wartime focus on refugees to a postwar politics of the prisoner. The fact that PEN moved so seamlessly from displacement to incarceration as its focus makes organization a particularly good bellwether for examining the transition from mid-century human rights to the postwar human rights movement. In continuing to include PEN in my story I also maintain my focus on the significance of the act of writing for human rights. While in the last chapter I showed how PEN's refugee work led the organization to adopt a position in which writing was inextricable from human life and human rights, these ideas become more explicit in this chapter because beginning in the 1970s writing begins to be upheld as a human right, and an especially privileged one within the human rights movement.

---

[7] Barbara Keys, *Reclaiming American Virture: The Human Rights Revolution of the 1970s* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013), 77.

[8] Barbara Harlow, Barred: Women, Writing, and Political Detention (Boston: Wesleyan University Press, 1992), Ioan Davies, Writers in Prison (London: Wiley Blackwell, 1990), Rivkah Zim, Consolations of Writing: Literary Strategies of Resistance From Boethius to Primo Levi (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014).

As the cultural historian Ioan Davies put it in the early 1990s, "everywhere, across time and societies, prisoners are not expected to write. They are expected to be written for. What happens when the prisoner writes?"[9] I answer this question in different ways in the pages to follow. To Davies' question, though, I add important ancillary queries: when did we begin listening to the prisoner? For whom did the prisoner write? How did the prisoner write? What does it mean if the prisoner who writes writes about writing itself? The first sections traces the history of the politics of the imprisoned writer, and shows the importance part these politics played in the development of the human rights movement. A later section turns specifically to the topic of torture. And I conclude with an analysis of a global dynamic that conjoins world literature and human rights, a dynamic I call "the prisoner's pressure."

THE POLITICAL LIFE OF BRUISED BARDS

In 2007, PEN International and George Soros' Open Society published a world anthology of imprisoned and persecuted writers titled *Writers under Siege: Voices of Freedom from Around the World*. It was the fourth PEN anthology devoted to writers in prison to be published since 1985.[10] The anthology includes poems, letters, appeals, prose fragments, and short essays and declarations from nearly thirty countries, and boasts contributions from Nobel Prize winners such as Harold Pinter and Orhan Pamuk, as well as slain martyrs like the Nigerian novelist and environmental activist Ken Saro Wiwa. Included in the volume is the Nigerian writer Chris Abani's poem "Portal" (2000), which recounts his first of many stints as a political prisoner in the 1980s. Born in 1966, Abani belongs to the first generation of writers indigenous to an

[9] Davies, *Writers in Prison,* 7.
[10] Carole Seymour-Jones and Lucy Popescu Eds. *Writers Under Siege: Voices of Freedom from Around the World* (New York: New York University Press, 2007).

international climate of human rights. And the poem is an acute testament to the fact that by the late twentieth-century, human rights organizations were helping shape world literature.

When first arrested
18.
Excited by possibilities of fame;
inflamed by
legends of political prisoners: sure that
Amnesty would free me

But the letters from Amnesty never arrive. "No word/ from my family/ no amnesty."

Caught in the cross-hairs of fear,
the only way to mark
the days is by counting the beatings
3 a day
62 days: 186. [11]

Abani's poem shows that by the late 1990s, one could not only write a poem *about* the watching eyes of human rights NGOs like Amnesty International, but also write in such a way as to intimate, with some irony, that an imprisoned writer in Nigeria would write *for* these institutions. Abani suggests this by dutifully tallying his beatings, "3 a day/ 62 days: 186," as if cognizant that the poem might one day be used as evidence or as part of a human rights report. Thus while

[11] Chris Abani, "Portal," in Carole Seymour-Jones and Lucy Popescu Eds. *Writers Under Siege: Voices of Freedom from Around the World* (New York: New York University Press, 2007), 80.

amnesty may not have come to Abani's rescue, the very existence of the organization impresses a kind of rubric on the young poet, described here by an older Abani, writing from the West. Even further, though, "Portal" insinuates that Abani may have felt emboldened to write his incendiary work by his confidence that the plight of an unknown teenage playwright in Nigeria would raise alarms on the other side of the world. Abani imagines human rights NGOS as both an international audience for his dissident writing as well a protective shield from Nigerian state persecution.

Figure 13. Heinemann edition of Ngugi's *Detained* (1981)

No writer of a previous generation, save perhaps the most famous, could have imagined that their treatment at the hands of a government would resonate outside the urban elite of the nation, nonetheless provoke an international response and intervention. Even the legendary "political prisoners" who "inflame" Abani's imagination — such Kwame Nkrumah, Ruth First or Denis Brutus — could not have relied on international organizations to intervene on their

behalf, or to amplify their voices. Yet by the time Abani began writing in the 1980s, the combination of political circumstance, new medias, and shifting sentiments that was the human rights movement had raised the visibility and political leverage of imprisoned writers dramatically. Starting in the late 1960s, Heinemann's famed African Writers Series translated and published no less than twenty African prison memoirs and novels, many by PEN members or Amnesty International sponsored "prisoners of conscience" such as Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Jack Mapanje, Stephen Biko, Wole Soyinka, and Nawal El Saadawi.[12] So numerous were imprisoned writers in Apartheid South Africa that Amnesty International's landmark report, *Political Imprisonment in South Africa* (1978), could have read as a catalogue of Heinemen's African Writers Series.

Prison memoirs often circulated and were sometimes partially funded as part of existing human rights campaigns on behalf of the author. The cover of Heinemann's edition of Ngugi's *Detained* conspicuously doubles as a protest placard, replete with the stirring call to arms, "free Ngugi now." [fig 3]. *Detained* begins with a long letter dedication to the "London Ngugi defense committee; Amnesty International; The International PEN clubs; the Afro-Asian Writers Movement; and many other teachers', writers', students', and workers' organizations from around the world" (ii).[13] Today, we take the connections between imprisoned writers and international human rights institutions for granted. But when and how did this collaborative matrix emerge? And how did it transform global literature itself?

§

[12] Many of these writings are collected in Jack Mapanje ed. *Gathering Seaweed: African Prison Writing* (London: Heinemann, 2002).
[13] Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *Detained: A Writer's Prison Diary* (London, Heinemann, 1981), 8.

In many ways, the international politics of imprisoned writers was invented by an all but forgotten figure, Paul Tabori. A Hungarian émigré and mildly successful science fiction writer, Tabori cut his teeth working for the PEN Refugee Writer's Fund in wartime London. Following the war, he led a successful drive to adapt PEN's wartime refugee work to the postwar context of permanently exiled writers. In 1947, Tabori took over as the head of the PEN Exiled Writers Center in London, and with the help of grants from a newly formed UNESCO organization, he edited and published the first of many PEN anthologies, *The Pen in Exile* volumes one (1954) and two (1956), which are the forerunners of later PEN and Amnesty anthologies focusing on imprisoned and persecuted writers. [fig 14].

Figure 14. Paul Tabori's *The Pen in Exile* (1954).

The failed Hungarian revolution of 1956 proved a turning point for Tabori. Hopes for reform in Eastern Europe had peaked following Stalin's death in 1956; yet Krushshev's crushing intervention following the Hungarian socialist revolution stemmed hopes of reform. While the flood of refugees pouring out of Hungary generated widespread sympathy in the West, one figure in particular captured international public imagination: the imprisoned Hungarian novelist Tibor Dery. Under the auspices of PEN, Tabori spearheaded an international campaign to free

Dery, enlisting a remarkably diverse range of writers, from Jean Paul Sartre, Arthur Koestler, and Albert Camus, to T.S. Eliot and Karl Jaspers, who successfully pressured the Soviet backed puppet government in Hungary to commute Dery's sentence substantially, leading to his release in 1960.[14]

Following the success of the Dery case, Tabori looked to establish a permanent organization to publicize and advocate for the release of imprisoned writers. His opportunity arrived in 1960. In the summer of that year, over a hundred writers convened in Rio de Janeiro for the XXXI Congress of PEN International. Backed by a generous grant from UNESCO, the congress boasted delegates from over forty countries, including Pakistan, the Ivory Coast and the Philippines, alongside writers of international renown like Graham Greene, Alberto Moravia, Heinrich Boll, and John Hersey. On July 25, during the congress's first full session, Tabori broke legitimately new ground in the international politics of writing and writers when he dramatically tabled a list 53 imprisoned writers, simultaneously translated into English, French, Spanish, and Portuguese [fig. 13]. Tabori's list had a dramatic effect on the course of the congress and the organization as a whole. For the remainder of the Rio congress, the prisoner took center stage. Provoked by Tabori's index, the Austrian's offered a resolution, calling on all "PEN Centers to do their utmost in the spirit of the Charter to support the work of a permanent PEN Committee for Writers in Prison to establish the freedom of writing wherever it is suppressed."[15] The resolution passed unanimously, and by the end of the congress PEN's Writers in Prison

[14] Letter from David Carver and Paul Tabori, 11/22/1966, Box 3, F: P.EN. Archive - International Writers Fund, 1960-66, General Correspondence, 1 of 2, HRC.

[15] Manifesto Submitted by the Austrian PEN Centre, July 1960, International Congresses: Rio 1960, PEN International Archive, Folder 3, HRC.

Committee (WiPC) had been formed. Tabori's initiative clearly resonated with the times. Within the year, the WiPC won the largest philanthropic windfall in PEN's history, securing large grants from UNESCO and the Ford Foundation.[16]

Figure 15. Page from Paul Tabori's initial list of imprisoned writers. Rio, 1960.

In its first years, the WiPC worked primarily by collecting information on imprisoned writers and providing legal and financial support. They began to compile biannual indexes of imprisoned writers and journalists, which they continue to publish and distribute today.[17] New communications technologies and information sharing amongst a burgeoning network of NGOS

[16] Letter from David Carver and Paul Tabori, 11/22/1966, Box 3, F: P.EN. Archive - International Writers Fund, 1960-66, General Correspondence, 1 of 2, HRC.

[17] "PEN Newsletter, Number 10, Spring 1970," 1970, Folder: PEN Newsletter Nos. 6-12, 1966-1973, HRC.

made this kind of international action both possible and increasingly popular during the early 1960s. The WiPC gathered and circulated individual accounts by prisoners and their families, and worked to raise awareness and garner public action on behalf of writers persecuted for acts of dissent. Though often overlooked, one of the early stories they circulated was of the Angolan poet Agostinho Neto, who, amongst other future achievements (for instance being the first president of independent Angola) would become one of Amnesty International's first "prisoners of conscience."

Figure 16. Agostinho Neto, 1968.

POET FLOGGED IN FRONT OF FAMILY

Though it is rarely remarked upon, the founding of Amnesty International in 1961 begins with the story of a "flogged" and imprisoned poet, the Angolan Agostinho Neto. In an editorial published in the British press in May of that year, Peter Benenson, the organization's founder, launched an "Appeal for Amnesty, identifying six "prisoners of conscience" who the campaign would seek to free. The article then moved to a sensational headline, "Poet Flogged in Front of Family," under which Benenson told the story of Neto, a poet and democratic activist who had been dragged from his home and publicly beaten by the Portuguese police, then taken into police custody without explanation and placed in solitary confinement in the Cape Verde islands. To Benenson's mind, the public flogging of Angola's "leading poet" offered up an instance of "revolting brutality," so "revolting," in fact, that Neto's beating came to function

synecdochically as *the* exemplary case of moral bathos and suffering towards which Amnesty's campaigns were to be directed.[18]

A "prisoner of conscience," as it was defined by Amnesty describes an individual "imprisoned or tortured" only because of their "opinions or religion" (1). Prisoners of conscience by definition do not engage in or advocate violence. Thus to imprison an individual on grounds of "opinion or religion," Benenson continued, is in breach of the UDHR, article 18, pertaining to the "right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion," and article 19, the "right to freedom of opinion and expression." To "flog" a poet is a human rights violation not necessarily because flogging is illegal but because poetry falls into a category of fundamental and universal freedom and rights.[19]

Ioan Davies has suggested that the "imprisoned writer" is the origin and template of Amnesty's "prisoner of conscience." Neto's place as one of the first POC's, which Davies does not discuss, supports this claim. Davies traces a genealogy of the POC, leading from Jesus and Socrates, Boethius and John Bunyan, Oscar Wilde and Fyodor Dostoevsky, to Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Primo Levi.[20] Throughout history, heretics have found themselves behind bars: too dangerous to let free and too innocuous to kill. As Davies sees it, their various textual accounts comprise a tradition of "conscience," which Benenson, a Catholic convert and an open admirer of figures such as Bonhoeffer, extrapolated upon to imagine the ideal subject of human rights work. As we will see, many writers have become high profile POCS in Amnesty's history.

Yet beyond exemplarity, the place of Neto's flogging in Amnesty's founding raises a broader question of how aesthetic freedom has governed our lived understanding of human rights at the international level in the twentieth-century. Seamus Heaney, for instance, believes the

[18] Benenson, "The Forgotten Prisoners," 3.
[19] Ibid., 2.
[20] Davies, *Writers in Prison*, 6.

freedom of aesthetic creation to be an ideal instance of human freedom realized. In the "The Government of the Tongue," Heaney writes: "In this figure of the poem's making, then, we see also a paradigm of free action issuing in satisfactorily achieved ends; we see a path projected to the dimension …And just as the poem, in the process of its own genesis, exemplifies a congruence between impulse and right action, so in its repose the poem gives us a premonition of harmonies desired and not inexpensively achieved."[21] Amnesty begins its life with a symbolic reversal of Heaney's "paradigm of free action" in "the figure of the poems making." The headline "Poet flogged" is a record of the poem unmade; the action (and phrase) diametrically opposing Heaney's paradigmatic freedom. Then in 1984, the year Heaney writes "The Government of the Tongue," Amnesty International approached Heaney to have him write the organization's first official anthem. Heaney accepted, and called it "From the Republic of Conscience." If Neto's flogging negates poetry through imprisonment and the power of the state, Heaney's later poem for Amnesty imagines a state where poetry governs.

"From the Republic of Conscience" records a round-trip journey through the titular territory, a province of the moral imagination where

> Their sacred symbol is a stylized boat.
> the sail is an ear, the mast is a sloping pen,
> the hull is a mouth shape, the keel and open eye.
>
> At their inauguration, public leaders
> must swear to uphold unwritten law and weep

[21] Seamus Heaney, *The Government of the Tongue: Selected Prose, 1978-1986* (London: MacMillan, 1990), 60.

to atone for their presumption to hold office

Upon departure, he is deemed "a dual citizen" and tasked by the officials of the republic

to consider myself a representative
and to speak on their behalf in my own tongue.

Their embassies, he said, were everywhere
but operated independently
and no ambassador would ever be relieved.[22]

Tasked by Amnesty to write a poem about human rights, Heaney imagines a polity where poetic license rules supreme. He rehearses a much older fantasy in which national allegiance can be measured in aesthetic inventiveness. In this republic — a kind of inverted projection of Plato's – – the unleashing of imaginative capacities and the upholding of "unwritten laws" shores up the borders of the state. Heaney intimates that "conscience" might be understood as the social or moral recapitulation of poetic license.

Twenty-five years after Amnesty launched with Neto's "flogging," they asked Heaney to write to redress the beating. Heaney doubtfully knew of Neto's formative history in Amnesty; nevertheless, "From the Republic of Conscience" responds to the Angolan's flogging by raising the flag of the imagination over the state. Yet in doing so, Heaney also follows Neto's lead.

[22] Seamus Heaney, *Collected Poems, 1966-1987* (London: Macmillan, 1990), 240.

During his imprisonment in Cape Verde, Neto addressed the matter of his flogging in a famous piece of African prison poetry. Untitled but much anthologized, the poem translates each individual blow into a stressed and rhythmic poetic line:

> Create create
> over the profanation of the forest
> over the brazen fortress of the whip
> create over the perfume of sawn trunks
> create
> create with dry eyes
>
> create create
> bursts of laughter over the derision of the
> *palmatória*[23]

Neto turns his political beating into poetic beats, and imagines resistance as a matter of *making*. The brutality of the state is met with a familiar call to action — but action framed as creation. The hortatory injunction to "create" — and to "create over" the force that renders pain and submission — counters each strike of the "palmatoria." And thus creation, or *poesis*, is the counterforce to the power of the state.

It hardly matters how much or how little we choose to read Neto's poem back into Amnesty's founding, since its ideas are already pregnant in the headline, "Poet Flogged."

[23] Agostinho Neto, "Untitled" in Mapanje, *Gathering Seaweed*, 138.

Amnesty's inaugural headline staged a convergence between aesthetics and politics – a literal convergence, insipient in a moment of blunt contact — to which the poem (and Amnesty) responds.

§

Scenes of carceral creation like the one we see staged in Neto's poem are replicated, broadcast, and reinterpreted across the literature of the human right movement. Repeatedly in the period stretching from 1970s to the 1990s, the scene of literature's creation behind bars, under conditions of duress or torture, provides a frame for isolating the conflict between people and power, the imagination and incarceration. In this isolation, creation, cut across by incarceration, becomes "conscience." In these scenes, the act of literary making instantiates the prisoner's inalienable freedom and raises writing to a form of moral action that transcends politics.

If there really is a literary foundation to human rights as we know it and live it, it develops outward from the isolated scene of literary creation as moral action — exemplified in the prisoner's act of writing. Consider, for instance, a powerful and generically representative moment in the Argentinian journalist Jacobo Timerman's bestselling memoir, *Prisoner Without a Name, Cell Without a Number* (1981). Condemned to solitary and having endured months of torture by a right wing militia, Timerman decides to "write a book." From the moment he hatches the plan we are aware that he cannot really mean "write," since being without pen and paper, even toilet paper, and often without food or water, he lacks the resources required. By "write a book," he informs us, he means a practice of "mental labor," designed for the longs

hours "inside my solitary cell, during interrogations, long torture sessions."[24] To resist and reduce the brutality brought on him by his captors, Timerman then indulges in a willfully digressive creative act, the "selection of style:"

> I held a long discussion with myself about what style to employ. Modeling it after Pablo Neruda would be reiterative, an inadequate romanticism perhaps; whereupon I recalled Federico Garcia Lorca's style in "Poet in New York," and came up with a few lines, but then began wondering if perhaps Stefan George's symbolism might not be more appropriate, for in a certain way it was linked with Franz Kafka's world.[25]

In Timerman's terms writing comes very close to signifying rights. Thus he goes on to build a fortress of styles as if they might protect him against his aggressors; he considers Vladimir Mayakovsky, Paul Eluard, Paul Claudel, Louis Aragon, alongside the "poets of my youth," Walt Whitman, Carl Sandburg, and "the Spaniards," Miguel Hernandez, Luis Cernuda. "Finally, I settled on Stephen Spender," he concludes, "and began to write, in my mind."[26] In the end, his opus never sees the light of day, and the book remained a creature of prison alone. Still, his memoir remains a persistently, even aggressively literary text, one in which literature and literariness repeatedly invert the powerlessness of political imprisonment and carves out the space of freedom.

---

[24] Jacabo Timerman, *Prisoner Without a Name, Cell Without a Number* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2003), 36-37.
[25] Ibid., 35.
[26] Ibid., 36.

