A Double-Negation: Allegory and the Re-inscription of Human Rights

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ABSTRACT

This essay explores the intersection of literary form and appeals for human rights. It focuses on how the form of allegory, or what Walter Benjamin calls the "expression of convention," highlights the authority of those genres that work to confirm or deny human rights. To this end the essay draws on the writings of the Hungarian Holocaust survivor Imre Kertész, the South African novelist J.M. Coetzee, and the American writer and critic Paul Auster. The essay argues that these authors demonstrate the necessary double negation of rights and human accounts: the representation of those who cannot represent their experience and therein the representation of what they cannot show.

> *Political dissensus […] is a conflict about who speaks and who does not speak, about what has to be heard as the voice of pain and what has to be heard as an argument on justice.*
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> — Jacques Rancière, "The Thinking of Dissensus: Politics and Aesthetics"

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In his 1993 Oxford lecture, "Human Rights, Rationality, and Sentimentality," the American pragmatist Richard Rorty argued for the undeniable existence of a post-Holocaust human rights culture. Attempts to justify *why* each human being is worthy of dignity, or for the particular protections enumerated in the United Nation's *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, merely interfere with the business of developing and defending that culture. Rorty claimed the existence of those rights served as a signpost toward a future, one where the importance of human rights would both spread further across the globe while growing deeper and stronger at their Western roots.

As our invention, Rorty says, those rights are produced by the imagination's willingness to include more and more people within the category of the human. What makes us believers in human rights are what he calls, without elaboration or nuance, "sad and sentimental stories" (119), stories that make one sensitive enough to hear the proper pitch of the times. These stories re-enforce an enlightened orientation. Therefore, he says,

> let us concentrate our energies on manipulating sentiments, on sentimental education. That sort of education sufficiently acquaints people of different kinds with one another so that they are less tempted to think of those different from themselves as only quasi-human. The goal of this manipulation of sentiment is to expand the reference of the terms 'our kind of people' and 'people like us.' (122–23)

If the Holocaust gave us a vast refusal of realities—what Primo Levi described "the screen of willed ignorance" where "it is enough not to see, not to listen, not to act" (65–66)—we are now, Rorty suggests, ready to consume the realities of human rights abuses. As if in an apotheosis of Simone Weil's empathic action, this consumption is just one more feast in a Western world of "wealth, literacy and leisure" (Rorty 121). He concedes that while it is "revolting to think that our only hope [...] consists in softening the self-satisfied hearts of a leisure

class" (130), utopia nonetheless remains a project of those powerful enough to wield power.

In the decades since Rorty's lecture, the promise of a human rights culture seems to have come true and fractured all at once. On the one hand, there can be no doubt that human rights stand for a ubiquitous set of discourses that describe injustices ranging from genocide and torture to the need for economic stability and access to health care; discourses called upon to justify the protection of individuals from being killed as well as to promote the idea that human potential must be nurtured. On the other hand, that proliferation of discourses has brought human rights into the blurry and bloody sphere of military interventions and the highly selective application of "humanitarian" intervention, as well as its sprawl of institutional aid, non-governmental agencies, and the ever-increasing use of militarized protections. What pundits in support of power call "problems from hell" or emphasize as a "duty to protect," have helped shift the sense that matters of concern matter most to those with power, those with rights, those with an opportunity to protect and burnish their own sense of duty. Or to go back to Rorty's sense of human rights as an enlightenment ideal within the wealth of the West, they are now a currency held in reserve—spent sparingly in Africa but there to gild rhetorically the U.S. and British invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan. It was this condition that led Costas Douzinas to write in *Human Rights and Empire* (2007) of an entwined triumph and collapse, the manipulation by the powerful resulting in the adjectival "human rights disaster" (7).

What then of that "sentimental education"? First, we can see how in its privileging of self-enhancement it feeds a logic that grants all power to the already powerful and thus contributes to the *revolting* paradox of humanitarian violence. Second, it assumes that human rights remain a problem of perception: a conceptual divide of the human from those thought to be less-than-human. This foundational divide recalls the distinction Hannah Arendt describes between the citizen and the merely human in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951). When the end of the Second World War brought to light the sorrowful processions of

stateless Displaced Persons (DP), Arendt saw that for those without a state there are no effective rights. All those instances of "abstract nakedness" (297) and all those people left adrift beyond a border that would protect or govern them, were caught "outside the scope of all tangible law" and thus seen only as the "scum of the earth" (267).

Jacques Rancière has recently tried to move us beyond Arendt's formula that rights adhere only to those who are already ensconced within the law, those who already count as political actors within a prescribed political sphere. This idea leaves us, he says, with the inheritance of a double negation: "the Rights of Man are the rights of those who have not the rights that they have and have the rights that they have not" ("Who is the Subject" 67). These negations are the products, in part, of a gap between two manifestations of rights. First, rights are written down, set forth as "inscriptions of the community as free and equal." Second, the visibility of rights is re-enforced by "those who make something of the [inscription], who decide not only to use their rights but also to build such and such a case for the verification of the power of inscription." For Rancière, the citizen and the scum are not names that identify individuals, collectives, or types of life. They are designations gained or lost through a process. They are, he says, "open predicates: they open a dispute about what they entail, whom they concern and in what cases" and therefore "the issue is to know precisely where to draw the line separating one life from the other. Politics concerns that border, an activity which continually places it in question" ("Who is the Subject" 68).

In more concrete terms related to rights and borders we can therefore say that while human rights have seemingly become global and supranational, the political battles for recognition and rights take place along a proliferating network of borders: from the national and imperial to sites where distinctions of status are applied and enforced, "wherever selective controls are to be found, such as, for example, health and security check-points" (Balibar 79–84). From this network, stories do not merely drift out of a scene of catastrophe as if so much ash and cinder. Rather, like Foucault's metaphoric capillaries of power, the

contestation over that inscription of rights, their confirmation or denial, defines matters of human rights from within—in acts of care, advocacy, forms of representation, and applied definitions. These comprise the substance of legal determinations and, with whatever vicissitudes, the momentary ordering of disorder.

In the case of organizing bodies like the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), Human Rights Association (HRA), and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), the question of who receives the protections of rights is answered through forms of talk. When individuals seek the legal status that will allow them to maintain—after having already crossed a national border—asylum and sanctuary, how and what they say can shape their fate. In *That the World May Know* (2007), James Dawes reports on the forms and fictions of humanitarian and human rights work and writes that the UNHCR, HRA, and ICRC each seek "to eliminate physical suffering by using words. They do certain types of language work (personal interviews, investigation of document trails) that enable them to perform certain types of speech acts. The daily work of rescue is a matter of words instead of deeds" (Dawes 250).

The performative language successfully utilized in such contexts is most certainly not measured in terms of its pathos, but often shaped by rules designed to remove sadness and sentimentality as variables. While the applicants must show that they have a "well-founded fear of being persecuted" if returned to their home country, the workers' mission, according to Dawes, is "excruciatingly specific"—the mandates of the laws in, say, Turkey, sculpting the workers' judgments about any individual. The strict arrangement of the *mis-en-scene* suggests that well-defined and rigid range for reception. "The interview," Dawes writes, "is structured like a triangle, comprising legal officer, applicant, and translator [...] The system [of exchange] is not meant to foster intimacy. Emotion can be dangerous" (84). In addition, workers assume that their inquiries will be met with "lies" and manipulations and then attempt to figure out "which lies are irrelevant and which are material to

the final decision" (83). That distinction rests on detangling a thick web of uncertain signs.