Similarly, the Nigerian writer Ngugi's prison memoir *Detained* (1981), published the same year as Timerman's *Prisoner Without a Name, Cell Without a Number,* turns on the story of literary creation. Like Timerman, Ngugi was a high profile "prisoner of conscience" and the subject of a vocal and well publicized international freedom campaign. In fact, the Heinemann edition of *Detained* was designed to double as a kind of protest placard. Yet unlike Timerman, Ngugi was able to write while in prison —surreptitiously on toilet paper — and composed a novel, *The Devil on the Cross* (1981), which we might think of as the physical realization of Timerman's imagined book of poems. *Detained* thus records the creation of *The Devil on the Cross,* making it the ideal example of the prison memoir which is in fact an index of the creative process. *Detained* opens with a classical invocation of a muse: "*Wariinga ngatha ya wira*…Wariinga heroine of toil…there she walks haughtily carrying her freedom in her hands." Wariinga, we find out, is fruit of Ngugi's uninhibited imagination: the half-mythical protagonist of the novel that he has decided to write as a prisoner, and against the prison itself, "to defy daily the intended detention of my mind."[27] The South African Breyten Breytenbach's monumental prison work, *The True Confessions of an Albino Terrorist* (1983), likewise recounts the creation of a novel in prison, *Mouroir* (1983). Knowing that his work would be read by the prison officials, Breytenbach wrote in a highly abstract style. Prison isolates the process of writing and reframes it as an act of "conscience" and resistance to dehumanization and instrumentalization. Breytenbach speaks of his need to write poems as the counterbalance to the forced confessions he is prompted to make by his jailers, who he calls the "Greyshits." "Even during the period of detention I had been allowed to write, it was something I could not ignore. A voice said write, and I wrote. And the more I had to enter the slithering area of confessing to and for the

[27] Ngugi, *Detained*, 9, 10.

Greyshits, trying to pin down and imagine life….I experienced the need to write what was 'true' — to communicate with someone else, not always the enemy."[28] As the human rights movement took shape, it lent the act of literary creation a new international profile and purpose. Yet, at the same, Amnesty built itself on the foundation of long held beliefs about literature's value and social function. The relays between rights and writing were mutually beneficial

I DO THE TORTURER IN OTHER VOICES

In the 1970s, the voice of political prisoners acquired a new international profile and audience. But more specifically, it was the voice of the tortured that cut through international noise with remarkable speed and amplification. More than any other single issue, the drive to end torture helped define the practices and ethos of the human rights movement in these breakthrough decades. It also contributed to a considerable rise in political stock and visibility for the movement, culminating in Amnesty International's Nobel Peace Prize in 1977.

On Human Rights Day, December 10, 1972, Amnesty officially launched its landmark Campaign Against Torture (CAT), with the stated goal of making torture "as unthinkable as slavery," and seizing on the language of "abolition" to further link the project to the movement to end slavery."[29] Amnesty now cast torture as a "crime against humanity." The following year, Amnesty convened its International Conference for the Abolition of Torture in Paris, in which the organization deemed torture "evil" and vowed to "eradicate this obscene instrument."[30]

---

[28] Breyten Breytenbach, *Confessions of an Albino Terrorist* (London: Harvest Books, 1983), 198.
[29] "Help Amnesty Fight Torture: An Appeal for Financial Support," p. 5, Amnesty International's International Secretariat Archives, International Institute for Social History, Amsterdam [hereafter, AI IISH], Folder 1234.

[30] Amnesty International, *Conference for the Abolition of Torture – Final Report* (London: Amnesty

Concluding with a concert by Joan Baez, an Amnesty stalwart, the conference also reflected the growing importance of anti-torture politics in the post-1960s counterculture slowly making its way into the mainstream. By 1975, Amnesty's torture reports were being published by Farrar Strauss and Giroux in the United States and Gallimard in France, and were being read by countless writers who integrated them into their work.[31]

Why the fascination with torture? As I discuss further on, J.M. Coetzee would ask that question of his fellow South African writers in in the early 1980s. For historians such as Samuel Moyn and Barbara Keys, who take a critical view of the practices of organizations such as Amnesty, the prevalence and success of torture in the politics of human rights in the 1970s threatened to reduce the movement into a single-issue campaign. As Keys explains, "torture proved a powerfully emotive subject." It did so by way of Amnesty's universalizing strategy, making torture the epitome of the "unspeakable" and "unconscionable," a collective crime, a strike against humanity. But while leading with the issue of torture brought unprecedented numbers to Amnesty's rank and file, Keys and Moyn suggest that it did so at a cost, attuning people to spectacular injury and "trading on torture testimony's shock value," to the detriment of more noble causes.[32]

Yet even before the rise of human rights, the voice of the torturer proved transformative for culture and politics in the twentieth-century. In postwar France, where the cultural politics of torture were born, the revelation of widespread torture by the military in Algeria (long an open secret) sparked a public debate that ultimately turned public opinion against the prolongation of

---

International, 1974), 10, 12.

[31] *Amnesty Internationl Report on Torture* (New York: Farrar Strauss and Giroux, 1975).
[32] Keys, *Reclaiming American Virtue*, 103.

imperial rule. During World War II, occupying Germans had employed torture against the French resistance. Collaterally, use of torture by the French in Algeria was seen as bringing the nation down to the level of Nazism: victims had become executioners. In 1958, Henri Alleg, a French citizen and editor of the communist newspaper *Alger Republican,* published *La Question* (1958), a detailed and gruesome account of torture at the hands of French police in Algeria. Alleg's book, which was quickly appended with an incendiary preface by Jean Paul Sartre, became the first book to be banned in France for political reasons since the revolution of 1798. Two years later, a female FLN activists named Djamila Boupacha released her own account of torture and rape at the hands of French officers, prefaced by Simone de Beauvoir. These graphic accounts led to an unofficial referendum on the French empire and on the Republican tradition of the Rights of Man, compelling many French citizens to "pause and examine French political history, as well as the role that the French Empire played in reshaping their society's value system."[33] After Alleg's revelations, torture became an issue that no writer or intellectual in France could ignore. "The use of torture," Albert Camus wrote in 1958, "are crimes in which we are all involved. The fact that such things could take place among us is a humiliation we must henceforth face."[34] Accordingly, nearly every major writer in France weighed in with unanimous if varied condemnations of torture, both in the press and in their creative work, and finally together in the infamous 1960 "Manifesto of the 121," officially titled the "Declaration of the Right to Insubordination in the Algerian War."

[33] Marnia Lazreg, *Torture and the Twilight of Empire: From Algiers to Baghdad* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 214.
[34] Albert Camus, *The Algerian Chronicles* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011), 140.

Figure 17. Spanish Edition of Henri Alleg's *La Question*, 1957.

The Algerian War thus made torture into a near requisite subject for writers of the postwar generation in France. Moreover, the greater intellectual response suggested that torture might not only be considered an important issue for the writer, but also a phenomenon deeply entangled with the ethics of writing itself. In his famous preface to Alleg's *La Question*, Sartre described torture as a form of linguistic and semantic perversion: "The purpose of torture is to force from a tongue, amid screams and the vomiting of blood, the secret of everything."[35] In this sense, Sartre argued, speech generated by torture, culminating in the written or dictated confession was literature's other. The confession was a kind of perverted script, corrupted language circulating in official discourse and branded as the "truth." By calling this language the "secret of everything," Sartre implied that it excluded the epistemological limitations that literature cultivates. The idea that torture manifests in the destruction of language has resonated widely since the 1970s. According to the literary critic Elaine Scarry, torture turns language into the "insignia of the regime."[36] Torture," Scarry suggests, is a practice of "unmaking the world." Humans create the world by making things — art and literature for instance —but torture breaks down our creations and turns our words to the maintenance of power and order. Torture hence fosters a language diametrically opposed to the freedom of the imagination. Prisons silence the prisoner, but torture is a highly effective form of language production and word processing. And thus it exists in competition with literature and literary creation.

We have already seen this dynamic at play, for instance, in Timerman's memoir, when he

[35] Jean Paul Sartre, "Introduction" in Henri Allege, *The Question* (Omaha: Bison Books, 2006), 12.
[36] Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 28.

imagines a work of literature into being as a response to the his daily regime of torture in Argentina. We have seen it too in Neto's opposition of flogging and creation. To "create" over the "brazen fortress of the whip" and the "derision of the /*palmatoria*" suggests that literary making can reverse the intentions of torture. Similarly, in Kim Chi Ha's famous poem, "Five Thieves" (1969) (for which he was later imprisoned and tortured), he goes so far as to make torture both the impetus to write and potentially the end point of good writing:

> If you're gonna write poetry,
> You should forget caution and write just like this.
>
> It has been sometime since I was spanked
> In the torture room for my unrestrainable pen
> And I'm mad again to write something
> My body itches, tongue and hand, wild and restless.
> And though my butt may burn from the flogging,
> I've got to write
> This unbelievably "true" story of thieves.[37]

The "unrestrainable pen" and the torture instrument are binaries but also in some way fungible. Kim's "unrestrainable pen" leads him to the torture room, but this only makes him "mad again to write something," and so he turns the pain of torture into the truth of his poetry as a form of remedy and redress. But by counseling his readers to write so truthfully that it might lead to

[37] Kim Chi Ha, *The Middle Hours: Selected Poems* (New York: Human Rights Publishing Group, 1980), 71.

torture and imprisonment, Kim also makes a telling, if playful, suggestion about the stakes of literary value.

Kim's 1969 poem proved prophetic. By the mid 1970s (when Kim became one of Amnesty's most high profile prisoners of conscience) individual cases of torture in small and distant countries like South Korea had transformed into an international concern. In the context of France and Algeria, the implications of systemic torture were understood as a blow to the imperial and democratic legitimacy of France. But now, set against the burgeoning global interdependence of the 1970s, torture was presented as crime implicating all of 'humanity," far and wide.

§

No literary tradition contributed more to the cultural anti-torture politics than Latin American writers of the postwar decades. For the writers of the Latin American "Boom" generation, including the Colombian Gabriel Garcia Marquez, the Argentineans Julio Cortazar, Ernesto Sabato, and Luisa Valenzuela, and Ariel Dorfman, the Mexican Carlos Fuentes, the Chilean Jose Denoso, and the Peruvian Mario Vargas Llosa, dictatorship and political violence comprised the fundamental material of almost all their writing.[38] This generation of writers came of age during a half-century of violent political and ideological struggle, military juntas, and Cold War insurgency and counterinsurgency, which unfolded over a period extending from World War II to the restoration of democracy in the Southern Cone in the 1990s. As Jean Franco suggests, during these immensely bloody decades "anticommunism became an alibi for slaughter, torture, and censorship— often in the name of 'stability' in opposition to 'chaos.' Under such

[38] For the best overview of the boom writers in relation to political violence see Jean Franco, *The Decline and Fall of the Lettered City: Latin America in the Cold War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002).

conditions, torture functioned as a routine form of "information gathering" used not only against "rebels" but also "socialists, hippies, women, gay men, and children who became the 'homo-sacer,' the dispensable non-citizens."[39] Whether it was confronted directly, as in Valenzuela's *Como en la Guerra* (1977, translated as *He Who Searches*) and *The Lizard's Tale* (1983), Denoso's *Curfew* (1986), or Ariel Dorfman's *Death and the Maiden* (1990), or indirectly as a single facet of the repressive societies these writers depicted, torture was ubiquitous in their writing.

Latin American writers contributed to international anti-torture politics in a variety of ways. Survivors of torture, like Timerman, provided vital testimony and became celebrities of the movement. *Prisoner Without a Name, Cell Without a Number* was adapted into a TV miniseries starring Liv Ullman, and Timerman commanded high profile audiences at the United Nation and Inter American Commission on Human Rights after his release in the early 1980s. Dorfman, who had fled Argentina in 1973, worked as a translator and human rights researcher in the United States. In 1979, Amnesty translated and published Dorfman's first book of poems, *Pruebas al canto* (literally "Poetic Evidence" or A Test of Poetry), which drew on transcriptions of interviews that he had conducted with victims of torture. In a more high profile contribution, between 1973-75,both Garcia Marquez and Cortazar acted as judges and participants in the second iteration of the Bertrand Russell War Crimes Tribunals held in Rome and Brussels. Focusing on human rights violations in Argentina, Chile, and Brazil, the widely covered tribunals brought scores of live and written torture testimony to world attention. It also demonstrated the symbolic authority held by writers as witnesses and judges to human rights abuses in South America. Nowhere was this authority more apparent than in the Argentinean

[39] Franco, *Decline and Fall,* 13, 21.

government's selection of Ernesto Sabato to head the landmark National Commission on the Disappearance of Persons in 1983, and to author the long narrative preface the commission's final report, *Nunca Mas* (1984). Sabato, a painter and novelist of existentialist and surrealist leanings, was a surprising choice to lead what was essentially Argentina's legal truth and reconciliation process, following the dictatorship known as the National Reorganization Process that lasted from 1976-1983. However, Sabato's reputation as writer of violent, intense and often disorienting fictions ultimately accorded with the collective experience and memory of a society scarred by terror. It was as if only a writer of rare imagination could fully compass the violent extremes that Argentina had endured under the regime. In selecting Sabato to oversee and preface *Nunca Mas,* the transitional government did not intend the report to be novelistic, but rather showed a keen recognition of the novelist's social function, to reveal or put into language what had previously been incomprehensible.

Figure 18. Ernesto Sabato ceremoniously delivers the first drafts of *Nunca Mas* to the Argentinean Parliament, 1984.

Figure 19. Gabriel Garcia Marquez at the Russell War Crimes Tribunals II. Brussels, 1974.

Sabato's role in the creation of *Nunca Mas* speaks not only to the importance of South American writers in the revelations of torture but also the influence exerted by the formal qualities of the "boom" writers on the apprehension and reception of torture internationally. Beyond the institutional roles played by these writers as activists and publicists of human rights abuses, their distinct style made theme particularly well suited to representing a phenomenon whose hiddenness and extremity made it difficult to fully imagine. Commonly referred to as "magical realism," the style developed variously by Latin American novels in the 1960s and 1970s mixed elements of modernism, surrealism, myth, and documentary. Its defining feature is a contrast of the impossible narrated as the ordinary, to the degree that such accounts of the impossible might be presented as evidence. In a dictatorial society where torture and disappearance are rampant but categorically denied, these human rights abuses take on a ghostly and unreal quality. As a result, the writer of surreal worlds miraculously assumes the role of documentarian, as Sabato did with *Nunca Mas*. Such is also the case, for instance, in the novels of Luisa Valenzuela, including her classic novelistic mediations on dictatorship and disappearance, *Como en la Guerra* (1977) and *The Lizard's Tale* (1983). As Avery F. Gordon has argued, "Valenzuela gets us farther than the human rights reports not only because the medium she employs is more suited to the task but also because she uses it to capture the haunting elements."[40] of South American dictatorship. Written while the author was in exile in the United States, working for PEN

[40] Avery F. Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*: *Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 84.

America, and living off a Guggenheim fellowship, *The Lizard's Tale* is an exemplary case of the transnational forms of human rights writing that helped animate and translate torture in South America for liberal readers in the West.

Like all of Valenzuela's fiction, *The Serpent's Tale* is formally experimental and multi-plotted. It follows a mythical ure ure known as the "Sorcerer" who is modeled after an illustrious Argentinean torture master, Lopez Rega. In classical magical realist style, real events from Argentinean history comprise the backdrop of the novel, while the foreground is occupied by the Sorcerer's surreal reign of terror. Valenzuela herself appears in the novel as a writer hired and held as kind of prisoner in order to compose the life of the Sorcerer, with whom she falls into a battle of narrative authority. Finally, she is able to write the Sorcerer out of existence by refusing to compose his biography. "By being silent now, I think I can make you silent. By erasing myself from the map I intend to erase you. Without my biography, it will be as if you never had a life. So long Sorcerer. *Felice Morte*."[41] Her refusal is akin to the resistance of confession or cooperation under torture. Valenzuela refuses to reproduce the narrative of the regime from which the Sorcerer derives power, and at the same time offers her novel as an alternative script aimed directly against the form of the torture confession. That fact that Valenzuela's novel was published by Farah Strauss and Giroux in the United States — who had also published Amnesty's *Torture Reports* — suggest that the book might be read as playing precisely such a role.

Even for those not immediately connected by birth or culture to authoritarian regimes, anti -torture politics played a crucial role in laying the stakes of political writing in the late 1970s and 1980s. Two important examples of writers directly influenced by the transnational politics of

[41] Luisa Valenzuela, *The Serpents Tale* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 1985), 207.

anti-torture are the British playwright and Nobel Laureate, Harold Pinter, and the Canadian writer Margaret Atwood. Both Pinter and Atwood officially joined Amnesty International in the late 1970s and remained active members and organizers over the next decade. In 1981, for instance, Atwood helped organize the first official conference on the topic of human rights and literature — called the "The Writer and Human Rights" — which brought together an all-star cast of international figures, including Timerman, Nadine Gordimer, Wole Soyinka, and Joseph Brodsky. In her introductory remarks, "Amnesty International: An Address," Atwood was one of the first Western writers to explicitly articulate the "writer's responsibility" by way of human rights in general, and torture specifically, calling on writers to respond to the "world's governments" who rule by "amputation: of the tongue, of the soul, of the head." By this light, responsible literature would be a project of reconstituting and reassembling a broken yet globally connected social body, where writers in liberal societies would speak and act on behalf of those who had been amputated.[42]

Like Atwood, Pinter was active as a human rights organizer and activist. In 1985, he and Arthur Miller traveled to Turkey on a mission co-organized by PEN and the Helsinki Watch networks to investigate torture in the military regime. Pinter's experiences in Turkey, and his growing involvement in Amnesty, contributed to a fundamental transformation in his writing, one in which he moved from being the foremost dramatic critic of British society to an equally powerful and renowned critic of the global New Right.

In Atwood and Pinter's work from early 1980s, the scene of torture took center stage. It acted as both a long range lens (to zero in on "distant" suffering) and a microcosm for analyzing

[42] Margaret Atwood, "Amnesty International: An Address," in *Second Words: Critical Prose, 1960-1982* (Toronto: Anansi, 1985), 168.

the dynamics of state power and domination. Furthermore, focusing on the space and language of interrogation allowed both writers to highlight the damaged and corrupted words produced by torture, and thus also adduce their own writing as alternative truths. Pinter's "torture plays *One for the Road* (1984) and *New World Order* (1991) take place in an interrogator's chamber, and consist entirely of dialogue between torturers or between torturer and victim. In his preface to *One for the Road,* Pinter explained part of the play's genesis in an alarming conversation in Istanbul with two young, "highly intelligent women," who deny that torture is used in Turkish prisons; "instead of strangling them," Pinter continued, " I came back immediately, sat down and, it's true, out of rage started to write *One for the Road*. It was a very immediate thing, yes. But it wasn't only that that caused me to write the play. The subject was on my mind" (2). The subject had been on Pinter's mind, he later recalled to his biographer, since the period following the Chilean dictator Augusto Pinochet's military coup in 1973.[43] But it had taken Pinter over a decade (including nearly four years of uncharacteristic silence for the prolific author) to leverage a response. As his preface indicates, Pinter quite explicitly wanted *One for the Road* to stand as his response, not only to the situation in Turkey but to realities of authoritarian rule everywhere it manifested.[44] And to do so, Pinter turned to the psychodymamics of the prisoner and torturer.

In Pinter's "torture plays" no one is physically tortured, except, perhaps, the audience who find themselves witnesses (and maybe accomplices) to the action. Furthermore, the setting and period of the plays are ambiguous, turning them into almost fable like explorations of power. In *One for the Road,* Nicolas, an interrogator, expertly terrorizes a family, Victor, his wife Gila, and their seven year old son Nicky. While torture and the repeated rape of Gila are alluded too, they are never depicted. Instead, much like the omnipotent Sorcerer in Valenzuala's novel

[43] Michael Billington, *Harold Pinter* (London: Faber and Faber, 2007), 290.
[44] Harold Pinter, *One for the Road* (London: Metheun, 1985), 3-6.