Sometimes, the signs themselves go missing. Dawes writes of applicants who for whatever reason cannot give their rightful appeals the correct form. Fearful or hesitant, they falter. They fail to speak when instructed to do so, or fail to do so in the manner expected:

> One man was nearly denied refugee status because an undetected hearing problem brought about by torture and head injuries interfered with his ability to respond to questions. Another was almost turned away because his response was distorted… Eye contact that lasts a fraction of a second too long, a sudden shift in bodily posture, the sound of a door opening unexpectedly—any number of small cues can trigger fear reactions and defensive silence. Whatever the cause, the consequences are extreme: if applicants do not tell their stories *as they must*, they will be deported. (84; emphasis added)

To which one might ask, whose story is it? Judith Butler has outlined the ontological dimensions of this question in *Giving an Account of Oneself* (2003), where she demonstrates that self presentation is never one's alone, but always caught up in a dynamic of shared contribution, so much so that to tell *my* story, to seemingly expose the most intimate details of *my* experience, to explain who *I* am, is to endure, inevitably, an undoing, a *dispossession*. First, she says, to speak of oneself might mean entering one's life into an already given framework of reference and description, a social norm that "conditions what will and will not be a recognizable account" (36). Thus one's words must, to a degree, be "substitutable" (37). Second, to give an account is to give it over, to render it to the addressee of that account. The addressee, real or implied, *takes it* in, hears it in a calculus of recognition. To this I would add, to tell one's story is to aestheticize one's account for the sake of opening it up to an interpretation that results in a form of recognition, or again with Butler, to some recognition of a familiar form.

In the context of the example above—along the border that divides the person appealing for the status of the refugee—Butler's gloss is weighted by the real potential of life and death. If "no one survives without being addressed" then in the case of human rights we might say that no one survives without giving over a story, addressing power, appealing for recognition. We hear this when she writes:

> The moment the story is addressed to someone, it assumes a rhetorical dimension that is not reducible to a narrative function. It presumes that someone, and it seeks to recruit and act upon that someone. Something is being done with language when the account that I give begins: it is inevitably interlocutory, ghosted, laden, persuasive and tactical. It may well seek to communicate truth, but it can do this, if it can, only by exercising a relational dimension of language. (63)

Should those appealing for a human right *truly* tell their story, there remains the great risk that within the relations of their situation, the "contaminating" factors of emotion, confusion, hesitation, not to mention silence, will discount their claim. Rather than the sad and sentimental, the particularly crafted appeals for human rights and recognition may smartly bypass pathos entirely, and do so according to the genre demanded. The task of one seeking rights is the performance of a certain set of signs that conform to the given expectations: just the right amount of controlled hesitation, the right tone of fear, the well-timed request for certain protections for family, etc.

The intersection of this economy of self-situation-representation and human rights is part of its relation to literature, where we can likewise trace the porous and policed borders of genre distinctions, from Bakhtin's speech genres and the pulse of discourse as Foucault conceived it to the written forms that conform to a culturally and historically determined set of expectations. As Stephen Heath wrote, the definition of literary genres can be distilled down to "socio-historical operations of language by speakers and listeners, writers and readers:

orders of discourse that change, shift, travel, lose force, come and go over time" (168–69). These orders of operation, Heath continues, not only orient a hermeneutics of merging horizons, but act as a stabilizing and inherently conservative force—a quiet authority governing the act of communication above both author and reader. The expected genre at any given point within the network of borders requires the apt performance of a "person" presenting a form of appeal held, at that point in time, to be most appealing. This is akin to the manifestation of rights Rancière identified with some who make something of the given inscription of rights, who *build a case for the verification of the power of inscription*. The notion of the political position of the "person" also recalls Joseph Slaughter's rich and instructive *Human Rights, Inc.* (2007), which describes how the *Bildungsroman* serves as a template for the conception of human rights, locating the ideal holder of rights in the novelistic conception of personhood. If that form of the novel appears outmoded, Slaughter's work shows that "the genre retains its historic social function as the predominant formal literary technology in which social outsiders narrate affirmative claims for inclusion in a regime of rights and responsibilities" (27).