(published the year before), Nicolas strategically erodes the solid foundation of reality, where words might correspond to things. Early on he compares himself to the old testament God: "I run the place. God speaks through me. I'm referring to the Old Testament God, by the way, although I'm a long way from being Jewish. Everyone respects me here. Including you, I take it? I think that is the correct stance."[45] Nicolas pours a glass of whiskey for himself and pummels Victor with nonsense punctuated by allusions to Gila's sexuality and gang rape. Since Victor can barely respond, the play unfolds as Nicolas's monologue. This, in turn, acts as something like the "official story" of the regime, the one that Valenzuela's writer/biographer in *The Lizard's Tale* refuses to document. And the crux of the play, like so many literary representations of torture at this moment, turns on the moment that Nicolas attempts (under the tacit threat of Victor's death and the death of his family) to enlist Victor as a co-author in the life and narrative of the regime. Here is Nicolas's proposition to Victor:

> There is only one obligation. *To be honest*. You have no other obligation. Weigh that. In your mind. Do you know the man who runs this country? No? Well, he's a very nice chap. He took me aside the other day, last Wednesday, I think it was, he me aside, at a reception, visiting dignitaries, he took *me* aside, *me,* and said to me, he said, in what I can only describe as a hoarse whisper, Nic, he said, Nic (that's my name), Nic if you ever come across anyone whom you have good reason to believe is getting on my tits, tell them one thing, tell them honesty is the best policy. The cheese was superb. Goat. One for the road.[46]

[45] Pinter, *One for the Road,* 18.
[46] Ibid., 26.

Pinter's scene is characteristically panoptic *and* diagnostic panoptic. It takes in the entirety of the society, from the omnipotent leader (or Sorcerer) to the "disappeared" non-citizen. It is also a conspicuously intimate encounter between rightless citizen and the state: the intimacy first, between the leader and Nicolas (the sobriquet "Nic" and the closeness of their faces in a "hoarse whisper"); and second, the intimacy of Nicolas and Victor. The leader speaks through Nicolas, who hopes, through his own hoarse whisper, to speak the leader through Victor, creating the harmony that regenerates the regime. Victor refuses and asks Nicolas to kill him. Next they meet Victor is too weak and brutalized to speak. Nicolas tells victor he can leave, but Gila will remain in custody. He forces Victor to drink, "one for the road," and then alludes to the death of Victor's son, Nick. Victor goes free, but he is broken.

Atwood's poem "Torture" is more graphic in its depiction.

> What goes on in the pauses
> of this conversation?
> which is about free will
> and politics and the need for passion.
>
> Just this: I think of the women
> they did not kill.
> instead they sewed her face
> shut, closed her mouth
> to a hole the size of a straw,
> and put her back on the streets,
> a mute symbol.

it doesn't matter where

this was done or why or whether

by one side or the other;

such things are done as soon

as there are sides

and I don't know if good men

living crisp lives exist

because of this women or in spite

of her.

But power

like this is not abstract, is not concerned

with politics and free will, it's beyond slogans

a flayed body untangled

string by string and hung

to the wall an agonized banner

displayed for the same reason

flags are[47]

[47] Atwood, *Collected Poems*, 180.

Its important to note here that Atwood rehearses many of the prevailing views of torture during this period. It is universal and above ideology: "it doesn't matter where/ this was done or why or whether/ by one side or the other; such things are done as soon/ as there are sides." And its existence corrupts universally: can there be "good" men in such a world? And finally, torture is something that is ongoing and perpetual, and therefore when we speak of something else — "this conversation" — we choose not to speak of it. But Atwood isn't nagging. "This conversation" might be a conversation with herself as she sits down to write a poem, which she hopes will be about "free will/ and politics and the need for passion," yet, perhaps inevitably, becomes a poem about torture. And in this sense, Atwood's is a quintessential poem about its time. In the 1980s, speaking about international politics could feel almost synonymous with speaking about torture

§

In a 1986 *New York Times* article, J.M. Coetzee considered the ubiquity of writing about torture amongst writers in his native South Africa. He asked: "Why are writers in South Africa drawn to the torture room? The dark forbidden chamber is the origin of novelistic fantasy per se; in creating an obscenity, in enveloping it in mystery, the state creates the preconditions for the novel to set about its work of representation."[48] While Apartheid South Africa was exceptional both in its extensive use of torture and its censorship and persecution of writers who dared speak of it, Coetzee might also have been speaking of a much wider fascination with the topic that had grown up internationally. His own novel of torture, *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980), had

[48] J.M. Coetzee, "Into the Dark Chamber: The Novelist and South Africa," *New York Times,* January 12, 1986, 2.

helped break Coetzee internationally. It had done so because Coetzee set the novel in a nameless and non-descript "frontier," and rather than in contemporary South Africa, thus avoiding censorship.

Coetzee's draft and research notes show that he came to the topic of torture after the death in custody of the anti-apartheid activist Stephen Biko in 1977. In his diary, Coetzee wrote: "I must make the relation to the Biko affair clear" (Atwell 93). But due to both censorship laws and his orientation towards political allegory, Coetzee made the story into a more abstract consideration of the "the impact of the torture chamber on the life of a man of conscience" (2). The novel's protagonist, a magistrate in charge of a peaceful imperial frontier, finds himself an unwilling accomplice in a regime of arbitrary imprisonment and torture. The magistrate cannot bring himself to morally accept the torture, but neither will he physically intervene to stop it. This situation mirrored the experience of many white liberals under Apartheid. While never engaging in full on insubordination, the magistrate begins to care for and tend the wounds of a single female torture victim, in full knowledge that these minor deeds will do nothing to stop systematic torture in the empire. The magistrate's ultimately doomed act of care parallels Coetzee's novel itself, a minor intervention by a "man of conscience" reeling from the "impact of the torture chamber."[49]

THE PRISONER'S PRESSURE

Yet *Waiting for the Barbarians* and Coetzee's writing ever since have been anything but minor. Winner of countless international awards and the Nobel Prize in 2003, Coetzee is surely

[49] Ibid., 3.

one of the most influential novelists and moral thinkers alive today. The formative role played by the politics of the prisoner on his fiction speaks to importance of the prisoner for twentieth-century culture. In his earliest drafts of what would become *Waiting for the Barbarians,* Coetzee worked with a different story, set on in Africa's most illustrious prions, Robben Island, in the near future, following a civil war that has brought black South Africans to power. Robben Island, home to South Africa's great political prisoners, from Nelson Mandela to Denis Brutus, has been emptied out and now serves as a refugee camp and processing center for white South Africans.[50] It seems that Coetzee abandoned the novel in this form due to the overly explicit message of this reversal — blacks in power, whites on Robben Island. Nevertheless, the plot makes plain the symbolic power of Robben Island as a microcosm for the ills of Apartheid. In his acceptance speech for the 1987 Jerusalem Prize for the Freedom of the Individual in Society, Coetzee opined that prisons mark the genesis of the polity: "When a colony is founded, Coetzee continued in his speech, quoting Nathaniel Hawthorne, "the earliest practical necessity is to allot a portion of the virgin soil as a cemetery, and another portion as the site of a prison." "South African literature," he continued "is a literature in bondage….It is exactly the kind of literature you would expect people to write from a prison. And I am talking here not only about the South African *Gulag*."[51] South Africa under Apartheid, Coetzee asserted, was so dictated by knowledge of the wrongs committed in its prisons that it became impossible to write in a conscionable way without writing somehow addressing prisons and prisoners. Even though most writers did not write about prisons it was due to censorship: to depict in literature or even photograph prisons in South Africa was illegal. In this climate, the weight of the politics of the prisoner (a politics so wrapped up in matters of freedom) became nearly inseparable from the ethics of writing itself.

[50] *Waiting for the Barbarians* "drafts," Container 26.12, 15. J.M. Coetzee Papers, Harry Ransom Center.
[51] J.M. Coetzee, *Doubling the Point* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 98,99.

Writing the year that Coetzee delivered his speech in Jerusalem, Seamus Heaney, another Nobel laureate, turned also to writing about a prison island, not Robben Island but Sakhalin Island, a Russian prison colony deep in Siberia. In the 1890s, Anton Chekov, by then a world-renowned author, had traveled to Sakhalin in his capacity as a doctor in order, in Heaney's mind at least, to "pay his debt to society" by bearing witness and tending to the "wretched of the earth," the forgotten creatures of a "Siberian gaol."[52] Nearly a century after Chekov made his journey, Heaney became openly fixated on Chekhov's motivation to travel into the belly of the Czarist beast at the height of his literary fame. Heaney came to see Chekov's "duty" to the prisoners of Sakhalin as the outcome of the Russian author's conflicted relationship to his own literary fame and freedom. In the poem "Chekov on Sakhalin," Heaney draws on Chekov's own account of his journey and imagines a moment when Chekov, having traveled for weeks through harsh conditions, hopes to put the prisoners towards whom he travels out of his mind by drinking a bottle of cognac: "first he drank cognac by the ocean/ With his back to all he traveled north to face."[53] Overcome by both drunkenness and self-reproach, "He felt the glass go cold in the midnight sun/ When he staggered up and smashed it on the stones/ It rang as clearly as the convicts' chains/ That haunted him. All through the months to come/ It rang on like the burden of his freedom" (167). This "burden," of course, describes his freedom to write, made acutely burdensome by the "convicts' chains" that Chekov (or Heaney) do not wear. Not wearing chains means that Chekov can write freely, yet the mere cognizance of these chains, their haunting sound, calls that freedom into question, and leads Chekov to seek a balance between absolute freedom and conscience: "To try for the right tone— not tract, not thesis— /And walk away from

[52] Heaney, *Government of the Tongue,* 63.
[53] Heaney, *Collected Poems,* 167.

floggings."[54] Chekov will leave Sakhalin, and "walk away from floggings." However, he must find a way to write about and publicize those floggings that is not "tract, not thesis." Heaney's poetry of the 1980s — also his poetry of the period of the Irish "troubles' —is the distillation of that necessity. For Heaney during this period, the question of how to write freely becomes inextricable from the question posed in "Chekov in Sakhalin" — how to write about the prisoner. Indeed, save the few who found themselves political prisoners, of the major writers of the last quarter of the twentieth-century, perhaps nobody expressed a longer and more tortured relationship to the figure of the prisoner than Heaney. Discussing his inability to write in a satisfactory way in response to the hunger strikes of the early 1980s, Heaney would remark of his work of this period: "The self-accusation of those days is everywhere in the poetry."[55]

The 1970s and 1980s were incredibly dark for the North of Ireland. Sectarian violence, whose epicenter was in Heaney's hometown of Ulster, increased in frequency and intensity while political solutions to the "troubles" seemed less and less viable, especially after the election of Margaret Thatcher in 1976. Already, the outlawing of the IRA and other rebel groups had swollen the prisons at Long Kesh (for men) and Armagh (for women). In the "cages" of Long Kesh, structured like a prison camp, the members of the Irish nationalist militias enjoyed relative freedom of association and expression; they enjoyed official recognition as political prisoners by the British government, were separated from the general population of inmates, wore their own clothing, and could write and communicate with the outside world. But shortly after coming to power, Thatcher repealed the Special Political Status of Republican POWS, demoting them to the status of common criminals. Under Thatcher, Republican prisoners were stripped of their rights of association and organization, their rights to wear civilian clothing, and most importantly

[54] Ibid., 168.
[55] Dennis O'Driscoll, *Stepping Stones: Interviews with Seamus* Heaney (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2010), 103.

their right to write and communicate with the outside. The response was explosive. The male and female inmates at Long Kesh and Armagh Prisons conducted a series of protests, refusing, first, the imposition of prison uniforms and thereby going naked (the "Blanket Protests"), and later the refusal to leave their cells for fear of abuse and torture by the guards or to wash and "slop out" (empty their latrines), the outcome of which was the "Dirty Protests," when inmates used feces and menstrual blood to cover the walls of their cells. Finally, beginning in March 1981, Bobby Sands, a 21-year-old prisoner and elected MP, began a hunger strike, followed by dozens of men and women, nine of whom died in the H-Block wing of Long Kesh. Sands was the first. Francis Hughes, a neighbor of Heaney's from Ulster, was among them.

While the hunger strikes in Long Kesh struck remarkably close to home, Heaney was geographically and culturally distant from the events. Whereas Irish politics darkened after 1975, Heaney's career brightened considerably. International recognition and financial security allowed him to be essentially free from Ireland, a place increasingly less attractive as a home as it slipped further into war. Heaney thus spent the worst years of the "troubles," including the period of the hunger strikes, at Oxford and Harvard. And this distance from the events led to what he would later call, the "enduring agonies of conscience."[56] In the midst of the strikes, Heaney considered dedicating a poem cycle to the hunger strikers, but changed his mind after representatives of the IRA approached and asked him to write officially in support of the strikers. Heaney refused.

Although Heaney turned down the offer to write on behalf of the strikers, he agreed to look over the proofs of the poetry of the strike's most plangent voice, Bobby Sands. Included in

[56] O'Driscoll, *Stepping Stones*, 105.

the proofs was Sands' "Trilogy," which includes his famous admonition of artists who turned their backs on the prisoners in favor of artistic freedom:

> The Men of Art have lost their heart,
> They dream within their dreams.
> Their magic sold for price of gold
> Amidst a people's screams.
> They sketch the moon and capture
> Bloom
> With genius, so they say.
> But ne'er they sketch the quaking
> Wretch
> Who lies in Castlereagh.
>
> The poet's word is sweet as bird,
> Romantic tale and prose.
> Of stars above the gentle love
> And fragrant breeze that blows.
> But write they not a single jot
> Of beauty tortured sore.
> Don't wonder why such men can lie,
> For poets are no more.[57]

[57] Bobby Sands, *Writings from Prison* (Boston: Mercier Press, 1998), 94.

Whether or not Heaney took specific note of Sands' reproach, it is difficult not to read the poetry that followed, such as "Chekov on Sakhalin," as a response to Sands and the pressure of the prisoners of Long Kesh.

In a testament to the weight of the prisoners on his conscience, Heaney once remarked in a interview:

> There is some kind of perhaps too scrupulous refusal to get involved with what is essentially a Provisional I.R.A propaganda campaign…That was the deep text: when you move, you move on behalf of those guys — you're part of the war machine now, and in a way you have lost your mystery. On the other hand, if you do shut up, you go through this awareness: You live out, or live in, this really useless little tremor of liberal conscience. You're left with Margaret Thatcher. You're speaking not with forked tongue, but with forked silence."[58]

But rather than capitulate to either side, the "war machine" or "forked silence," Heaney wrote of the struggle of writing between a prison nation like Ireland and the "Republic of Conscience" he idealized in his poem for Amnesty International. Heaney's masterpiece from the period of the hunger strikes is the semi-autobiographical long poem, "Station Island" (1984), in which Heaney appears as a pilgrim, beset by visitors from the past. In one section, a hunger striker speaks from the beyond the grave:

[58] O'Driscoll, *Stepping Stones*, 207.

My brain dried like spread turf, my stomach

Shrank to a cinder and tightened and cracked.

Often I was dogs on my own tracks

Of blood on wet grass that I could have licked.

Under the prison blanket, an ambush

Stillness I felt safe in settled round me.[59]

Another speaker in the poem, a dead Republican fighter, accuses Heaney of an improper response to the deaths of the strikers: "You were there with poets when you got the word/and stayed there with them."[60] Later, Heaney's poetry is reproached for willfully turning a blind eye to the death of the strikers: "You confused evasion and artistic tact." Heaney surely felt those accusations deeply. However, "Station Island" is itself part of Heaney's response; and working through the guilt, the poem in which he finally comes to write explicitly and at length, is about the "troubles" and the strikes. Importantly, Heaney's response takes the form of a visionary pilgrimage and perpetual dream state. Sands accused: "The Men of Art/ Have Lost their Heart/ They dream within their dreams." And "Station Island" is long dream vision: "I dreamt and drifted. All seemed to run to waste." The hunger striker's voice comes to Heaney in a dream, in fact, in a "dream within a dream," and Heaney treats the voice with a layer of figuration that might very well have struck Sands as too dreamlike, confusing "evasion and artistic tact." But Heaney offers more than simple riposte. Instead, he seeks a form of compromise with Sands,

[59] Heaney, *Collected Poems,* 204.
[60] Ibid., 204.
.

laying claim to an ethical posture that neither turns its back to Long Kesh — as Chekov could not do of Sakhalin — nor renounces citizenship in the "Republic of Conscience."[61]

§

How to write? And how to write with and for the prisoner? In 1984, the same year Heaney asked and answered these questions in "Station Island," Nadine Gordimer, yet another Nobel Laureate, explored the quandary in her influential essay, "The Essential Gesture," first delivered as the Tanner Lecture on Human Values at the University of Michigan.[62] Gordimer, like Heaney, used the opportunity to acknowledge her own feelings of guilt and self-reproach for not doing more to improve conditions in her native South Africa; also like Heaney she acknowledged the accusation that she was not doing enough for her compatriots filling up the country's Gulags. "Any writer from a country of conflict will bear me out. When interviewed abroad, there is often disappointment that you are not there, and not in jail in your own country. And since you are not — why are you not? Aha…. does this mean you have not written the book you should have written?." Here, she makes a very astute and important observation regarding the impact of human rights and social justice on cultural value in the international sphere. In an atmosphere in which "critics and readers who live safe from the realm of midnight arrests and solitary….have their demands upon the writer," to write the right book, Gordimer intimates playfully, would, or should, land the author in prison. Playful as it is, Gordimer's quip spoke clearly to the pervasiveness of the prisoner's pressure on literary value, impressed both from the

[61] Ibid., 203, 204, 205.
[62] Nadine Gordimer, *The Essential Gesture: Writing, Politics and Places* (London: Penguin, 1989), 39.

prisoner's within her country and the "critics and writers" internationally who view global politics through the prism of the prison.[63]

Feeling herself caught between an international expectation to write herself into the prison and the local conditions of imprisonment, Gordimer wondered whether there was a space for the writer to be truly an asset to social justice without enacting or condoning the kind of politics that lead to solitary confinement. Was there, she asked, a place for the writer "between the ivory tower and the maximum security prison?" The answer that she developed over the next decade was that this was place of the writer as "witness," to which the next chapter will turn.

[63] Ibid., 35, 37.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE WITNESS

> *European thinking has been circling around one problem so old that many people are ashamed to name it… who can justify the suffering of the innocent?*
>
> Czeslaw Milosz "The Importance of Simone Weil" (1960)

By the early 1980s, towering figures of world literature like Nadine Gordimer, Seamus Heaney, Margaret Atwood, Harold Pinter, and J.M Coetzee could speak openly of the pressure exerted on both their conscience and their craft by prisoners, both at home and from far-flung corners of the world. What I've called the "prisoner's pressure" describes a widespread cultural dynamic that transformed the ethics, politics, form, and sociology of global literatures in the late twentieth-century, as liberal writers and political prisoners came to form the two poles — both opposites and twins — of an international human rights movement. The push and pull of influence and recognition between writers and prisoners is one side of the larger story of how the rise of the human rights movement changed the way writers and critics came to imagine literature's relationship to social justice and social transformation. The prisoner, whether real or imagined, often represented a level of action and commitment to systematic change or revolution of which the writer was ideologically or constitutionally incapable. This left writers searching to carve out and articulate their distinct role in a global conjuncture imagined through the dynamic of human rights.

As I've shown through the case of the prisoner, matters of human rights impress themselves on the fundamental questions writers ask about writing itself: what is literature? What is a writer? Why write? What can literature do? What should it do? In this chapter I turn to perhaps the most common and, because of its ubiquity and diffuseness, complicated answers that writers and critics have expressed during the second half of the twentieth-century: the idea that writers can and should "bear witness to atrocity" and human rights abuses.

In the following pages I trace a history of the witness as a late-twentieth century literary ideal. By this I mean a history of how the witness came to be a model of what a writer should be. As generally understood, this ideal is defined by a series of ethical relations to atrocity and suffering: a fidelity to remember past atrocity, a responsiveness to present atrocity, and vigilance to guard against future atrocity. There is an altruism in contemporary scholarship on culture and human rights that holds that what is important about these relations is the witness's or writer's ability to *represent* atrocity because it by nature resists representation and interpretation. James Dawes, for instance, argues: "Atrocity both requires and resists representation. The argument that we must bear witness to atrocity, that we must tell the stories, is the core of the catechism of the human rights movement."[1] But for all of the attention paid to how literature contends with the *unrepresentability* of atrocity, there is very little concern with how literature judges what is and is not atrocity, and therefore what acts of violence call out — levee a moral and political injunction — to be represented in the first place. It is a history of this dimension of witnessing that I tell here: a history of contending convictions and personal negotiations over what counts as atrocity and, say, liberation. I do not only tell this history but seek to convince the reader that a history of critical judgment, as opposed to a history of trauma, is fundamental to understanding

[1] James Dawes, *Evil Men* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013), 8.

the significance of the witness in the history of twentieth–century human rights. Indeed, the significance of the witness as a figure that exercises judgment over violence is one key distinguishing factor between the revolutionary tradition of the eighteenth-century "Rights of Man" and the global policing of twentieth-century human rights. One reason that the story I tell here has been sidelined is that the history of the witness has heretofore been channeled through the measured responsiveness to a single historical atrocity: the Holocaust. In reality, however, witnessing as a literary ideal develops in relation to other sources of violence and its logic.

The first sections of the chapter chart what I see as the heretofore neglected genealogy of the witness. This genealogy begins with the oppositional ideas of Jean Paul Sartre and it advances to show how they clashed dialectically with a foundational triad of twentieth-century literary witnesses, Simone Weil, Albert Camus, and Czeslaw Milosz. I argue that this clash, which took place in the immediate postwar decade defined by the memories of World War II and the beginning of decolonization, established the terms and terrain on which later writers claimed and negotiated moral authority of the witness. Importantly, my genealogy decenters the Holocaust and major events in Holocaust memory such as the Eichmann trial as the locus for thinking about the origins of the witness as a literary and cultural figure. While not leaving the Holocaust out of my story, I attribute equal importance to the politics of decolonization and third-wordlism (*tiers-mondisme*) as the militating force to the moral authority of the witness. Later sections explore both the intellectual contexts and individual texts in which the witness became an aspirational literary ideal between the Vietnam era and the end of the Cold War. Here, the work of Denise Levertov and Joan Didion come to the fore. I conclude by returning to Milosz, Gordimer and Coetzee in a section on the meaning and form of genocide in late-twentieth century literature.

In the remainder of this introduction, I want to give a brief account of the importance of the witness to the idea of literary responsibility in the late twentieth century. I also project forward to introduce some features of Coetzee's novels towards which the entire chapter is heading. Thus introduced, the chapter, I hope, will have the feel of both an archeology and genealogy of the witness.

§

According to the historian Annette Wieviorka, the role of survivor testimony during the trial of Adolf Eichmann in 1961 inaugurated an "era of witness." In this era (arguably our historical present), the testimony of individuals who suffered under the Holocaust became increasingly important to both politics and culture, tying them together in new ways.[2] By 1977, the Holocaust writer and survivor Elie Wiesel could write: "If the Greeks invented tragedy, the Romans the epistle, and the Renaissance the sonnet, our generation invented a new literature, that of testimony. We have all been witnesses and we all feel we have to bear testimony for the future."[3] In Wiesel's influential terms — which helped launch the field of trauma studies — the transmission of Holocaust testimony in literature, film, documentary, memoir, and the many hybrid forms between, have placed all subsequent generations as imagined witnesses to *past* atrocity, subsequently interpolating them as moral witnesses to future political violence.

The idea of what is now often called "literary witness" really took off in the early 1980s, after the Polish émigré poet and witness to World War II, the Holocaust and Stalinism, Czeslaw Milosz, unexpectedly won the 1980 Nobel Prize in Literature. As I discuss towards the end of

[2] Annette Wieviorka *The Era of Witness* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006), 37.
[3] Elie Wiesel, "The Holocaust as Literary Inspiration" In *Dimensions of the Holocaust,* ed. Elliot Leifkovitz (Evanston: Northwestern Universtiy Press, 1992). 9

this chapter, Milosz was the first winner of the prize to use the term "genocide" in his Nobel address, and his use of the term ushered in a new era of literary ethics situated in relation to the twentieth-century as a "century of genocide."[4] The year after his Nobel Prize, Milosz delivered the Charles Eliot Norton lectures on poetry at Harvard, titled *The Witness of Poetry* (1982), Meanwhile, the American poet and Amnesty international researcher Carolyn Forché began to launch her own appeals for a "poetry of witness;" and in 1993, Forché published her groundbreaking anthology *Against Forgetting: The Twentieth-century Poetry of Witness*. Expressing the prevailing historical philosophy of its time, Forché's anthology divided twentieth-century poetry according to political conflicts — not just wars, but "genocides," "repressions," "apartheids," "struggles," the "Shoah," linked, in Forché's influential telling, through the figure of the "witness."[5] Forché carved the twentieth-century up into atrocities as a way of attributing value and coherence to the writer as witness, and this way seeing literature and history through the same optic of atrocity proved immensely influential.

By the end of the twentieth-century, this twinned optic for viewing the century and valuing literature through atrocity had made its way into the highest echelons of the cultural economy. In 2001, the Nobel Prize in Literature celebrated its centennial with a star-studded symposium on the topic of "Witness Literature." Among those who participated were Gordimer (who delivered the keynote), the Romanian novelist and future Nobel laureate Herta Muller, the Hungarian novelist and Auschwitz survivor Imre Kertesz, the Japanese writer and oral historian Kenzaburo Oé, the Chinese émigré novelist and playwright Gai Xingjian, the Somali activist and novelist Nurrudin Farah, and the historian and journalist Timothy Garton Ash. Representing the legacies of, amongst others, South African Apartheid, Stalinism, the atomic bombing of

[4] Czeslaw Milosz, "Nobel Lecture," http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1980
[5] Carolyn Forché ed. *Against Forgetting*: *Twentieth-Century Poetry of Witness* (New York: Norton, 1993).

Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the Holocaust, and Chinese Communism, these writers had employed various genres and forms, from realist novels to absurdist drama and oral history, to shed light on some of the darkest passages in human history. Each in their own way, these writers laid claim to the position of witness to their nation's crimes against humanity.

In inviting and organizing speakers around the political catastrophes of the previous century, the Nobel centenary reinforced the increasingly common take of the twentieth-century as a "century of genocide." This all-encompassing view of the twentieth-century as an "age of atrocity" and "century of genocide" had gained traction in the late 1970s and 1980s in the wake of a broad exodus from communism and *tiers-mondisme* in European political and intellectual culture. As the political scientist Robert Meister suggests, during this era "the denunciation of physical atrocity as such became an essential element in the fin de siècle conception of what it means to be human, and the foundational premise of human rights advocacy."[6] The Nobel centenary revealed another dimension to the post Cold War view of the twentieth-century as an age of genocide and atrocity. It confirmed a connection between the view of recent history as genocide and the concomitant perspective of the role of the writer as witness. The somewhat odd conjunction of celebrating the role of the writer in the twentieth-century as witness and remembering the twentieth-century as genocide disclosed an important confluence in the way that literary achievement and historical violence were judged (and still are). At the Nobel centenary, literature was judged and valued for its judgment and valuation of violence. A culture that values literature for its capacity to "bear witness to atrocity" will also, we can expect, view history *as* past atrocity, and politics as protection against future atrocity. And indeed, this was the case at the turn of last century.

[6] The proceedings are collected in Horace Engdahl ed. *Witness Literature: Proceedings of the Nobel Centennial Symposium* (Stockholm: World Scientific Publishing, 2002).

Around the same time as the Nobel Centenary, J.M. Coetzee, who would go on to win the Nobel the year after, completed and published two novels that he had been writing simultaneously during the late 1990s: *Disgrace* (1999), and *Elizabeth Costello* (2003). While stylistically and thematically very different, the two novels ultimately explore the same questions: when, if ever, is violence justified? Who judges what is legitimate violence and what is atrocity? And if all violence is equally evil, then how can one possibly bear witness to everything? In *Disgrace* this question is posed within the context of post apartheid South Africa. Here, Coetzee introduces and tests the idea that the violence of the colonized against the colonizer might find justification in the past atrocities of empire. Of course, Coetzee does not make this judgment easy: the colonizer, in this case, is a sympathetic and liberal women, Lucy, who is gang raped and robbed by black South Africans at her farm in the townships. Lucy's unwillingness to seek legal redress suggests that she believes that a history of imperial domination, of which she is the beneficiary, but not an active perpetrator, dictates what scales of violence are justified in the present.

In *Elizabeth Costello* the question of the legitimacy of violence is inserted into a highly metafictional novel of ideas that acts as its own literary history of witnessing, making reference to Camus and Milosz, and situating Costello as member of the tradition of literary witnessing that I historicize here. In the novel, Elizabeth Costello, a novelist who delivers a series of lectures on the ethic of writing with titles like "Witness, Silence, Censorship," finds it increasingly difficult to differentiate between scales of justifiable and unjustifiable violence. She scandalously compares abattoirs to Nazi death camps. "A sparrow knocked off a branch by a slingshot, a city annihilated from the air: who dare say which is worse?" she wonders, "Evil, all

of it, an evil universe invented by an evil god."[7] Costello comes to understand and claim her inability to judge atrocity from necessary pain "the special problems of a writer, the special fidelities."[8] This idea that the writer's special gift is to erase all difference in the scale of admissible violence is the ideal of the literary witness taken to its absurd end. Importantly, in the novel's surreal climax, Coetzee opposes this ideal of the writer's "special fidelities" to the mitigating factor of past colonial genocide to which Costello, like Lucy in *Disgrace,* is a hypothetical beneficiary. Coetzee suggests that Costello's implication in past violence overturns the ethical grounds of her writerly fidelities. Coetzee's novel leaves us in a deadlock between Costello's fidelities to all suffering voices, and the primacy of past voices of atrocity, raising the question of whether one can equitably bear witness in the present if past injustices have not been settled. What I want to leave off with, for now, regarding Coetzee's late twentieth-century novels, is the image of the writer as witness caught between the past violence of empire and the present impulse to treat all suffering as equally "evil" and worthy of bearing witness to.

WITNESSING AND ITS OTHERS

The 'committed' writer knows that words are action… As no aristocratic pride would any longer force him to deny that he is in a situation, he would no longer seek to soar above his times and bear witness to it before eternity.

Jean Paul Sartre, "What is Literature?" (1947)

Jean Paul Sartre was the great antagonist to the witness in the twentieth-century. This antagonism stemmed from two important strains of his thought. First, his aesthetic theory of

[7] J.M. Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello* (London: Penguin, 2003) 125.

[8] Ibid., 224.

"commitment," wherein literature is valued and politically justified *alone* for its contribution to "historical change" and the "freedom" of "the collectivity."[9] As I will discuss at length further on, Sartre, beginning with his founding vision of "commitment" in the essays collected in *What is Literature?* (1949), understood witnessing as a property of literature and an ideal of the writer to be something like commitment's opposite. The opposition stuck. When the ideal of literary witness began to gain traction around 1980 — the year, not coincidentally, of Sartre's death — the movement's pioneers, from Carolyn Forché to Gordimer, framed their work and the work of others they claimed as witnesses as a departure from the Sartrean ideal of "committed literature." The second strain of Sartre's thought to contest the ideal of witnessing was *tiers-mondisme* or "Third Worldism." As Robert Malley defines it, *tiers-mondisme* is "a belief in the revolutionary aspirations of the Third–World Masses, in the inevitability of the their fulfillment, and in the role of strong, centralized states in this undertaking."[10] Along with *tiers-mondisme*'s unequivocal support for the liberation and self-determination of formerly colonized peoples came an ancillary if uneven sanction of decolonizing violence, captured in Sartre's famous preface to Franz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* (1960).[11] Across the postwar decades, Sartre's support of violence as a just means for political and even humanistic ends, cut against and eventually helped provoke a surge in global consciousness directed towards the denunciation of political violence, even when this violence was carried out in the name of revolution and third world liberation. Whether it was engrained in the new humanitarianism of Medicines Sans Frontiere, the post-Vietnam poetry of Denise Levertov, or the postcolonial novels of V.S. Naipaul, this new global consciousness ranged against Sartre's ideas identified with the practice and ethos witnessing.

[9] Jean Paul Sartre, *What is Literature?* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), 267.
[10] Robert Malley, *The Call from Algeria: Third Worldism, Revolution, and the Turn to Islam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), p.2.
[11] Jean Paul Sartre, "Introduction" in Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 2001).

Sartre's literary theory and his *tiers-mondisme* were closely related. Indeed, his belief in the necessity of political violence for the completion of third world liberation had a literary critical analog. It came in the form of his censor of literary styles of critical distance, formal moves and narrative perspectives through which the writer could appear to step back and occupy an "objective" position on their historical present, relieving themselves from an otherwise irreducible partisanship to the colonizer or colonized.[12] When witnessing finally broke through as the literary equivalent to human rights advocacay towards the end of last century, it did so in no little part by valorizing the very formal qualities scorned by Sartre and claiming the critical distance he disparaged as the foundation of a superior form of partisanship.[13] Thus despite, or possibly because of Sartre's energetic opposition to its founding ideals of ethical detachment and non-violence, his ideas frequently functioned as the dialectical terrain on which the ideal of the writer as witness came into being.

Sartre's influence on the literary and cultural history of human rights is both clear and conflicted. In the half-century following World War II, Sartrean commitment affirmed that literature could change the world for the better and participate at the highest level of structural change: liberation and revolution. Furthermore, Sartre offered a model of what literature could and should do to contribute to social justice: to "inform," "disclose," and "reveal" the world of suffering and injustice.[14] In doing so, Sartre had a huge hand in the formation of a transnational "cultural left," which was indispensable to the spread of a human rights moment. At the same, though, Sartre also imposed nearly categorical restrictions on the kinds of injuries and injustices the committed writer could "reveal" and "disclose," and especially *how* these disclosures were to

[12] "Objective" is the word used derisively by Sartre in *What is Literature?*
[13] See Forché, "Introduction" in *Against Forgetting.*

[14] Sartre, *WIL,* 239, 260.

be conducted. The boundaries of Sartrean commitment were not only marked out by ideology — Sartre's communism for instance — but were contoured to the *scale* of injustice and human insight that Sartre believed could be mobilized for collective social change, and therefore the *threshold* of violence at which a writer should speak out. Ultimately, the boundaries between commitment and its others were as productive for those who transgressed them as for those who ascribed. From a young Gordimer in South Africa in the 1950s, deliberating on the relation of "aesthetic liberty" to colonial violence, to a young Milosz in Paris during the same period, having defected from his post as a Polish diplomat in renunciation of Stalin's crimes only to find himself denounced by Sartre and his circle, to Robert Silvers and the circle he formed around the *New York Review of Books*, including Susan Sontag, Hannah Arendt, Mary McCarthy, Connor Cruise O'Brien, Joan Didion, and V.S. Naipaul, in the New York of the 1960s and 1970s, Sartre generated new avenues for conceiving of literature's responsibility in a world structured by violence. He built roads between culture and politics but barricaded others, forcing an entire generation to pave new ways around his formidable presence. By the end of the twentieth-century, many of those roads had led to the ideal of the witness.

I begin my account of the witness as literary ideal with Sartre because of the formative pressure he exerted on this history. At the same time, there are other practical reasons for my choice of sequencing. One is that Sartre provides a very early iteration (in fact, I am at a loss to find an earlier one) of the idea of witnessing as tied intimately and intricately to literary form. In fact, Sartre at times assesses witnessing as ultimately synonymous with *style*. Even before the likes of Theodor Adorno and Lionel Trilling could launch their important reposts to Sartre's idea of commitment under the rubric of the "morality of form," Sartre had already identified morality

with form, a morality directly identified with an ethos of witnessing.[15]

§

I've begun to note that the witness stands in stark opposition to the Sartrean ideal of "committed" literature. This is something of surprise given that the late twentieth-century ideal of literary witnessing is so closely tied to the pursuit of social justice and human rights. First, however, we should further clarify what Sartre meant by commitment, and from where he drew his ideas about literature and global social justice. "The function of the writer," he writes in an oft-quoted passage, "is to act in such a way that nobody can be ignorant of the world and that nobody may say that he is innocent of what it's all about."[16] The committed writer informs their readers of what the world is "all about," combatting ignorance and the denial of injustice. Sartre does not provide an abundance of models for committed writing. He reiterates his respect for Richard Wright, particularly *Native Son* (1944), whom Sartre counts as committed but who would also come to reject the moniker. He lauds Ernest Hemingway for his terse and "transparent" prose: "After Hemingway, how could we dream of describing? We must plunge things into action." "Action" was a keyword for Sartre; it described both the act of writing and the course of history that was changing perpetually through human "undertakings."[17] Taken alone, this sounds like a reasonable definition of witnessing. For Sartre, however, the action of disclosure, precisely because it is an action, changes the world it discloses. And by changing the world, the writer (or at least the committed writer) gives up their claim to impartiality and the

[15] Theodor Adorno "Commitment," *The New Left Review*, September-December 1974, Lionel Trilling, *The Liberal Imagination* (New York: NYRB Classics, 2008).
[16] Sartre, *WIL*, 218.
[17] Ibid., 193.

role of witness. "The committed writer" Sartre asserts, "knows that words are action, he has given up the impossible dream of giving an impartial picture of Society and the human condition." The state of being and acting in history Sartre called a "situation," and to be in a situation is to forgo impartiality and the possibility of witnessing. Once a writer can no longer "deny that he is in a situation, he would no longer seek to soar above his times and bear witness to it before eternity."[18]

Across *What is Literature?* Sartre associates impartiality and witnessing with specific literary forms and practices, from lyric poetry, to third person narration, and even to poetry in general, which he famously claimed could not, by nature of its own attention to language, be a committed art.[19] In turn, Sartre equates these forms with "style" itself. For instance, in one of many denunciations of nineteenth-century realism, Sartre argued that writers such as Gustave Flaubert imagined themselves as "impartial witnesses of their age" but found instead that they were "caught in the trap of an artistic style." Whereas style is generally regarded as a means of taking a position, for Sartre style seemed to count as the very opposite: an abandonment of a position. "It is not enough to denounce abuses and injustices in a fine style," he exhorts, "We must take up a position *in our literature,* because literature is in essence a taking of position (italics original)."[20] Style and witnessing are the two sides of an abjuration of a position *tout court*. They situate the writer and orient the reader to an ahistorical no-place within the space of the text that has its real world analog in a refusal of commitment to universal human freedom and liberation.

When imagining how commitment and witnessing work, and work against one another, in literature, Sartre turns to metaphors that figure style's substance and tangibility. These

[18] Ibid., 39, 265, 266.
[19] Ibid., 138.
[20] Ibid., 224.

metaphors thus also figure the consciousness of a witness at work. One metaphor he frequently uses is "glass." While Sartre admits literature cannot be without "style," he insists that style "should pass unnoticed. Since words are transparent and since the gaze looks through them, it would be absurd to slip in among them some panes of rough glass. [21] Glass is transparent (like words) but "rough glass" bears imperfections that alert the gaze to a mediating factor, a lens, a consciousness, an author, or a witness. As we've seen, Sartre does not hide his antipathy for formal markers of a mediating consciousness. Catching sight of the refractory wobble in the glass of language ejects the writer and reader from the "situation," where "All undertakings…reduce themselves to a single one, that of *making history*."[22] Since he feels so strongly that literature is "in essence a taking of positions" in the struggle to make history, Sartre hangs the accusation of escapism and self-exculpation on the "rough glass" of style. "Style," whether in the form of "lyrical subjectivity" or "internal narrators and all-knowing witnesses" (notice how these two go together), is for Sartre evidence of the writer's desire to escape history by claiming a perspective wherein they might reflect on its shape, trajectory, and damages, and not the least their own place within it.