Beyond the *Bildungsroman* that gave rise to the essential embodiment of human rights, literary realism is bound up with the exacting political and social circumstances of any appeal for rights. And as soon as we introduce the historical background of the social structure within which the "hero" appeals for their place in the regime of rights and responsibilities, there appear a range of disquieting difficulties. To begin, no matter how dutifully a realistic narrative describes and catalogs, however clinical in its representations of the societal dynamic, there remains a tension between the promise of life as it is and its aesthetic formulation. What Adorno calls the "ruthless, effectively aconceptual presentation of empirical detail" threatens to overwhelm the artifice, such that for realism, "carrying out intentions contradicts its principle." Using theater to illustrate the general problem, Adorno writes:

> Perhaps it would be impossible to organize a realistic play according to its conception without its becoming, *à contre coeur*, dadaistic; through its unavoidable minimum of stylization, however, realism admits its impossibility and virtually abolishes itself. Taken in hand by the culture industry, it has become mass deception. (*Aesthetic Theory* 249)

The realistic appraisal of given circumstances, if not entirely and always a case of "mass deception," may nonetheless feed into an "overvalued realism." Here, realism generates political positions too well "assimilated" to given social conditions. If a Western world whose development of technology and ethic of efficiency ruthlessly sustains a fetish of means without the moral consideration of ends, what role is there for Rorty's reader/spectator/consumer of human rights culture? It could be said that the very "hope" Rorty holds to might well aid and abet a culture of mass destruction as it supports the *realist* ideological position, a position that Adorno warned, "does not for one second think or wish that the world were any different than it is" ("Education" 23). Playing into the liberal sense of a spectator to the world thereby re-enforces a passivity born of defeat as the recognition of *facts on the ground* also sanctions their necessity, as if admitting in the process that our own sentimental education validates the distant suffering of others. That distance is crucial. For realism requires a certain manner of measure, a restraint that will not confound the objective of clarity.

When Erich Auerbach cataloged realist subject matter he stressed the "inner problems, historical complications, the function of the ruling class, the causes of moral decline or the practical conditions" of daily life, but added that these must not be subjected to over-illumination. Should the writer's scrutiny bore too deep, it may well suggest a crippling "enthusiasm" effective only "in the service of propaganda" (442). The restraint carries the connotations of quiet acceptance for the sake of a clear-eyed, unenthusiastic portrayal of the world merely as it is, and in the terms through which it can be recognized. Looking too intently into the production of cruelties that disregard and destroy

the supposed rights of a human being may not always be the result of propaganda, but it may still have a debilitating effect on attempts at understanding. In many cases, is not the real simply too much to bear? Doesn't an over-exposure to the horrors stun the sensations of both conscience and recognition?

This is precisely the warning presented in J. M. Coetzee's novel, *Elizabeth Costello*. Named after its heroine, who is also a writer, it is a book of ideas that both works from, and explores the antinomies of, realism. In the chapter "The Problem of Evil," Costello famously confronts the implications of reading a novel that describes Hitler's torture and murder of would-be assassins from the *Wehrmacht*. The descriptions are grisly and vivid. For Costello, the words cast a "malign spell." Giving us just a taste of the humiliation, degradation, and eventual "butchery" of the human body, Coetzee has Costello muse on the difficulty of being so pricked and bruised by the representations hatched in her brain, a spectator overwhelmed by the vicious "spectacle." She reports that after having read "page after page, [with] nothing [left] out" she feels wrongly exposed to what rightfully belongs to the crypt of trauma. She is sickened by having experienced it all through the writer's mobilization of exacting, *excruciating* detail—experiencing in the imagination a gratuitous excess that becomes the delirious real. This is what Coetzee, again through Costello, calls the obscene:

> Obscene because such things ought not to take place, and then obscene again because having taken place they ought not to be brought into the light but covered up and hidden forever in the bowels of the earth, like what goes on in the slaughterhouses of the world, if one wishes to save one's sanity. (159)

The challenge for thinking *realism* is not to be found in judging the portrayal of brutality, but in understanding Costello's reaction and the idea Coetzee has set down. For in considering the limits of enduring what may be seen when the worst of our afflictions are *brought into the*

light, Coetzee is using the consumption of zealous violence through the novel to make a larger point about the imagination and its relation to the world with which it engages. After all, although *Elizabeth Costello* is a novel of ideas, its character is a novelist who must battle her body, her thoughts and memories, the culture industry that claims her as author, and so it begins, correctly, with a chapter entitled "Realism." There we encounter the two words that key Coetzee's operating definition of realism: *embedded* and *bewildered*. Embedded is certainly a familiar enough term, having been a part of Auerbach's outline of the realist tradition (he identifies the anonymous figures who would not otherwise be the subject of artistic production as *embedded* in the narrative). For Coetzee, however, the notion of *embedded* is beyond that descriptive depth. Ontologically, it refers not to strands of narrative substance woven into the greater whole, but to the very real sense of being caught in the flow of history. To be embedded is what the subject, any subject, endures, including subjection to cultural and political violence: the exposure to the sickening realities of torture, or the ceaseless imposition of discourses, including those that confer rights to some and withhold it from others.

Given this definition of *embedded*, we can better hear what Coetzee means by *bewilderment*. What else to call the confusion that ensues when we are faced with the demands made upon our ego, our imagination, our heart in the ceaseless economy of realist representations and the proliferation of human rights discourse? As a literary form, Coetzee shows, realism must not merely reflect the world but approach the delicate and uncertain sensations of *embedded-ness* and *bewilderment*. Where Adorno saw the real fractured into absurdity in its representations, the realism of Coetzee betrays itself by actualizing the fitful reflection that is our thought. It gives human heft to the ideas that circulate through *mere* language and its power to hatch obscenities in our field of vision.

Ideas take root in concrete situations, and therefore must be embodied, as Coetzee does in the figure Elizabeth Costello. Such realism will always exceed the bare existence Arendt posited as outside

a proper political position in the world. For it both captures the matter of matter's mortality—the body's frailties and stark susceptibilities—and shows the susceptibilities of bearing witness to the susceptibilities of others. Costello explores this idea when she attempts to explain to her son Kafka's "A Report to an Academy," wherein an ape addresses a learned society, telling his own tale of coming to live as one who counts as human. Costello says that despite the absurd premise, Kafka allows us access to the profoundest aspects of Being: being hunted, being wounded, being bound, being educated, as well as being movingly disappointed with the fruits of his "elevated" status.

Recall that near the close of his address, the ape tells the academy, "Nearly every evening I give a performance, and I have a success that could hardly be increased. When I come home late at night from banquets, from scientific receptions, from social gatherings, there sits waiting for me a half-trained little chimpanzee and I take comfort from her as apes do. By day I cannot bear to see her; for she has the insane look of the bewildered half-broken animal in her eye; no one else sees it, but I do, and I cannot bear it" (258–59). (This is of course Elizabeth Costello's own plight, caught as she is in her own vulnerable perceptions of other animals' suffering, perceptions and feelings that no one else seems to share.) "On the whole," Kafka's ape continues, "I have achieved what I set out to achieve. But do not tell me that it was not worth the trouble. In any case, I am not appealing for any man's verdict, I am only imparting knowledge, I am only making a report. To you also, honored Members of the Academy, I have only made a report" (259). From this, we catch a shudder of that what conventional realism might leave behind. For "that ape is followed," Costello says, "through to the bitter, unsayable end, whether or not there are traces left on the page" (32). Through her struggles to fathom the depths that one may safely consider while holding to their sanity, Coetzee suggests the "bitter, unsayable end" is also a part of reality, even if only as a spectral haunting beyond the margins of a page or the shape of an appeal. While literary naturalism and materialism have experimented with the very forms that structure "reality"—along with feeling the cultural

dynamics of determination—*the real* in this kind of realism seems not only perpetually elusive, but the *bewildering* force that threatens to either exceed our limits or endurance. It leaves us safely supplementing our sentimental education, our sanity intact and the lingering systems of ongoing human destruction seemingly far off on the distant horizon.