Two general judgments made by Sartre concerning the conjunction of style and witnessing are worth noting. First, he associates them both with "purity:" the mistake of "Pure stylists is to think that the word is a gentle breeze which plays lightly over the surface of things, grazing them without altering them, and that the speaker is a pure witness who sums up with a word his harmless contemplation."[23] This emphasis on the witness as "pure" is important to keep in mind for the longer arc of this chapter, and for the history of human rights more broadly. The human rights movement and its practitioners, especially in the Christian inflected mold of

[21] Ibid., 39.
[22] Ibid., 193.
[23] Ibid., 99.

Amnesty International, are often associated — and indeed associate themselves — with a form of purity. Moreover, the movement itself has also been historicized as a form of purification for the American and European left, following decades of entanglement with the politics of liberation and *tiers-mondisme*.[24] In ascribing purity to the witness, Sartre is anticipating both future hopes and critiques of human rights as a movement and ideal. The second characteristic that Sartre strongly identifies with the witness is an artificial or impossible view of "history" and the "human condition." This view is characterized as being from above or "on-high," "soaring" and "distant." The committed writer, once properly availed of a "situation," Sartre holds, "would no longer seek to soar above his times and bear witness to it before eternity."[25] As Amanda Anderson and others have shown, this metaphor has been used to characterize "cosmopolitan detachment," critical distance, and objectivity since at least the nineteenth-century.[26] As Anderson also points out, apropos of Sartre's attack on the witness, the characterization of critical detachment and distance as a literally distant —soaring above —view from above is part and parcel of an "unwarranted assumption that any and all practices of cultivated distance claim a kind of pure or absolute objectivity for themselves."[27] Sartre's denigration of the witness proceeded on precisely these grounds: the witness was seeks a detached and distant Archimedean point outside of history where they can remain "pure," non-partisan, and objective.

Sharpening his ideal of commitment like an arrow, Sartre takes aim at the high-flying "witness" and brings them back to earth, history, and the situation. Late in his polemic, he adopts the third person plural "we" and sets out his vision for good writing and good politics:

---

[24] See Moyn, *The Last Utopia,* Chapter 4, "The Purity of the Struggle."
[25] Ibid.,38.
[26] Amanda Anderson, *The Powers of Distance: Cosmopolitanism and the Cultivation of Detachment* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 26.
[27] Ibid., 32.

> They thought that they were justifying, at least apparently, the foolish business of storytelling by ceaselessly bringing to the reader's attention, explicitly or by allusion, the existence of an author. We hope that our books remain in the air all by themselves and that their words, instead of pointing backwards towards the one who has designed them, will be toboggans, forgotten, unnoticed, and solitary, which will hurl the reader into the midst of a universe where there are no witnesses; in short, that our books may exist in the manner of things, of plants, of events, and not at first like products of man.[28]

It is worth pausing on Sartre's unsettling vision of a "universe where there are no witnesses." A world without witnesses sounds nightmarishly totalitarian. The idea brings to mind the Nazi strategy of "night and fog" and its retooling in Argentina and Brazil by the act of "disappearing" dissidents. Of course, this is not what Sartre is driving at. What he means by witnesses here is a space of critical reflection within the literary text. A "universe without witnesses" is a literature without style, and literature without style is a committed literature. This is important to keep in mind, because it looks forward to a time when, in the decades to come, writers navigating the terrain of commitment will try to articulate in a positive manner what Sartre here articulates in the negative. Milosz, for instance, whom we will turn to in a moment, would later write that the literary witness depends on style: without "style" and the exigencies of form, art and poetry risk reduction to "the raw material of reports, desperate notes from prison, letters." The voice of a

[28] Sartre, *WIL*, 186.

poet," by contrast "should be purer and more distinct."[29] Sartre would surely have agreed.

For Sartre, however, a "universe without witnesses" was the necessary "circumstance" of present history. "Whereas our predecessors thought that they could keep themselves outside history and that they had soared to heights from which they could judge events as they really were, circumstances have plunged us into our time" (184). The "circumstances" that Sartre referenced were various. The incomplete project of Europe's liberation (from fascism and capitalism), global economic inequality, the American system of Jim Crow: all of these comprised political struggles that would undo the neutral position of the witness. Yet perhaps the most pressing and transformative political force laying behind Sartre's theory of literary commitment and his attack on the ethics of witnessing was the decolonization of Europe's empires. Towards the end of the pivotal essay "Why Write?" (1947) Sartre calls attention to the opening shots of the war of independence in French Indochina. Writers, Sartre argued, could not be:

> systematically opposed to the use of violence. I recognize that violence under whatever form it may show itself is a setback. But it is an inevitable setback because we are in a universe of violence; and if it is true that recourse to violence against violence risks perpetuating it, it is also true that it is the only means of bringing it to an end. A certain newspaper in which someone wrote a rather brilliant article saying that it necessary to refuse complicity with violence wherever it came from had to announce the following day

[29] Czeslaw Milosz, "Response to A. Alvarez," *New York Review of Books,* June 9, 1988.

> the first skirmishes of the Indo-Chinese war. I should like to ask the writer today how we can refuse to participate indirectly in all violence. If you say nothing, you are necessarily for the continuation of war for one is always responsible for what one does not try to prevent. Violence for violence; one must make a choice according to other principles….It is incumbent upon the writer to judge the means not from the point of view of an abstract morality, but in the perspectives of a precise goal which is the realization of a socialist democracy. Thus we must mediate upon the modern problem of ends and means not only in theory but in each concrete case.[30]

Like a bullet shattering the "rough panes of glass" separating the witness from the committed writer, Sartre intimates that the impending liberation of the colonial world called for a new relationship between literature and politics, and specifically political violence. Even at this early moment in the process, Sartre foresees a series of ongoing wars (within the Cold War binaries) with decolonization and counterinsurgency as the motors. These wars will act as the horizon of moral action and political possibility: as the ultimate "situation" into which the entire global conjunction is thrown. It will also act as the terrain of literature, which, he foresees, will have to organize itself according the "relative means and ends in a world dictated by violence."[31]

The end of empire was going to be violent. Consequently, Sartre implied, it was not a historical process that would admit mere witnesses, especially European witnesses. It is in this manner that Sartre's theory of literature — so central to twentieth-century aesthetic thought —

---

we can refuse to participate indirectly in all violence."
[30] Sartre, *WIL,* 232.
[31] Ibid., 193.

cannot be entirely separated from his commitment to decolonizing nationalism and violence. From Fanon, Sartre famously adopted an investment in the struggle against empire as a semi-utopian horizon that would transform not only global political structures but also *humanness itself*. Sartre believed that literature should, at its purest, be "anthropological," and the new humanism pregnant in decolonization fed his vision of where literature would fit into a future world. Literature could either adapt to a decolonizing world or disappear. There could be no witnesses to the liberation of the colonial world.

VIOLENCE AND ITS OTHERS

> *We must refuse to make violence legitimate…Violence is inevitable and Unjustifiable*.
>
> Albert Camus "Neither Victims nor Executioners," 1947
> Nadine Gordimer, recorded in her notebooks, 1952
> Czeslaw Milosz, recorded in his notebooks, 1966
> J.M. Coetzee, recorded in his notebooks, 1997

I've pointed to a pivotal moment at the end of "Why Write?" when Sartre makes direct reference to the opening of the war of liberation in French Indochina. The "first skirmishes" of decolonization in the French empire ultimately close the broader argument of *What is Literature?* condensing Sartre's multilayered argument concerning commitment onto a single hard substrate of violence, and the writer's necessary "position" on its justified use. Speaking in the third-person plural, addressing "writers" as a "bourgeoisie class," and pursuing the broad epistemological query, "why write?" Sartre offers a definitive answer in the task of adjudicating on the relative ends and means of violence: "Violence for violence…..It is incumbent upon the writer to judge the means not from the point of view of an abstract morality, but in the

perspectives of a precise goal."[32] Indeed, in a very concrete sense, this is Sartre's answer to the question "why write?"

What is particularly illuminating about this fact for the larger story I aim to tell in this chapter (and for the history of human rights as a whole) is that Sartre levies something like a moral injunction at writers to maintain and cultivate a studied attention to, and judgment of, individual cases of violence. This injunction feels very familiar in our present age of human rights. Overheard from the present, it sounds as if Sartre is calling on writers to "bear witness to atrocity," and in a way he is. But atrocity and political violence are not one and the same for Sartre, as they would increasingly become towards the end of the century. Sartre calls on writers to observe and judge violence with a moral vigilance; yet calls not for impartial witnesses but rather partisan actors. In Sartre's universe, his global conjuncture defined by insipient decolonization, there is "Violence for violence," and violence to "end" violence, and thus the writer "plunged into" this universe can only judge violence from the perspective of justified necessity, and not, as he intimates some writers had begun to, universal renunciation. A major part of the story of the changing fortunes of the witness as literary ideal involves the contested universalisms that surround the judgment of violence. Sartre's injunction to cultivate attention to violence set a standard to which future writers, not the least future writers who would adopt the position of witness, would claim a fidelity, even as they strove to overcome and transform Sartre's legacy by judging all violence unjustifiable. Sartre's was only one of the period's enduring injunctions to writers to observe and judge violence as a moral imperative. Let us now turn to another.

[32] Sartre, *WIL,* 232.

In the same section of "Why Write?" I've been discussing above, Sartre makes oblique reference to "A certain newspaper in which someone wrote a rather brilliant article saying that it is necessary to refuse complicity with violence;" Sartre wonders, in light of coming decolonization, if that writer still believes "we can refuse to participate indirectly in all violence."[33] For anyone in the know, it was obvious that Sartre referred to his friend and, until that point, closest intellectual interlocutor, Albert Camus, and his essay "Neither Victims nor Executioners: An Ethic Superior to Murder" (1946). This essay, whose origins and afterlives are the topic of this section, is widely regarded as marking Camus' turn from the communist politics of the Resistance to a universalist ethics anchored in non-violence, a shift that might also be articulated as finalizing his turn from fighter to witness. Apart from signaling a fundamental change in Camus' thought, the essay also instigated the beginning of the end of Sartre and Camus' personal and intellectual alliance, giving way to perhaps the most spectacular and well recorded war of ideas in the twentieth–century.

In "Neither Victims nor Executioners" Camus unequivocally denounced the postwar Stalinist purges as "murder." Then, in a move that Sartre found illustrative of an "abstract morality" unsuited to the reality of political life, Camus extrapolated from the Soviet context to levee a universal claim of murder against all political violence. In a very literal way, to be neither "a victim nor an executioner" — but to be nonetheless involved and implicated in a global conjuncture of violence — was to be a witness. The purpose of the essay, Camus wrote, was to "save bodies" by animating the conscience of those who "lack imagination when it comes to other people's deaths."[34] The tone of humanitarian good will — "to save bodies" — echoed the concerns and topoi of Camus's contemporaneous novel, *The Plague* (1947), the story of a doctor

[33] Sartre, *WIL,* 232.
[34] Albert Camus, *Neither Victims nor Executioners: An Ethics Superior to Murder* (New York: New Society Publishers, 1986), 15, 102.

who bears witness to the effects of a plague whose origins is beyond human comprehension and historical causality. Both Camus's essay and *The Plague* display every possible characteristic of the witness as outlined and denounced by Sartre. They take an "on-high" and detached view of the world and choose to side with history's victims, and they elect to denounce all violence and "terror" categorically, and seek out the position of the "healer."[35] We must refuse to make violence legitimate," Camus wrote in one of the essay's most well known passages: "violence is inevitable and unjustifiable."[36]

In the epigraph to this section I point to the afterlives of the moral ideal on which Camus's essay and his postwar philosophy turns "We must refuse to make violence legitimate…Violence is inevitable and unjustifiable." At different moments writers central to my story and the twentieth-century tradition of literary witness recorded these lines in their personal notebooks. These records provide a kind of history of the literary witness in miniature, showing how an injunction to bear witness and shed light on the victims of all violence arose at different pivotal moments, and as the basis of pivotal texts, in twentieth-century literature. I will touch on these individual histories further on, but here I want to illuminate the origins of Camus's ethical injunction. While the words are Camus's, the ideas behind them belong to Simone Weil. Without an understanding of Weil's thought and distinct literary ethics, and their influence on and later transmission through Camus and Milosz, the later twentieth-century history of witnessing as a literary ideal cannot be fully apprehended.

§

[35] Albert Camus, *The Plague* (New York: Vintage, 1996), 319.
[36] Camus, *Neither Victims*, 13.

If Sartre is the great antagonist of the witness in the twentieth-century, Weil is the patron saint. In her short life — she died at the age of thirty–four — Weil attended the Ecole Normal Superieure (with Simone de Beauvoir), worked as a professor of Greek and philosophy (donating most of her salary to militant labor unions), spent a year in a metallurgical factory (in solidarity with the working class), fought (poorly) with the Durutti Column in the Spanish Civil War, worked for the free French government in London, and died in protest of the conditions of Europe under Nazi occupation. Ending her life a devout though unconventional Catholic, the heterodoxy and intensity of her faith combined with the breadth of her worldly commitment have made Weil a distinct, if difficult, voice in the history of ethics and politics. As Susan Sontag observed in 1963, Weil ultimately expressed views far more "ascetic," "severe," and at times "hysterical" than her largely liberal readership (Sontag NYRB 3).[37] Yet her enormous impact on liberal writers and thinkers of the twentieth-century betokens the wider attraction among these classes to ethical positions beyond their own abilities to fulfill. Nowhere was this more apparent than in the Weil's views on violence and human suffering.

Weil looked on modern politics through a Manichean lens, in which evil and good exist irreducibly. To accept violence is to accept the world as it is; but to justify violence in the name of a better world — as in war, revolution, and modes of domination (empire most of all) — only multiplies evil, and rejects the world as such. In a Manichean world the most one can do is strive for an equilibrium, devoting oneself to fostering good while never disavowing evil or calling for its extermination. Weil's beliefs led her to categorically reject the political or ideological justification of violence, especially in the form of a Marxist theory of historical necessity.

[37] Susan Sontag, "Simone Weil," *New York Review of Books,* February 1, 1963, 3.

Weil believed that the best literature engendered human value by exhibiting the fallacy of justified violence. Yet the immense degree of responsibility she invested in literature also lead her to severely condemn some of her contemporaries, who she thought responsible for "the disaster" of WWII, and "the growing weakness, and the almost disappearance, of the idea of value."[38] The destruction of "value," in Weil's estimation, was endorsed by modern literature, particularly the aesthetics of "total license" expressed in dada and surrealism. While these movements valorized violence in order to shock and disorient the bourgeois public, they advanced no vision of the good other than the mere destruction of existing values. By contrast, Weil saw in classical Greek literature an ongoing wellspring of equilibrium and harmony. Translated into English by Mary McCarthy and published in Dwight MacDonald's *Politics* magazine, perhaps Weil's most important essay, "The Iliad: Poem of Force" (1942) reasoned that Greek literature and theater had played an essential civic and socio-political role of demonstrating both the naturalness and the evil of violence, or "force." "The true hero, the real subject, of the *Iliad,* is force. That force which is yielded by men rules over them, and before it man's flesh cringes. The human soul never cease to be modified by its encounter with force, swept on, blinded by that which it believes itself able to handle, bowed beneath the power of that which it suffers. Here, Weil stakes her most important claim concerning violence and the ethics of literature. Great literature reveals the folly and illusion of domination: "Those who dreamt that force, thanks to progress, belonged henceforth in the past, have been able to see its living witness in this poem: those who know how to discern force throughout the ages, there at the heart of every human testament, find here it most beautiful, most pure mirrors."[39] In the *Iliad*, "Force" travels like a boomerang. Those who employ it are implicated in a cycle of perpetration and

[38] Simone Weil, *An Anthology,* (New York: Grove Press, 2000), 287.
[39] Weil, *Anthology,* 153.

victimhood. Thus while those who seek domination will attempt to master "force," the poem reveals how those who use violence, just as those who are subject to it, are stripped of their humanity: "force is that which makes a thing of anybody who comes under its sway."[40] For Weil then, the power and enduring lesson of the *Iliad* was therefore twofold: first, violence is both evil and ineradicable; and second, great literature demonstrates the effects and dangers of utilizing force, yet does so without abusing it.

Evidence of this message, she thought, could be found in the "tone" in which "force" is presented in the poem:

> Such a heaping-up of violent deeds would have a frigid effect, were it not for the note of incurable bitterness that continually makes itself heard, though often only a single word marks its presence, often a mere stroke of the verse, or a run-on line. It is in this that the Iliad is absolutely unique, in this bitterness that proceeds from tenderness and that spreads over the whole human race, impartial as sunlight. Never does the tone lose its colouring of bitterness; yet never does the bitterness drop into lamentation.[41]

"Bitterness" (*la amertume*) is a wonderfully expressive descriptor for the "tone" with which violence is recalled but never censored nor "lamented" in the *Iliad*. Elsewhere, Weil describes "the good" as "full of sweet and perpetual ecstasy." Yet goodness in literature is "boring and flat,

[40] Ibid., 154.
[41] Ibid., 208.

while fictional evil is varied and intriguing, attractive, profound, and full of charm."[42] The ability to reverse this order — to imbue the "good" with sweetness and "evil" with a sour or bitter taste without making either unpalatable —Weil referred to as "genius." The "soul of the Greek epic" was thus to govern, with a "geometric strictness," the equilibrium between force and care, bitterness and sweetness, and to do so through precise attention to tone and style in language. Broadly speaking, we might say that writers in one tradition of twentieth-century witness have variously struggled to uphold this position. If the potential for violence incubates in all things — words most of all — literature might best serve the ends of humanity first by drawing attention to the destructive power of violence, and second, by bearing witness to its own potential actuation of violence in the world.

With a few exceptions, Weil's writing remained virtually unknown during her lifetime. Yet around 1945, her fortunes changed when Camus began to collect and publish her scattered writings as an editor at Gallimard. During this same period, Camus became acquainted with a young cultural attaché for the Polish government and a frequent visitor to the Paris named Czeslaw Milosz. They became quick friends, and Camus introduced Milosz to Weil's writing, including his newly published edition of "The *Iliad*, Poem of Force." Milosz soon began editing her work and translating it into Polish. Milosz, a member of the Polish resistance, had already penned some of the most powerful poems of witness to emerge from World War II, honing a contrapuntal style that moved in fluidly from minute personal detail to world historical catastrophe.[43] As an official of Poland's communist government in the late 1940s Milosz had been welcomed into the inner circles of radical Paris, a guest of Sartre and De Beauvoir, and

[42] Ibid., 290.
[43] See Robert Zaretsky, *A Life Worth Living: Albert Camus and the Quest for Meaning* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013), 64-70.

Neruda, who translated Milosz into Spanish. In 1951, however. Milosz defected from the government and found himself cast out of the Paris scene — a privilege he shared with Camus.

Together in the early 1950s, Camus and Milosz read and processed Weil's impossible moral standards, seeking some livable and realistic application of her views on violence and suffering. They often visited Weil's family home like pilgrims, spending time in the cramped environs of her childhood bedroom. The image of these two titans of twentieth-century literature meditating on morality and violence in child's bedroom serves as a poignant and illuminating window into the development of the witness as a literary ideal. These were the days of Camus's fierce debates with Sartre and Merleu-Ponty, and the first years of the Algerian War, which ultimately proved to be the crucible for Camus's ethics of non-violence. At a time when it was common for intellectuals to elaborate justifications for anti-colonial terror carried out by the FLN in Algeria, Weil held out an opposing model of moral resolve and duty to the victims of all forms of political violence and terror. Camus and Milosz, resolutely opposed to Stalinism and the emerging principles of *tiers–mondisme,* formed a close bond over their shared respect for Weil's writing, which challenged them to translate her Manichean ethics into a worldly aesthetics of witnessing.

§

In Milosz's well-known essay, "The Importance of Simon Weil" (1960), written shortly after Camus's death in a car accident, the poet reflected on the lessons of Weil and his recently deceased friend. "It seem to me," Milosz wrote,

> That European thinking has been circling around one problem so old that many people are ashamed to name it. It happens sometimes that old enigma of mankind are kept dormant or veiled for several generations, then recover their vitality and are formulated in a new language. And the problem is: who can justify the suffering of the innocent?[44]

Weil, of course, had answered the question with a categorical rejection of all justified suffering, especially violence carried out in the name of ending violence. Sartre, in turn, gave the very opposite answer: violence was justified and necessary to end the violence of empire. Milosz's essay meditated on both the difficulty and necessity of upholding Weil's standards, not the least in the age of the Cold War and decolonization, when justifications for violence at nearly every scale, from the bombing of a milk car in Algiers to the nuclear decimation of entire populations, proliferated. Whether it was a revolutionary theory of historical necessity, a Fanonian theory of a new humanism, or a Cold War theory of "rollback," "Containment," development," or mutually assured destruction, political and theoretical abstractions appeared to decimate any purchase for an ethics scaled to the suffering individual. That Weil had achieved such a vision, Milosz chalked up to her religious Manichaeism. But how to translate this to a world whose Manichaeism was political not moral, a Manichaeism that framed the world in the aspect of evil and good to inflict and justify violence and suffering?

Milosz was often at pains to reconcile Weil's severe and categorical refutation of violence and oversensitivity to suffering with worldly responsibility. To Milosz's mind, Weil was by "temperament" a "Cathar," Christian Platonists who renounced the material world as evil

[44] Czeslaw Milosz, "The Importance of Simone Weil," in *To Begin Where I Am: Selected Essays* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 2011), 248.

and condemned the killing of all living creatures. Writing to his friend, the Trappist monk Thomas Merton in 1960, Milosz weighed the possibility of applying Weil's beliefs to the present.

> We live in a time when Manichaeism is particularly strong and one could enumerate many reasons for it — though we do not grasp as yet all the causes. I do not know to what extent a sort of despair at the ruthless necessity in Nature is justified. Yet it exists while it was not know until quite modern times. The distance between man and the rest of creation was so great that for Descartes too the animal was a machine. Some old Manichean elements started to revive perhaps in the Reformation but were mitigated. You can say that overstressed compassion for millions and billions of creatures crushed every second makes part of the modern schism which destroyed quite real barriers between man and animal. But the bitter taste of necessity colors the style of our contemporaries and if Simone Weil is such a force and if she counterbalances many modern follies, it is because she was *one Cathar*. Albert Camus called her (in a letter) "the only

> great spirit of our time" and Camus undoubtedly was a Manichaean.[45]

As a possible antidote to the polarization of the Cold War, Milosz considers the long historical battle to imagine and reimagine the barrier between human and non-human suffering — from the ancient Cathar's "overstressed compassion for millions and billions of creatures crushed every second," to Descartes's belief that animals were machines, to the medium ground of the present, which he finds in s. Milosz's point was that the boundaries of grievable life are constantly changing, and thus need to be monitored with great care. Even if Weil's position as a "Cathar" was too absolutist and strict in its prohibitions to afford a useable politics, Milosz nonetheless insisted that her unstinting "attention" to the "sufferings of mankind" could be calibrated to a rich literary ethics. As Weil understood it, "attention" to the boundaries of justifiable suffering was cultivated in and through "prayer." Prayer is a form of close religious attention to what is sacred in life. The temporality and intensity of prayer opened onto a style of attention that could compass suffering at all scales, or at leas this was Milosz's point in naming Weil a "Cathar." Milosz, seeking a way to adapt Weil to the present, believed held that her example of "attention," despite it religious grounding and extremity, furnished a possible countermodel to Marxist and liberal positivism and the trump card of necessity. The practical difficulty of making a politics from Weil's thought, however, resided both in the *distribution* of "attention" to suffering — how attentive can we be in a world where human suffering is all around us — and in the *distinction* of attention — what or whose suffering is worthy of our attention.

[45] Robert Faggen ed. *Striving Towards Being: The Letters of Thomas Merton and Czeslaw Milosz* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 1996), 79.

In his essay on Weil, Milosz rightly notes that Camus had attempted to translate her mode of attention to suffering into a secular model in *The Plague*. Camus's novel had asked the seminal question: "who can justify the suffering of the innocent?" But it had done so, Milosz asserted, without any "metaphysical foundations."[46] Therefore the scale of justifiable suffering could not be dictated through recourse to God or prayer, but through the powers of human intention and attention alone. To imagine a situation where all suffering must be equally valued, Camus adopted the perspective of a doctor attending to a plague, who adopts "the tone of the impartial observer" that Sartre so derided.[47] In its content, *The Plague* transposed Weil's religious attention into the context of medical ethics; in its form, it translated medical ethics into a new paradigm of literary witness.

In *The Plague*, a physician named Rieux tends dutifully and selflessly to the plague-stricken population of Oren, Algeria. As the severity of the outbreak intensifies, he undergoes a series of personal crises as he attempts to cope with the magnitude of suffering and death. He indulges in a natural impulse to shield himself from the impact of each individual death by imagining the plague and its effects as an "abstraction." Rieux comes to wonder if the only way to cope with the facts of mass death is to live in a "a world of abstractions." Set in opposition to the ethics of attention taught and lived by Weil, "abstraction" signifies an anesthetizing of the sensing self, or what Camus elsewhere called, "a lack of imagination when it comes to other people's deaths."[48] Since the plague is a natural rather than a political force it cannot be ascribed adversarial agency, and so "abstraction" itself functions as the novel's moral antagonist. Rieux's indulgence in and later battle against "abstraction" mirror's Camus own battle with the political consciousness of his generation and the Marxist laws of "necessity."

[46] Milosz, "Importance of Simone Weil," 250.
[47] Camus, *The Plague,* 290.
[48] Ibid., 200, 260.

The novel's climax coincides with Rieux's victory over abstraction. This victory also importantly coincides with the revelation that Rieux is the novel's narrator and therefore also its narrating witness. Unable to proceed solely in his duty as a doctor who tends to the dying, "Rieux resolved to compile this chronicle, so that he should not be one of those who hold their peace but should bear witness in favor of those plague-stricken people; so that some memorial of the injustice and outrage done them might endure."[49] Leaving a narrative record where silence would have otherwise reigned, Rieux leaps past his duty as a doctor to become a witness to his patients and the effects of the plague. At the same time, he suggests that his own actions should be adopted as a practice for future witnesses to human suffering: "the tale…could be only the record of what had to be done, and what assuredly would have to be done in the future again in the never ending fight against terror and its relentless onslaughts."[50] Camus mapped Weil's morality into a medical framework, but then he tweaked and adapted his own mapping by turning the doctor protagonist, Rieux, into a narrator who comes eventually to use the narrative as a vehicle for testifying to the individual suffering of all human beings under "terror" and "evil." In the figure of the doctor who *must* attend to suffering (by vocation) but then chooses to speak and "bear witness" as narrator, Camus turns medical ethics into a literary ideal of witness.

Due to its clear moral council to the future, *The Plague* stands as one of a handful of twentieth-century literary works that might be said to have directly contributed to the development of a culture and practice of human rights. At least two important branches of contemporary human rights work can be traced back to the ideas in the novel: the practice of *témoignage* or "witnessing" fostered by Medecin Sans Frontiere (MSF) in the late1960s, and the

[49] Ibid., 288.
[50] Ibid., 291.

turn in literary studies to Holocaust memory and witnessing.[51] In Shoshana Felman's influential reading of the novel, which helped launch a critical dialogue around the figure of the witness in the 1980s, Rieux's battle against the plague and his testimony to the lives of the victims allegorizes an injunction to bear witness to the suffering of Jews during the Holocaust. *The Plague,* Felman suggests, explores the "impact of history as holocaust on those *subjects of history* who were…its historic onlookers: its *witnesses*."[52] Subsequently, Felman credits Camus with raising the novel form itself to the level of historical narrative "by creating a new form of *narrative as testimony* not merely to record, but to…*transform history* by bearing literary history to the Holocaust."[53] As a the epigram to her book *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature and Psychoanalysis* (1988), Felman uses a well-known quote from Camus's controversial Nobel Prize Speech in 1957, when Camus, unwilling to use the pedestal to endorse the FLN and the cause of Algerian liberation was shouted down and publically renounced by Algerian students in the crowd. From Camus's speech, Felman's groundbreaking book on witnessing and testimony takes the quote: "The artist cannot serve today those who make history; he must serve those who are subject to it."[54]

Camus's words were a riposte to Sartre, for whom the committed writer committed precisely to *making* history not tending to its victims. In the historical context of 1957, deep into the darkest hours of the Algerian war, Camus's humanitarian ideals did not necessarily fall on deaf ears — he had won the Nobel after all —but they were met with the full force of political opposition from a still culturally dominant Marxism and *tiers-mondisme*. Born of the

[51] For Camus' influence on MSF see Peter Redfield, *Life in Crisis: The Ethical Journey of Doctors Without Borders* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013).
[52] Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (London: Routledge, 1992), 96.
[53] Felman, *Testimony,* 95.
[54] Ibid., 4.

interregnum of between World War II and the full violence of decolonization, Camus's model of literary ethics and witness, drawn from Weil, was ultimately drowned out by the more dominant politics of liberation that were fomented in the 1950s and peaked in the 1960s and early 1970s. His stance on Algeria made him into a political pariah for the left for many decades. When Felman revived Camus in the service of launching a new critical paradigm around the witness, it was in the early 1980s, at a time when the politics of liberation were fading, and Holocaust memory was being firmly implanted as global ethical consciousness. Contra Sartre, Felman derived from Camus an alternative form of commitment and historical intervention. If for Sartre, the writer makes history by writing in such a way that eliminates the witness, giving way only to revolutionary actors who bring about a liberated future, for Felman literary witnessing commits narrative to history as a record of suffering and injustice. The writer as witness may not *make* history, but for Felman they "transform history" by committing to language what would otherwise be lost and overrun in the course of "historical necessity." But, as I've tried to show, what is perhaps most fundamental about the witness as ethical paradigm, and literary figure, is their judgment about *what* to bear witness to. The witness does not only record or speak out but makes a judgment based on a threshold of how much suffering can be supported by political causes or can be borne in silence.

BECOMING A WITNESS IN THE AGE OF VIETNAM

Biafra. Biafra. Biafra… Vietnam, Vietnam.

Denise Levertov, "Biafra" (1967)

I have been tracing a genealogy of the witness as a literary ideal with two contending sides. On the one side, there is Sartre's denigration of the witness in his theory of committed literature and his ancillary renunciation of political impartiality. On the other side is a tradition of impartial, non-partisan ethics of witnessing that runs from Weil through to Camus and Milosz. As I've shown, these parallel though conflicting projects shared a vision of the writer as a figure who pays vigilant attention to violence and suffering and ultimately passes judgment. The final judgment pertains to if and how the violence should be spoken about, and ultimately if it should be ended: either through more violence or through concerted amelioration and dialogue, or outright moral renunciation. For Sartre, only violence can end violence and therefore some violence must be justified. For Weil, Camus, and Milosz, "Violence is inevitable and unjustifiable." We have looked a briefly at how these conflicting views were translated into the operation of literature and literary form: Sartre equated witnessing with literary style and forms of detachment that called attention to an impartial author who judges from outside of the continuum of history's making, "soaring above his time;" Camus ultimately affirmed Sartre's ideas in many ways by helping invent the conventions of literary witness by tethering the duty and impartiality of the doctor to the agency of the narrator.

With this genealogy in place and some basic intimation of how a "literature of witness" came into being in the interregnum between World War II and decolonization — forged in the

dialectical pressure exerted on politics, culture, and ethics by these two histories — what is left to do in this chapter is flesh out how this literature evolved (and also how these constitutive histories evolved with it) in the decades that followed. These were decades when Sartrean commitment and Camusian witnessing were diffused outward across the globe and processed by writers, often at the same time. The forms and texts that came out of these years negotiated the extremes of Sartre's *tiers-mondisme* and Camus's humanitarian ethics, creating hybrid works of simultaneous witness and commitment. But as Richard Wolin recently put it, "By the mid-1970s there were virtually no 'Sartreans' left. Nearly everyone had become a Camusian, championing the priority of ethics over politics."[55] The remaining work of this chapter will have two sides and purpose. First, to do some further exegetical work and consider how writers came to do the difficult work of witnessing, oscillating between the poles of Sartre and Weil, and engaging in the politics both of liberation and human rights. Second, to connect the mid-century debates of Sartre and Camus to late the century paradigm of witnessing that I began with, when witnessing had taken hold as the highest stage in literary development.

In keeping with the themes and figures of the discussion so far, the readings to follow continue to pursue the question of what forms and scales of violence and suffering writers attend to; what if any violence and suffering is admissible and necessary; and how these thresholds changed over the decades of the postwar, in concert with shifting norms in global politics.

§

[55] Richard Wolin, *The Winds from the East: French Intellectuals, the Cultural Revolution, and the Legacy of the 1960s* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 260.

I want to begin with a series of poems by the British born, American poet Denise Levertov. Levertov is a quintessential writer of twentieth-century witness. Her work and activism took her from a detached and a-political modernism and the early praise of T.S. Eliot, to the Black Mountain school, to anti-nuclear protests, the anti-war movement, to Saigon as a cultural ally to the North Vietnamese, to El Salvador and Nicaragua as a reformed Catholic and human rights activist. Indeed, between the early-1960s when she stridently came into Holocaust consciousness during the Eichmann trial, to the mid-1960s when she turned to radical anti-war and anti-colonial politics, and finally the mid-1980s when she morphed into a Catholic mystic and fierce proponent of human rights, she basically ran the full gambit of late twentieth-century literary politics.[56] What I am interested in getting at here is the desire, and difficulty, of becoming a witness in an age of decolonization, when the politics of liberation, and particularly Vietnam, cut across the countervailing pressure to "bear witness" to all political violence that emerged co-extensively through Holocaust consciousness.

Levertov's poem, "During the Eichmann trial" (1961), is a considered a classic account of Holocaust memory in the making, a work that directly indexes the coming into being of a witness in response to the testimonies provided at the trial. Held in December 1961, the Eichmann trial was to be unabashed "spectacle," as the prime minister of Israel David Ben-Gurion proudly noted.[57] It was the first trial to be internationally broadcast on television, including in the United States, where the proceedings arguably had its deepest and most transformative effects. In New York, a full-page newspaper advertisement by a television station made the psychological and affective stakes of the trial almost painfully clear, stating: "let us

[56] See Donna Hollenberg, *The Poet's Revolution: The Life of Denise Levertov* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013).
[57] Quoted in c 14.

now watch the judgment of Eichmann by sitting in judgment of ourselves."[58] This was the context in which Levertov encountered the trial, as she watched the proceedings from her apartment on New York's West Village.

"During the Eichmann Trial" turns on the trope of looking. Like a number of accounts of the trial, it takes note of a felicitous double exposure created by the reflective surface of Eichmann's bulletproof glass booth, in which the audience could see their own faces reflected back from the space occupied by the Nazi war criminal.

When we look up
Each from his being

(*Robert Duncan*)

He had not looked,
Pitiful man whom none

Pity, whom all
Must pity if they look

Into their own face (given
Only by glass, steel, water[59]

[58] Quoted in Lipstadt, *Eichmann Trial,* 39.

Anyone who reads this passage will assume that the speaker identifies, to some extent, with the perpetrator. As it stands here, Eichmann's crime is to have "not looked." Yet this is an offence implicating all who *now* look — but look too late — and are asked to pass judgment. Judgment is complicated, however, because, having been fellow non-lookers, they must also pass judgments on themselves who they see reflected in the glass booth. "He, you, I, which shall I say?/ He Stands /Isolate in a bulletproof/ witness-stand of glass."[60]

But the identification with the perpetrator is only a momentary stage. In the final lines of the poem's first part, a turn to dramatic irony suggests that in seeing their collective reflection in Eichmann's glass booth, shocked by their complicity and yet also possessed of the capacity to "pity" Eichmann, the audience of the trial is rewarded with the pedagogical upshot of a shared humanity, of which Eichmann himself is unknowing:

> He, you, I, which shall I say?
> He Stands
>
> Isolate in a bulletproof
> witness-stand of glass
>
> A cage, where we may view
> Ourselves, an apparition

[59] Dense Levertov, "Durign the Eichmann Trial," in *The Collected Poems of Denise Levertov* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), 206.
[60] Ibid., 208.

Telling us something he

Does not know: we are members

One of another[61]

The poem ends with a surprisingly uplifting message about time, distance, and redemption. Since the identification with Eichmann is with *past* bystanders — those who did not look in the past and were therefore complicit with the Holocaust — the moment of present looking, signified by the imbricated reflection of many faces in the glass cage, splits off from past complicity. By looking *now* the audience learns what Eichmann did not know: "we are members / one of another." Having been unable to stop past atrocity — and hence being complicit as an imagined bystander — the spectator passes through a feeling of shame and into an enlightened and newly committed position as a witness. Levertov thus appears to trade the binary of victim and perpetrator for the opposition of bystander and witness, exculpating her past inaction by taking up the present position of the witness. The poem can in this sense be read as an index of new and conscientious attention, figured in the act of looking, which comes into being in the mode of Weil-like conversion to the role of witness.

Yet Levertov's writings over the next decade would prove how difficult it was to remain solely a witness in the era of third-world revolution. If "During the Eichmann Trial" finds Levertov in a moment of self-recognition (and exculpation) as a witness, the transformation did not lead onto an abjuration of support for political struggle. Instead, the generation of the New Left and anti-Vietnam movement took the specter of Auschwitz and the crime of complicity as

61

cause to oppose American genocide in Vietnam and support violent struggle against Western imperialism. The 1960s were a period of rapid radicalization for Levertov. If 1961 counted as the year of her awakening as witness to past atrocity (through Eichmann), by 1965 Levertov was crafting some of the period's most important protest poems, calling poets and publics to action in a direct Sartrean mode.[62] And yet despite, or in fact *because*, of her famous calls for political and even violent action over Vietnam, "Nothing" is what she resides to do at the end of her poem "Biafra" (1967).[63]

Whereas "During the Eichmann Trial" signals a simultaneous admonition of complicity in past genocide and a pledge to bear witness to future genocide, "Biafra" makes plain the many obstructions that exist to living this ideal in the 1960s. The poem is a vivid record of the way that, even when confronted with impassioned accounts and gruesome images of "genocide," allegiances to revolutionary action and even violence can supersede a universalistic humanitarian ethos. Like her Eichmann poem, "Biafra" finds Levertov in front of a television, this time watching news footage of the Biafra crisis, sparked by the events of the Nigerian Civil War. Biafra marked a unique threshold moment in the transition from a politics of anticolonial nationalism to one of humanitarian intervention. The Nigerian treatment of the Igbo people and the Biafran separatist movement was widely compared to Auschwitz and deemed genocide by international governments and NGO's. The crisis helped launch Médecins Sans Frontieres and the wider *sans-frontieriste* movement that came to challenge Sartrean *tiers-mondisme* from the perspective of Camus paradigm of witnessing. Indeed, the founders of MSF have been open about their indebtedness to Camus's example, which helped give shape to their own practice of

[62] See the poems in Levertov, *The Sorrow Dance* (1967).
[63] Levertov, *Collected Poems,* 309.

témoignage or "witnessing."[64] Sent to Biafra as volunteer doctors for the International Red Cross, the founders of MSF were unwilling to remain quiet about the violence and conditions they witnessed; like Riuex, they broke the silence of medial ethics and testified before the international community regarding the suffering of their patients. The importance of Biafra is generally understood to be as a pivot from the politics of liberation towards an international ethics of witnessing. And Levertov's poem captures in a vey acute manner the felt tensions and conflicting allegiances — both political and affective — that marked this transition on the ground.