Therefore, even when the desire to use the real story of experience to right wrongs, there is the risk of a profound disconnect and Rorty's call for the sad and sentimental sounds like the material desired by the well-meaning journalist who appears near the end of Imre Kertész's Holocaust novel, *Fatelessness* (1975). Finding the camp survivor Gyuri on a Budapest tram, the journalist follows him, presses for his experiences and his feelings.

Kertész's description of Gyuri's experiences is striking in its affective tone, the reception of which Kertész returns to in other works, interrogating the way expectations are formed in political and cultural contexts. His young protagonist does grant us access to the crude facts of round-up, transports, Auschwitz, a work camp, Buchenwald, infirmary, and finally survival and return. But those facts are embedded in an attitude of distanced appraisal. Of the camps and their processes he is inclined to admit a certain "respect" for the arrangements of the camps, or find their workings *natural* or *understandable* or *agreeable*. Or when during selection he sizes up both the "the essence of the doctor's job" and the state of those around him and says, "Thus, I was also driven to perceive through the doctor's eyes how many old or otherwise unusable people there were among them" (87).

As if in defiance of the existing order he finds in Budapest, his attitude of having experienced the camps may well be that of Kafka's ape: *do not tell me that it was not worth the trouble. In any case, I am not appealing for any man's verdict, I am only imparting knowledge*. This attitude confounds the journalist, who initially cannot understand Gyuri's refusal of the metaphor "hell" for the camps and his willingness to name his experiences there as "natural" while expressing "hatred" for the signs of normalcy in the Budapest. Nonetheless, the journalist seeks to appropriate Gyuri's words and unexpected affect

for their "uses" (247)—to *mobilize public opinion against apathy and indifference*:

> What was needed, according to him, was an uncovering of the causes, the truth, however "painful the ordeal" of facing up to it. He discerned "much originality" in my words, all in all a manifestation of the age, some sort of "sad symbol" of the times, if I understood him properly, which was "a new, individual color in the tiresome flood of brute facts," as he put it… (251)

In Kertész's novel, the depiction of experience contains a reflection on the limits of communicating that experience; a failure that has nothing to do with the human/inhuman or the journalist's lack of warmth and empathy, but instead on the imposition of a genre, a particular way of seeing, sensing and speaking, a limiting sense of community based on a shared repertoire of speech acts (Miller 23).

When Kertész emphasizes the refusal of metaphor and the convention of pathos or a rage at injustice, he exposes a hollow within the convention. The literary form that most openly bases itself on the absence of meaning where it is expected to be is allegory, which points toward the authority that gives the arbitrary sign meaning. In *The Origins of German Tragic Drama* (1985), Walter Benjamin described allegory not as a "convention of expression," but as the "expression of convention." Moreover, he calls it the "expression of authority, which is secret in accordance with the dignity of its origin, but public in accordance with the extent of its validity" (175). While Benjamin's definition emerged from his intense study of seventeenth-century mourning plays, Angus Fletcher echoes this idea that the allegorical is used, in part, to make clear, or expose, the "open secret" of validated authority. Through its multiple formulations, the allegorical work, Fletcher demonstrates, is the one that tells the story of its own interpretation (377). This may be particularly necessary in times that do not lend themselves to more direct representational modes, for as Fletcher writes, "memory stranded in limbo calls desperately for the story of what can never be explained,

for which rational general classes and sets of logically gathered thought are bound to be inadequate" (410).

The whole of *Fatelessness* is nothing if not rational and logically constructed and yet Kertész shows that Gyuri is indeed left with *memory stranded in limbo* when his "report" cannot be heard by strangers, reporters, and even family members—all those whose way of making sense is bound to a different and dominating authority (which in post-war Budapest has its undeniable political equivalents). Near the close of the novel, about to walk out on the family he has left, he tells us:

> I too had lived through a given fate. It had not been my own fate, but I had lived through it, and I simply couldn't understand why they couldn't get it into their heads that I now needed to start doing something with that fate, needed to connect it to somewhere or something; after all, I could no longer be satisfied with the notion that it had all been a mistake, blind fortune, some kind of blunder, let alone that it had not happened. (259)