"Biafra" is remarkable less for its aural vividness and visual saturation — the great strength of Levertov's political poetry — than for its dull and depressive affect. Pausing to let the word echo like a drum tap — "Biafra. Biafra. Biafra" — the speaker finds

> Small stock of compassion
> Grown in us by the imagination
> (when we would let it) and by
> photos of napalmed children and by
> the voice of Thich Nhat Hanh
> has expended itself, saying
> Vietnam, Vietnam: trying
> to end that war.[65]

[64] See Redfield, *Life in Crisis*, and Eleanor Davey, *Idealism Beyond Borders: The French Revolutionary Left and the Rise of Humanitarianism 1954-1988* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).
[65] Levertov, *Collected Poems,* 309.

While Levertov's description of "compassion fatigue" is extremely familiar, there is far more going on in this poem than the enervation of empathic stocks. The juxtaposition of Biafra and Vietnam — or rather "Biafa. Biafra. Biafra," with its punctuated full-stops that invoke a cynical, nagging intonation, and "Vietnam, Vietnam," spoken by the heroic Nhat Hanh — suggests political motivation behind the speaker's unwillingness to extend her sympathy and solidarity. Her inability to feel as strongly about the Biafran humanitarian crisis and the struggle of the Vietnam reflects deeper political factors. "Biafra" thus records an inability, but also a refusal, to become a mere witness in the age of Vietnam.

Nevertheless, Levertov was actively striving to overcome her resistance to humanitarian causes such as Biafra. A contemporaneous long poem, "Relearning the Alphabet" (1967), records Levertov's development towards a more universal ethics that would culminate in her conversion to Catholicism in the 1980s. Comprised of 26 short stanzas marked A-Z, the poem turns on scenes of rebuilding language from ruin: "Relearn the alphabet/ relearn the world," "Sweep up anguish as with a wing-tip/ brushing the ashes back to the fire's core." "Caritas is what I must travel to/ *Through the fire's core,* an alchemy: caritas, claritas.[66] *Caritas* (charity) and *claritas* (clarity) are fused here as a felicitous product of the fire's alchemical power. To write clearly is to act charitably. The image on which the poem recursively circles back, "the fire's core" suggests both universal renewal and the conflagrations in Vietnam. Here, however, fire is pregnant with possibility: if we can travel through the "fire's core" we may walk out the other side possessed of new capacity: "To love an other only for being."[67]

§

[66] Ibid., 321-322.
[67] Ibid., 320.

"Relearning the Alphabet" is a good descriptor of what was generally underway as the long 1960s came to an end. Levertov's quest to pass "through the fire" of Vietnam and find a common substrate of humanity was in many ways emblematic of her generation of American writers and Western liberals. As the historian Barbara Keys puts it, the human rights movement took off as a "new moral calculus" after Vietnam, helping "salve the consciences of liberal Americans who had so recently been horrified by accounts of American wrongdoing in Vietnam."[68] Liberal writers and intellectuals played a large part in setting the terms of this "new moral calculus." In 1967, the year Levertov wrote both "Biafra" and "Relearning the Alphabet," Robert Silvers, the editor and founder of the influential left-liberal *The New York Review of Books*, convened and moderated a public forum in New York on "The Legitimacy of Violence as a Political Act?" The forum brought together Noam Chomsky, Hannah Arendt, Susan Sontag and Connor Cruise O'Brien (with Tom Hayden in the audience), to address the question, posed by Silvers: "under what condition, if any, can violent action be said to be 'legitimate'?" Though Silvers did not directly weigh in on the matter at the time, it is clear in hindsight that he came down squarely on the negative., rejecting any justification of violence. Over the next decades he turned the NYRB into a house organ for literary and intellectual witnesses to challenge radical orthodoxies and the Sartrean tradition. For instance, the one published article in the *NYRB* to come out of the 1967 forum was Arendt's "Reflections on Violence" (1969), in which she famously levied a direct riposte to Sartre's valorization of decolonizing violence.[69]

The same year as the forum on "The Legitimacy of Violence as a Political Act?" Silvers convinced Arendt's close friend, the novelist Mary McCarthy, to visit North and South Vietnam

[68] Keys, *Reclaiming,* 212.
[69] Hannah Arendt, "Reflections on Violence," *New York Review of Books*, February 27, 1969.

to report for the magazine. McCarthy, while an outspoken critic of the war, was neither a journalist nor a political authority. Yet this seemed to be precisely the point for Silvers. He wanted a novelist's eye for detail and sensitivity to style. For McCarthy's part, she viewed the assignment as a way of channeling her "personal" and "vicarious shame" into an act of "witnessing….not in the legal but in the Biblical sense."[70] Witnessing would soon become a prominent theme in the habitués cultivated by Silvers and the *NYRB*.

As the *NYRB* emerged as a forum for an ethically inflected political writing, Silvers elected two main figures to uphold the house style: V.S. Naipaul and Joan Didion. Both began working with Silvers in the 1970s, and both have since become synonymous with a political and stylistic challenge to radical politics and the politics of liberation. At the heart of the project cultivated by Silvers and executed by Didion and Naipaul, amongst others, was a Camuesque focus on political excesses and the necessity of individual acts of "revolt" and conscience.[71] Naipaul set the tone with a series of seminal pieces on Peronism in the mid-1970s, masterminded by Silvers.[72] By the mid-1970s, this critical stance was largely associated and metaphorized as the act of witnessing. Didion's third novel, *A Book of Common Prayer* (1977), begins with the words "I will be her witness."[73] In this case, the narrating witness is Grace Strasser, an American born matriarch of a Central American dictatorship. Grace takes an interest in the crumbling life of Charlotte Douglas, a troubled and existentially lost upper middle class American woman in an unnamed Central American country. While the two women share absolutely no political allegiances, they have both "lost a child," making their bond, and Grace's act of witness, solely personal. While peasant revolts, foreign backed revolutions, and American sponsored

[70] Mary McCarthy, *Vietnam* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1967), 27.

[71] Didion, for her part, traced this lineage back to George Orwell.
[72] V.S. Naipaul, "The Corpse at the Iron Gate," *New York Review of Books,* August 10, 1972.
[73] Joan Didion, *A Book of Common Prayer* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1977), 6.

counterinsurgency destabilize the country, Didion focuses her novel almost entirely on Grace's ill-fated attempt to apprehend the meaning of Charlotte's chaotic life, cut short when she is unwittingly swept up in the country's violence and killed during a wave of extrajudicial murders. Charlotte, who the novel describes as "immaculate of history, innocent of politics," is a suffering innocent and a victim of political violence, but not of the type a politically-minded witness would choose to represent. Didion's decision to set a novel about one woman's ultimately irrational care for another woman amidst a setting of revolution, guerrilla warfare, and dictatorship, understandably earned her a reputation for a "sneering dismissal" of the politics of liberation and revolution.[74] John McClure, for instance, despairs over what he calls "Didionesque witnesses," seeking "personal salvation by staunching wounds that must be inflicted."[75]

Yet without disputing the gravity of Didion's challenge to the politics of liberation in the Americas, we should not dismiss the deep political and philosophical premise of *The Book of Common Prayer*. In so blatantly and boldly backgrounding revolution in favor of a single act of "witnessing," Didion's book seeks to illuminate a global conjuncture with implications beyond the mere dismissal of radicalism, or the advocacy of personal salvation. Didion's novel, not unlike *Elizabeth Costello,* lays down the stakes of what witnessing as a purely ethical act entails, an act that takes all scales of violence and injury as equal and equally worthy of bearing witness to. And also like Coetzee after her, Didion sets this mode of ethical attention against the century's other project of radical fidelity to a singular cause, revolution and third-world liberation, in order to juxtapose the extreme instantiations of ethics and politics, extremes that she tellingly characterizes as revolution and witnessing. The purpose and value of *The Book of Common Prayer*, it seems to me, is to have identified and illustrated these extremes, not to have

[74] John McLure, *Late Imperial Romance* (New York: Verso, 1994), 56.
[75] Ibid., 62.

made partisans bids for one side or the other. The book takes up in the starkest possible terms the tension between ethics and politics right at the moment when ethics finally appeared to be getting the upper hand in the liberal perception of values in a globalized world. And in Didionesque fashion, it refuses to come down entirely on either side.

Placed within the longer story that I have been tracing of witnessing as a literary ideal, what is especially illuminating about Didion's novel is that it explicitly takes up the act of witnessing — Grace begins the book by claiming the position of witness to Charlotte — as a potentially irrational interruption of singularity within the organization of the collective project that is politics. Grace's fidelity to Charlotte cannot be explained by any rational means, other than that Charlotte is "lost" and "innocent." This incursion of irrational singularity has its analog in an inability to rationalize the injury, suffering, or death of any one human being over another. Read in this way, Grace's strange act of witnessing can be seen as an effort to shed light on the lived tension between an ethical, semi-religious injunction to bear witness to human suffering at potentially finer and finer scales, and a political imperative to rationalize individual casualties in the name of the greater good, most importantly the common cause of revolution.

By saying that Grace's act of witness is *irrational*, however, I do not mean to suggest that it is *emotional,* and thus a matter of feeling and affect. To the contrary, Grace, who we find out is an anthropologist and ethnographer who worked with Claude Levi-Strauss in Brazil, speaks very rationally about her act of witnessing, specifically regarding the ways she has been trained in modes of attention. Trained as an anthropologist and ethnographer, just as Rieux in *The Plague* is trained as physician, Grace translates her disposition as an acute observer of human life into a narrative act of witnessing. Importantly, both the anthropologist and doctor are figures who embody an impartial, detached view. In Didion, just as in Camus, the adoption of a particular

disciplinary *stance* as narrative mode opens onto a literature of witness. In these cases, witnessing begins with a mode of attention to individual bodies. While in the case of Didion and Camus, this takes the form of trained modes of looking at the world that are detached from the writer (anthropologist and doctor) it becomes clear that these disciplinary perspectives are figures for the task of the writer as witness. What begins with a trained mode of attention within the diegesis of the novel becomes a practice of literary ethics in the world

THE AGE OF THE WITNESS

A rape is a rape. Just as a genocide is a genocide

Médecins Sans Frontiéres, Nobel Peace Prize Address (1999)

When Milosz won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1980, the revolt against *tiers-mondisme* and the politics of liberation had begun to reach a climax. The public conversations between Sartre and the former Maoist turned anti-totalitarian firebrand Bernard Henri Levi had led the aging philosopher to backtrack on his once staunch resistance to the primacy of ethics over politics, and to withdraw his support for communist regimes in the global south. While revelations of genocide perpetrated by the Khmer Rouge and the ensuing "boat crisis" in South East Asia in the late 1970s were the most immediate catalysts for Sartre's public contrition, these were only the final punctuations of a decade that included the explosive effects of the French publication of Alexander Solzhenitsyn's *The Gulag Archipelago* (1973), the increasing force exerted by Holocaust memory on the horizon of ethical and political action, and the influence of Eastern European dissidents and the samizdat movement. Tied up with each of these progressions was

the new global resonance and reach of human rights. Amnesty's own Nobel Peace Prize in 1977 had been a turning point in the history of the movement, as had Jimmy Carter's decision to promote human rights ideals in his bid for presidency in 1976. In 1979, Carter accepted the Nobel Peace prize with a somber speech that was the first to employ the word genocide. The next year, Milosz became the second laureate to use the term genocide in their acceptance speech.

In his speech, Milosz recalled a fairytale figure from his childhood who "flies above the Earth and looks at it *from above* but at the same time sees it in every detail." This high-flying observer, Milosz suggested, was an idealized "metaphor of the poet's vocation."[76] At the same time, he noted the danger of apprehending the world only from above — the privileged and abstracted view of "History," "ruined cities," and of "fire falling from the sky." Nevertheless, he refused to forego the virtue of distance, however fraught. As he put it: "Reality calls out for a name," and the poet must answer that call; but to draw too close to the "fire" and commit oneself to "action," will make art and poetry appear "inconsequential" and even "dangerous." Therefore, to ensure that literature survived as a way of saying what can't be said otherwise, writers needed to resist the temptation of "action" in order to warn against its excesses. Such was the contradiction, he concluded, "discovered by poets of an earth polluted by the crime of genocide."[77]

For Milosz, writers in the twentieth-century had been faced with a stinging paradox: to write poems in a "century of genocide" would seem like "moral treason," since suffering on such a scale should reasonably move all humans into action. Yet to "embrace reality in such a manner that it is preserved in all its old tangle of good and evil, of despair and hope, is possible only

[76] Milosz, "Nobel Address," 5.
[77] Ibid., 5-6.

thanks to a distance, only by soaring *above* it."[78] As he often did, Milosz invoked Weil and Camus in his Nobel speech as the precursors and inspiration for his ethical and aesthetic philosophy. A year later, he elaborated on his metaphor of the "soaring" poet in his 1981 Charles Eliot Norton Lectures as the chair of poetry at Harvard, later published as *The Witness of Poetry*. This treasonous figure, "soaring above" an "earth polluted by the crime of genocide," Milosz deemed the witness.

As we will recall, Sartre had used the very same metaphor of the writer who "soars above" their time to characterize the witness in *What is Literature?* There, Sartre's renunciation of witnessing had hinged on the impossibility and political apostasy of the soaring view from above, which would seek to pass objective judgment on all acts of violence rather than accept the implicated "situation" of the writer in the postwar world's political struggle between colonizer and colonized. Sartre's aesthetic theory and political ideology cast the high-flying witness as treasonous and worthy of denunciation. Yet Milosz, nearly a half-century later, could triumphantly claim "treason" as the necessary conditions of witnessing, and self-identify with the high-flying figure who Sartre denounced. In doing so, he helped pave the way for a generation of writers to loosen their solidarities and adopt the on-high view. The reversal was dramatic, and directly reflected the major shifts in the global political temperature of the period. Sartre's reversal of views and death in 1980, the end of Vietnam, the demise of *tiers-mondisme,* and the growing influence of human rights and organizations such as Amnesty and Médecins Sans Frontiéres all pointed towards the conditions for the emergence of an age of the witness.

Milosz's novel foregrounding of genocide captured the aesthetic ideal that reflected and reinforced the values of this era. In his Nobel speech and *The Witness of* Poetry, Milosz

[78] Ibid., 6.

suggested that the intensification and expansion of political violence in the twentieth-century called for a total reassessment of the writer and of writing itself. Genocide had pushed the writer's ambit of care and attention beyond the codes and forms imposed by filial, national, internationalist, ideological, or revolutionary partisanship, while at the same time, refusing the notion of total literary autonomy. The "horrible events of mass genocide and of deportations," Milosz would write elsewhere, had provoked "successive waves of revolutionary change in versification, in syntax, in structure of a poem."[79]As such, the form and impetus of a radical literature — "proletarian" in pre45 terms, "committed" in post45 terms — gave way, or split into, a *radically open* literature, a literature by and for "those well mangled by the historical wringer."[80] In Milosz's terms, the "crime of genocide" necessitated and opened up a new way of looking at the world, or a new mode of attention, that could judge violence on its own terms and bear vigilant witness to present violence.

To take just one prominent example of how the rise of genocide as a historical optic was translated into the matter of scale and attention in literature, we can turn to Adrienne Rich. The early 1980s saw Rich in a transition from a radical Marxist feminism to a more universal position of writerly responsibility. "Don't we have to start here," she had asked at a conference in 1983 in the Netherland, "where we are, forty years after the Holocaust, in the churn of Middle Eastern violence, in the midst of decisive ferment in South Africa—not in some debate over origins and precedents, but in the recognition of simultaneous oppressions?"[81] Today, the question can't help but sound rhetorical. But at the time, viewing "simultaneous oppression" meant giving up allegiances and debates that sought justification and equivocation for present violence in past events. It also entailed finding an optic for viewing "oppression" along an axis of simultaneity

[79] Milosz, "Response to Alvarez," 2.
[80] Milosz response to alvarez 1
[81] Adrienne Rich, *Blood, Bread, and Poetry: Selected Prose* (New York: Norton, 1997), 218.

and equivalency. Rich achieved this view by "soaring above."

In a contemporaneous poem, "North American Time" (1983), Rich connected her feeling of responsibility to past and present atrocities, genocides, political assassinations, colonial massacres, and humanitarian crises by chaining them together in sweeping sequence that stresses a common substrate as well as a form of cultivated distance:

> Poet, sister: words —
> whether we like it or not—
> stand in a time of their own.
> No use protesting *I Wrote that*
> *Before Kollomtai was exiled*
> *Rosa Luxemburg, Malcolm,*
> *Anna Mae Aquash, murdered,*
> *Before Treblinka, Birkenau,*
> *Hiroshima, before Sharpeville,*
> *Biafra, Bangla Desh, Beirut, Assam*[82]

Here, Rich stages a transition from feminist poet to poetic witness by demonstrating the breadth of attention and negotiation of scale that witnessing will call for. She moves seamlessly across individual assassinations, death camps, military massacres, nuclear attacks, and humanitarian crises. In a sense, by moving so freely between the events she does precisely what her friend and fellow poetic witness, Levertov, could not do in "Biafra," still stuck in the allegiances of revolutionary solidarity that stopped her from seeing Vietnam and Biafra for their equal tolls on

[82] Adrienne Rich, *Later Poems: Selected and New 1971-2012* (New York: Norton, 2013), 132.

human life. Rich's stanza steps back to move across the surface of these events so as to judge each for their individual tolls, disregarding the root causes that separate them and might lead them to appear more justifiable than the other.

In placing mass genocides alongside far less catastrophic events, Rich runs the risk of effacing the significance of genocide. Yet her decision reflects a common if somewhat paradoxical consensus coming into being at this moment — a consensus that holds that mass killing and violence on the scale of Hiroshima and Treblinka, calls for a refocusing and recommitment to smaller scales of suffering and violence. This move calls for judging all past violence equally, or in a manner that does not implicate actors in the present in such a way as to make violence necessary or justified. This was the ethos of the witness that emerged at the end of the twentieth-century. But its constitutive problem was: how small of a scale of suffering should we bear witness? Could an absorption and fidelity to finer and finer scales of suffering not ultimately distort and eventually overwhelm the witness? And what of the crimes and atrocities of the past that seek redress and justice in the present?

§

Coetzee's *Disgrace* and *Elizabeth Costello* are of the most celebrated and discussed novels of the late twentieth–century, and it is a testament to the importance of the problem that I note above that he devotes both woks to exploring its history and implication. As I began to work out in my introduction, the two novels work through the question by addressing diametrically opposing viewpoints. *Disgrace* operates in a historical conjuncture, the early years of post-apartheid South Africa, in which the crimes of empire are near enough to affect the judgment of violence and

justice in the present. In the rape of Lucy, Coetzee pushes the Sartrean view of the necessity of decolonizing violence to a gruesome extreme. Characteristically, Coetzee neither openly affirms nor rejects Sartre's view, but rather offers a sober admonition that there is no universal foundation or perspective from which to judge all acts of violence. Nevertheless, the novel closes with the protagonist, David Lurie, Lucy's father, on a clear paths towards the attunement, recognition, and care for finer scales of suffering, as the once and in ways still culturally insensitive Lurie becomes an attentive and devoted volunteer at an animal clinic, where he tends to sick and dying stray dogs. The novel thus leaves us between the most extreme poles of Sartrean violence and Weil-like absorption in the care for what would otherwise be the most insignificant of suffering creatures, the mongrel animal.

The significance of *Elizabeth Costello* is to have to extended the dynamics of *Disgrace* and the historical conjuncture of post-Apartheid South Africa — of empire, decolonization, and post-colonial democracy — into an exploration of the writer's task and responsibility in a global era. In the later novel, written, as I've already noted, more or less simultaneously with *Disgrace*, the tension between past atrocity and present witnessing is dramatized in all of its complexity. And importantly, the novel's final philosophical gambit turns on the history that I have unfolded in this chapter. In the Kafkaesque final chapter, "At the Gates," Costello is obligated by a court or council to take some partisan position, to sate "what she believes," in order to reach the afterlife. Costello refuses, citing Milosz, who she claims has set the example of the writer's fidelity to all causes and all scales of violence. She cites his poem, "Secretaries" (1976), in which he writes, playfully, "I am no more than a secretary of the invisible thing /That is dictated to me and a few others."[83] "I cannot afford to believe…in my line of work one has to suspend belief."[84]

[83] Czeslaw Milosz, *Collected Poems: 1931*-2001 (New York: Ecco, 2001), 130.