In contrast to Kertész's allegorical gestures at the close of *Fatelessness*, Paul Auster's *In the Country of Last Things* (1987) offers a sustained allegory of the struggle to transport experiences through language and writing. His narrator, Anna Blume, is not engaged in reporting the experiences of *a place* like Auschwitz or Buchenwald but instead writes from some far-off country and a besieged city, from which she will, she promises, depart. The novel begins with a sense of some coming collapse and an exhausted capacity to say what needs to be said in the time remaining:

> These are the last things, she wrote. One by one they disappear and never come back. I can tell you of the ones I have seen, of the ones that are no more, but I doubt there will be time…
> I don't expect you to understand. You have seen none of this, and even if you tried, you could not imagine it. These are the last things. (1)

Still, she goes on, as if in the Beckettian mode of compulsion, or what Derrida called the tragic dimension of representation, the "fate of representation" to always be there in its "gratuitous and baseless necessity" (250). She writes of reductions and depravations and desperate acts: scavenging, bartering, shaving away desires and needs. While she tells her story, she also acts as a kind of ethnographer of common behaviors and codes, and more generally a chronicler of a civilization's twilight fade into barbarism. There are sketches of a space filled with homelessness, food riots, the threats of weather, fear of power, material scarcity, an economy of starvation, suicide and human slaughter; a realm where dignity is perpetually threatened, denied and beat back — a black hole of human rights. These are all familiar echoes of the twentieth century, and even the triumph of rights culture does little to suggest that such imaginings do not portend a future to come.

Despite these references to experiences, to "facts" she has to deal with (130), Anna is the writing: she emerges only as the writing does. Her words come and fill the book even as they fail to convey all that has been lost. They alone replace what she calls the haunting "blank, a ravening null" (114). She is trapped on the other side of her testimony, her words emerging from Auster's familiar trope of the found notebook or letter, language marshalled into a depository that may or may not be found and read, reflected in what Anna calls her "posthumous sort of life" (137). Because of its allegorical construction, therefore, we bear witness to language itself, to the need for, and resistance to, testimony. Rather than beholding the authority of the authentic witness, we witness the process of attempted communication, one where the words are said to grow "smaller and smaller, so small that perhaps they are not even legible anymore" (183). Those words declare themselves to be the (first) and last things, remnants of a catastrophe that by definition can never be witnessed.

Auster's narrator, like Kertész's, like Elizabeth Costello, perhaps like Kafka's ape, is vividly conscious that the conditions in which reports are given are filled with two confounding dynamics. First there is the space inhabited by the body in need, the body that aches, the

sensation of losing will and choice. Second are the barriers to being understood, the threats of drifting from the authority-shape of a given and governing genre. These literary works therefore illuminate the intruding, demanding, interrogating present that not only asks the questions, but imposes the form the answers must take.

In Joseph Slaughter's *Human Rights, Inc.* we saw that:

> The *Bildungsroman* has always had an allegorical aspect as a novel about the sociohistorical conditions of its own possibility, thematizing the process by which the individual (both the reader and the protagonist) acquires the social literacy and literary sensibility required to become part of the public social texture. (308–309)

The novels presented above, in contrast, use allegory to expose and explore the authorities that can write the individual out of that texture. In this they re-inscribe a claim to rights by demonstrating the conditions of their denial.

These allegorical presentations can thus be read as what Rancière called the political act of contestation, re-inscribing within the given a new *form of visibility*. When allegory calls forth the double negation that remains at the heart of human rights it shows that the denial of rights is never the reflection of an ontological condition, or a matter of some fundamental mistake in perception, or a situation that can be undone by the soothing balm of pathos-laden stories. It shows that the denial of rights comes from an operating consensus of genre and expectation. Instead of Rorty's call for a sentimental education, these works show the imposition of an authority propped up by a consensus. They demonstrate dissensus. They re-inscribe a new possibility for hearing the language of testimony. They achieve this by mobilizing a new form of double-negation: providing the plight of those who cannot represent their experience and therein the representation of what they cannot show.

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