"I am a writer and I write what I hear. I am a secretary of the invisible, one of many secretaries over the ages. That is my calling: dictation secretary"[85] Here Coetzee characterizes Costello interpreting Milosz, who was in turn interpreting Weil. Costello thus becomes, in a way, the Weil of the late twentieth-century, reimagined as a cosmopolitan novelist who must bear witness to the century that Weil could not bear to live through.

If Costello appears a cipher for Weil, the "council" who judges her seems to echo Sartre, biding her to take a "position." After Costello offers her explanation of why she cannot, as a writer, favor the "voices" of some over others, a council member responds: "And what of the Tasmanians…What of the fate of the Tasmanians," and not Tasmanians in general but "The old Tasmanians, the ones who were exterminated. Do you have special opinions about them?"[86] Costello, who is Australian, is at the broadest level of abstraction, implicated in this extermination, as a distant beneficiary. The Judge's point is, of course, that you should not be able to claim the position of the detached observer to the crime of genocide, especially a genocide in which you are implicated as a descendent of colonial perpetrators. "The extermination of the old Tasmanians by her countrymen, her ancestors. Is that, finally, what lies behind this hearing, this trial: the questions of historical guilt?", Costello remarks to herself. [87]On this view, the knife in the side of the witness is time itself, which if followed back far enough, might implicate all human, and certainly all Westerners in genocide and atrocity. But how far back are we obligated to go in order to conceive of our responsibilities and organize our beliefs in the present?

---

[84] Coetzee, *Costello,* 269.
[85] Ibid., 264.
[86] Ibid., 265.
[87] Ibid., 334.

In invoking the genocide of the "Old Tasmanians" the council represents an absurdly extreme version of a Sartrean fidelity to a partisanship with the victims of empire. By contrast, Costello's somewhat comic invocation of Milosz is in fact a staged misreading that turns into a kind of cosmic misreading, so that Costello is finally lost in the multiplicity of possible voices to bear witness too. She foregoes judgment all together to become an entirely passive mediator of suffering, the most extreme version of Sartre's dreaded witness. Coetzee knows that neither position is possible, but he is correct in staging the polls as the dialectical markers of the twentieth-century: both its violent excesses and its ethical insights. In his letter to Thomas Merton in the 1960s, Milosz spoke of Weil's extreme attunement to suffering as an impossible but necessary poll to the laws of necessity held up by both sides of the Cold War. Milosz tried to live between the poles of Weil and the necessities of judgment and action called for by the political world, and his adoption of the language of witness described the lived and ultimately very difficult position of living between ideals, not fully achieving one. This tense and interstitial space is also the terrain of Coetzee's late twentieth-century masterpieces, and it is little wonder that he turns finally to Milosz to plot this terrain.

§

Sartre had characterized the witness as "pure." And there is a similar and connected tendency to disparage human rights as a utopian ideal that seeks a way out of the difficult tangle of politics. This chapter has tried to place the witness at the center of this tangle, but I've done so without recourse to a common way of treating the witness as the product of trauma. The difficulty of witnessing can be a difficulty of judgment, bound up by the sometimes minute by minute negotiations of how to live in a world of endless suffering and endless connection.

Channeled through the Holocaust, or attached to more literal ideas of direct witnessing of atrocity, studies of the witness, especially within the field of literary studies, have centered on questions of proximity to violence, how this proximity is internalized as trauma and recorded as memory, and how it is then translated into forms of expression and testimony. This focus on lived proximity to violence and its effects has come at the cost of assessing other definitions of the witness and witnessing. In particular, a preoccupation with extremity and trauma has made it difficult to apprehend the manner in which many writers have in fact taken up and understood the position of witness as a space of critical distance from, and ethical judgment of, violence and extremity, rather than a proximity to it. Furthermore, an attachment to trauma as the marker of authenticity and the lived experience of "witnessing" overshadows the fact that the cultivation of critical distance can also be an experience of violence that is both lived and deeply felt.

In her keynote at the 2001 Nobel centenary, titled "Witness: The Inner Testimony," Gordimer explained her role as a "witness to apartheid" as a combination of personal circumstance, moral responsibility, and the specific vocation of a writer to listen and observe in order to record what will otherwise remain silent or repressed:

> I was the child of the white minority, blinkered in privilege as a conditioning education, basic as abc. But because I was a writer— for it's an early state of being, before a word has been written — I became witness to the unspoken in my society. Very young, I entered a dialogue with myself about what was around me; and this took the form of trying for the meaning in what I saw by transforming this into stories based on what were everyday incidents of ordinary life for

> everyone around me: the sacking of the backyard room of a black servant by police while the white master and mistress of the house looked on unconcerned.[88]

Readers of Gordimer will recognize in this passage the omnipresent machinations of racial domination in Apartheid South Africa, which often takes the form of the violence of the ordinary. While some argue that trauma takes the form of the ordinary and the "unspoken," it would seem a stretch to apply it to Gordimer's vision of witnessing. Gordimer was greatly inspired by the literary ethics of Camus and of Milosz, both of whom she invokes in her address. Through Camus, Gordimer developed a literary posture that was both engaged in bringing the crimes of Apartheid to light, but fell short of a radical embrace of decolonizing violence. I have been arguing that that this interstitial stance exemplifies the twentieth-century literature of witness. But it might just as well describe the moral and political project of human rights in the twentieth–century, caught between a past revolutionary tradition and a "century of genocide."

[88] Engdahl ed., *Witness Literature,* 94.

BIBILOGRAPHY

ARCHIVES

Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas at Austin (HRC)

PEN International Papers
PEN English Center Papers
J.M. Coetzee Papers

Princeton University Special Collections

PEN America Papers

Library of Congress

Archibald MacLeish Papers
Charles Malik Papers
Muriel Rukeyser Papers

Columbia University Manuscripts Collections

Amnesty International USA Papers
Ivan Morris Papers

BOOKS

Amnesty Internationl Report on Torture (New York: Farrar Strauss and Giroux, 1975).

Agamben, Giorgio *Means Without Ends* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000),

———————. *Homo Sacer* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004)

Anker, Peder *Imperial Ecology: Environmental Order in the British Empire: 1895-1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001)

Arendt, Hannah *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt and Brace, 1953)

———————. *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958).

———————. *On Revolution* (New York: Penguin, 2003)

———————. "The Concentration Camps." *The Partisan Review* 15.7 (July 1948).

———————. "The Rights of Man;' What are They" *Modern Review* 3, no. 1 (1949)

———————. *Jewish Writings,* edited by Jerome Kohn and Ron H. Feldman (New York: Shocken Books, 2007).

Anderson, Amanda *The Powers of Distance: Cosmopolitanism and the Cultivation of Detachment* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

Armitage, David *The Declaration of Independence: A Global History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008)

Atwood, Margaret *Selected Poems II: 1976-1986* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1988)

———————. *Second Words: Selected Prose 1968-1982* (Toronto: Anansi, 1986)

Auden, W.H. *Collected Poems* (New York: Vintage, 1998)

Bauman, Zygmut "Humanity on the Move." In *Liquid Times: Living in an Age of Uncertainty* (London: Polity, 2007)

Benenson, Peter "The Forgotten Prisoners," *Observer,* May 28, 1961.

Benhabib, Seyla *The Rights of Others* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004);

———————. *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt* (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publishing, 1996)

Benjamin, Walter *Illuminations* (New York: Shocken, 2011)

Bernstein, Charles "Poetics of the Americas." *Modernism/Modernity* 3.3 (Sep. 1996)

Beverley, John *Against Literature* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1993)

––––––––––––. *Testimonio: On the Politics of Truth* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2004)

Birmingham, Peg *Hannah Arendt and Human Rights* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 2006)

Black, Shameem *Fiction Across Borders* (New York: Columba University Press, 2010)

Mutu Blasing, *Lyric Poetry: The Pain and Pleasure of Words* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008)

Boll, Heinrich "The Imprisoned World of Solzhenitsyn's *The First Circle,*" in *Alexander Solhenitsyn: Critical Essays and Documentary Materials,* ed. John B Dunlop, Richard Haugh, and Alexis Klimoff (Belmon: Nordland, 1973)

Booth, Wayne C. *The Company we Keep: An Ethics of Fiction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).

Borgwardt, Elizabeth *A New Deal for the World: America's Vision for Human Rights* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007)

Breytenbach, Breyten *Confessions of an Albino Terrorist* (London: Harvest Books, 1983)

Buchanan, Tom "The Truth Will Set you Free:" The Making of Amnesty International," *Journal of Contemporary History.* Vol. 37, No. 4 (October, 2002)

Burke, Roland *Decolonization and the Evolution of International Human Rights* (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania University Press, 2010)

Cameron, Sharon *Impersonality: Seven Essays* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007)

Camus, Albert *The Plague* (New York: Vintage, 1996)

——————. *The Algerian Chronicles* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011)

——————. *Neither Victims nor Executioners: An Ethics Superior to Murder* (New York: New Society Publishers, 1986)

Caruth, Hayden *Actfive and Other Poems,* by Archibald MacLeish. *Poetry* (June 1948)

Clark, Ann Marie *Diplomacy of Conscience: Amnesty International and Changing Human Rights Norms* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001)

Coetzee, J.M. "Into the Dark Chamber: The Novelist and South Africa," *New York Times,* January 12, 1986.

————————. *Doubling the Point* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992)

————————. *Disgrace* (London: Penguin, 1999)

————————. *Elizabeth Costello* (London: Penguin, 2003)

Cohen, Stanley *States of Denial: Knowing About Atrocities and Suffering* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001

Dawes, James *Evil Men* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013),

Davies, Ioan *Writers in Prison* (London: Wiley Blackwell, 1990)

Didion, Joan *A Book of Common Prayer* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1977)

Douzinas, Costas *Human Rights and Empire: The Political Philosophy of Empire* (London: Routledge, 2007)

English, James *The Economy of Prestige* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005)

Esposito, Roberto *The Third Person: The Politics of Life and the Philosophy of the Impersonal* (London: Polity, 2012)

Faggen, Robert ed. *Striving Towards Being: The Letters of Thomas Merton and Czeslaw Milosz* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 1996),

Fassin, Didier *Humanitarian Reason: A Moral History of the Present* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012)

––––––––––. "Ethics of Survival: A Democratic Approach to the Politics of Life." *Humanity* Fall, 2010

————————. Didier Fassin, "Anotehr Politics of Life is Possible." *Theory, Culture, and Society* September 2009 Vol. 26 No. 5, 51

Feldman, Shoshana and Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (London: Routledge, 1992).

Forché Carolyn ed. *Against Forgetting*: *Twentieth-Century Poetry of Witness* (New York: Norton, 1993).

Fussel, Paul *Abroad: British Literary Traeling Between the Wars* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982)

Gatrell, Peter *The Making of the Modern Refugee* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012)

Gordimer, Nadine *The Essential Gesture: Writing, Politics and Places* (London: Penguin, 1989),

Gourgouris, Stathis *Lessons in Secular Criticism.* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013)

Greene, Graham *The Power and the Glory* (London: Penguin, 1973)

Gündoğdu, Ayten *Rightlessness in an Age of Rights: Hannah Arendt and the Contemporary Struggles of Migrant* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

Hamacher, Werner "The Right to Have Rights (Four-and-a-half Remarks)." *South Atlantic Quarterly* 103 2/3 (2003), 349.

Harlow, Barbara *Barred: Women, Writing, and Political Detention* (Boston: Wesleyan University Press, 1992)

Heaney, Seamus *The Government of the Tongue: Selected Prose, 1978-1986* (London: MacMillan, 1990)

———————. *Collected Poems, 1966-1987* (London: Macmillan, 1990)

Helton, Arthur C *The Price of Indifference: Refugees and Humanitarian Action in the New Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002)

Hegel, G.W.F *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art Volume II,* (London: Clarendon Press, 1998)

Hoffmann, Stefan-Ludwig ed., *Human Rights in the Twentieth-Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010)

Hopgood, Stephen *Keepers of the Flame: Understanding Amnesty International* (Ithaca: Cornell Universuty Press, 2006)

Humphrey, John Peter *Human Rights and the United Nations: A Great Adventure* (New York: Transnational Publishers, 1984)

Hunt, Lynn *Inventing Human Rights* (New York: Norton, 2007)

Ignatieff, Michael *Human Rights as Politics and Idolatry,* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999)

Izenberg, Oren *Being Numerous: Poetry and the Grounds of Social Life.* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), 2-3.

Jameson, Storm *Journey to the North* (London: Berg, 1946),

Jarvis, Simon "Comentary on Oren Izenberg's *Being Numerous.*" *Nonsite.org*

Jensen, Steven B. *The Making of International Human Rights: The 1960s, Decolonization, and the Reconstruction of Global Values* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016)

Johnson, Barbara ed. *Freedom and Interpretation: The Oxford Amnesty Lectures.* (New York: Basic Books, 1992).

Katznelson, Ira *Desolation and Enlightenment* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 19.

Keck, Margaret E. and Kathryn Sikkink, *Activists Beyond Borders: Advocacy Networks in International Politics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998)

Keys, Barbara *Reclaiming American Virtue: The Human Rights Revolution in the 1960s* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012)

_____. *Reclaiming American Virture: The Human Rights Revolution of the 1970s* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013)

Koestler, Arthur *The Scum of the Earth* (New York: Eland Books, 2007)

Konuk, Kader *East West Mimesis* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010).

Lazreg, Marnia *Torture and the Twilight of Empire: From Algiers to Baghdad* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007)

Lear, Jonathan *The Case for Irony* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006)

Lee, Hermione *Virginia Woolf: A Biogrpahy* (New York: Vintage, 1999)

Levine, Caroline *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015).

Levertov, Dense *The Collected Poems of Denise Levertov* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013).

Lipstadt, Deborah E. *The Eichmann Trial* (New York: Shocken, 2011),

MacLeish, Archibald *Collected Poems: 1917-1982* (New York: Mariner Press, 1985)

_____ "Public Speech and Private Speech in Poetry." *The Yale Review* (August 1937)

Malik, Charles "Speeches and Writings," in *Ambassador Charles Malik and the Universal Declaration of Human Right* n.d. Web.

Malkki, Liisa *Purity and Exile: Violence, Memory, and National Cosmology among Hutu Refugees in Tanzania* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995)

Malley, Robert The call from Algeria: Third Worldism, Revolution, and the Turn to Islam (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996)

Mapanje, Jack ed. *Gathering Seaweed: African Prison Writing* (London: Heinemann, 2002).

Maritain, Jacques *Christianity and Democracy, and The Rights of Man and Natural Law*. (Washington, DC: Ignatius Press, 2012)

----------. *Frontiers of Poetry* (London: PL Poetry Editions, 1945)

———————. *Art and Scholasticism and Other Essays*, (Newark: FQ Classics, 2007)

Mazower, Mark *No Enchanted Palace*: *The End of Empire and the Origins of the United Nations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008)

McCarthy, Mary *Vietnam* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1967)

McLure, John *Late Imperial Romance* (New York: Verso, 1994)

Meister, Robert *After Evil: A Politics of Human Rights* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 19.

Milosz, Czeslaw "Nobel Lecture," http://www.nobelprize.org

———————. *Collected Poems: 1931-2001* (New York: Ecco, 2001)

———————. "Response to A. Alvarez," *New York Review of Books*, June 9, 1988.

———————. *To Begin Where I Am: Selected Essays* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 2011),

Morsink, Johannes *The Universal Declaration of Human Rights: Origins, Drafting, Intent* (Philadelphia" Pennsylvanian University Press, 1999)

Moyn Samuel and Jan Eckel eds., *The Breakthrough: Human Rights in the 1970s* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013).

_____ *Christian Human Rights* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015).

————. *The Last Utopia: Human Rights in History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010),

Martha Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice: The Literary Imagination and Public Life* (Boston: Beacon, 1997).

–––––––––––––––. *Poetic Justice,* and *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990).

————————. *Political Emotions: Why Love Matters for Justice* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012).

O'Driscoll, Dennis *Stepping Stones: Interviews with Seamus* Heaney (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2010)

Palumbo-Liu, David *The Deliverence of Others: Reading Fiction in a Global Age* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012).

Pinter, Harold *One for the Road* (London: Metheun, 1985)

Redfield, Peter *Life in Crisis: The Ethical Journey of Doctors Without Borders* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013).

Rich, Adrienne *Later Poems: Selected and New 1971-2012* (New York: Norton, 2013)

————————. *Blood, Bread, and Poetry: Selected Prose* (New York: Norton, 1997)

Sands, Bobby *Writings from Prison* (Boston: Mercier, Press, 1998)

Shute, Stephen and Susan L. Hurley, eds., *On Human Rights: The Oxford Amnesty Lectures 1993* (New York: Basic Books, 1993)

Sartre, Jean Paul *What is Literature?* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988)

Scarry, Elaine *The Body in Pain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985)

Seymour-Jones, Carole and Lucy Popescu Eds. *Writers Under Siege: Voices of Freedom*

from Around the World (New York: New York University Press, 2007).

Schwarz, Bill *White Man's World: Memories of Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011)

Seghers, Anna *Transit* (New York: NYRB Classics, 2008)

Slaughter, Joseph *Human Rights Inc: The World Novel, Narrative Form, and International Law* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007).

Sliwinski, Sharon *Human Rights in Camera* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).

Smith, Sidonie and Kay Shaffer, *Human Rights and Narrated Lives: The Ethics of Recognition* (New York: Palgrave, 2004).

Smuts, Jan *Walt Whitman: A Study in the Evolution of Personality* (New York: Berg, 1977)

Sontag, Susan "Simone Weil," *New York Review of Books,* February 1, 1963.

Solzhenitsyn, Aleksander *The Gulag Archipelago*: *Volume I* (New York: Pantheon, 2008), 372.

Susan Stanford Friedman, "Cultural Parataxis and Transnational Landscapes of Reading," *Modernism, Vol 1* (2007), ed. Astrudur Eysteinsson and Vivian Liska, 35-52.

Susan Stewart, *Poetry and the Fate of the Senses* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 23.

Sullivan, Rosemary ed. *Human Rights and the Writer* (New York: Doubleday, 1983).

Tiffany, Daniel *Infidel Poetics: Riddles, Nightlife, Substance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009)

Timerman, Jacabo *Prisoner Without a Name, Cell Without a Number* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2003)

Thiong'o, Ngugi wa *Detained: A Writer's Prison Diary* (London, Heinemann, 1981).

Traven, B. *The Death Ship* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 1991)

Tunstall, Kate E. ed. *Self Evident Truths: Human Rights and the Enlightenment* (London: Bloomsbury, 2011)

Weil, Simone *An Anthology* (New York: Grove Press, 2000).

Wells, H.G. *The Rights of Man* (London, Penguin, 1943)

Wiesel, Elie "The Holocaust as Literary Inspiration" In *Dimensions of the Holocaust,* ed. Elliot Leifkovitz (Evanston: Northwestern Universtiy Press, 1992).

Wieviorka, Annette *The Era of Witness* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006),

Williams, Thomas D. *Who is my Neighbor: Personalism and the Foundation of Human Rights* (Washington DC, Catholic University of America Press, 2005)

Williams, Raymond *The Politics of* Modernism (London: Verso, 1988)

Wolin, Richard *The Winds from the East: French Intellectuals, the Cultural Revolution, and the Legacy of the 1960s* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012),

Zaretsky, Robert *A Life Worth Living: Albert Camus and the Quest for Meaning* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013)

Zim, Rivkah *Consolations of Writing: Literary Strategies of Resistance From Boethius to Primo Levi* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014).

Zupancic, Alenka *The Odd One In* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2008)