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ACTIVIST MODERNISMS: HUMAN RIGHTS AND ANTI-TOTALITARIANISM IN MID-  
TWENTIETH CENTURY LITERATURE

A Dissertation  
presented in partial fulfillment of requirements  
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy  
in the Department of English  
The University of Mississippi

by

MARY GRAY

May 2019

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## ABSTRACT

The period after World War II saw the emergence of a new discourse of human rights, with the signing of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights. In the postwar period and throughout the twentieth century, human rights would often be viewed as a set of self-evident, monolithic, and timeless values that had merely reached their full realization after the horrors of the war. This study examines a body of literature from the 1930s and 40s, the wartime moment just before the foundation of the twentieth century universal rights ideology, to explore the process by which theories of human rights are formed from among a multiplicity of possible human rights philosophies. The texts in this study - from the work of wartime journalists Rebecca West and Martha Gellhorn, to the anti-fascist spy novels of Eric Ambler, and the writing of communist dissidents like Arthur Koestler – respond to the rise of fascism and totalitarianism and the mass displacements and genocide that occur as a consequence. These writers create narratives to understand and contend with the historical ruptures of their time. These narratives theorize human rights by providing differing answers to the underlying questions of those rights, including the ultimate authorities in which rights are grounded and the ideal kinds of community for nurturing rights. Creating rather than inheriting human rights ideals, these texts from the dawn of the era of human rights reveal the ways in which human rights are always historically situated, always imagined and negotiated, rather than being eternal truths that need only to be revealed.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my advisor, Dr. Ian Whittington, for his guidance and support, as well as my committee members, Drs. Dan Stout, Leigh Anne Duck, and Sue Grayzel.

In addition, I would like to thank my family and friends for their patience and encouragement during this process.

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## INTRODUCTION: WAR, FASCISM, AND THE PRODUCTION OF HUMAN RIGHTS

In “Greenhouse with Cyclamens,” her study of the Nuremberg trials and the aftermath of the Second World War in Germany, writer and journalist Rebecca West observes the chaos of the postwar atmosphere and the inability of notions of right and wrong to attach themselves neatly to historical realities. After making the ironic observation that, for all the horrors the Germans have perpetrated, the German system seems to be better suited to accommodate postwar refugees than British society would have been, she notes wearily that “here, as so often before, we see that history takes no care to point a moral” (182). And yet West is far from ceding the need for a historical morality. Like the other wartime writers in this study, West finds it an urgent objective to draw meaning from the history of her time – to understand the failures of morality and ethics that underlay the catastrophes of the war. However, West and her contemporaries see this historical chapter as a moment of deep uncertainty which does not yield up a meaning on its own. Rather, West understands that the moral of the story – a moral that will revolve around the deeply unsettled matter of human rights – will have to be imagined and negotiated by the players in the twentieth century drama, the various individuals who will write down and interpret their experiences of war and the rise of fascism and totalitarianism.

Rebecca West is among a group of wartime writers, including Rex Warner, Phyllis Bottome, Martha Gellhorn, and Arthur Koestler, whose socially-engaged and often genre-defying writings represent an understudied chapter of twentieth century literature. In works that take a thorough and critical look at the troubled history of their own time and often combine the

tools and objectives of journalism with the form and narrative strategies of the novel, these writers make an often overlooked contribution to both literary modernism and twentieth century human rights literature. Modernist critics have traditionally emphasized the social and political aloofness of high modernism, while more current modernist studies often focus on redefining the boundaries of modernism in both time and space. However, the late modernist writers in this study represent another facet of modernist literature by revealing the significance of late modernist writing to a discussion of twentieth century human rights thinking. Furthermore, these wartime texts are unique within the body of human rights literature, with the capacity to pull back the curtain on the development of contemporary human rights ideology in the years leading to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948.

Some studies of human rights literature have examined the potential of writing – particularly novels – to promote human rights, while others have focused on literature’s capacity to fill in the gaps or expose the flaws of traditional ways of thinking about rights. This study contributes to the literary human rights discourse by suggesting another way in which literary studies and human rights can intersect. I argue that mid-century anti-totalitarian texts can be seen as case studies in the formation of narratives of human rights. The writers in this study do not so much critique rights traditions, call attention to rights abuses, or name specific rights to which people are entitled. Rather, they attempt to conjure whole a theory of human rights, addressing this subject matter’s most fundamental questions. The writers interrogate the origins and ideological foundations of human rights, the sources of authority upon which those rights depend, the ways in which individuals can achieve visibility and recognition as human persons (or fail to do so), how individuals are reconciled with larger communities, and the ideal kinds of communities for sheltering human rights. The exploration of these fundamental human rights

questions in writing of the 1930s and 40s provides valuable insight into the process by which human rights are imagined and formulated.

The historical situatedness of these texts is significant to their unique place in the conversation about literature and human rights. The years of the Second World War and their immediate aftermath have often been represented as a pivotal time of social crisis and horror that ultimately led to the realization of universal human rights, as announced by the United Nations' 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, both a breakthrough moment in history and the fulfillment of the oldest promises of the Western liberal tradition. However, this perspective of the wartime moment within the legacy of human rights is largely retrospective. In reality, the mid-century period was a time of great uncertainty that lacked a dominant framework for thinking about rights. The 1948 declaration, presented as the culmination of contemporaneous ideals, emphasized universal human rights – a philosophy in which every human has inalienable rights simply by virtue of being human, independent of any cultural or political institutions. However, as many human rights critics argue, the universalist sentiment was more aspirational than fully realized, and was often impracticable. Furthermore, it was frequently undercut by the continued presence of traditional liberal ideology, which did not quite accommodate universalism, as well as the great social and political importance of the nation-state. Mid-century writers, therefore, do not work from a solid and established belief system, but rather labor to construct such a system, pulling from competing strands of rights-related ideology.

The texts in this study respond to various ruptures in Western society – from the development of fascist ideology to the Holocaust and the rise of Soviet totalitarianism. Their writers understand these ruptures as arising from deep instabilities within Western society and attempt to heal them by narrating the events of their time into stories about human rights. Each

text represents a different story; some of them present the nation-state as the ultimate and natural sanctuary for human rights, while others gesture towards an image of the universal human person, untethered to any political institution. However, each of these narratives is a fragment of twentieth century human rights thinking. Together they reveal the conflicting strains within human rights ideology and demystify the logic as well as the contradictions that come to bear on the question of human rights. It is furthermore important to look not only at the stories these texts tell, but also how they tell their stories. Wartime writers, like the drafters of human rights declarations, present themselves as merely the unveilers and elucidators of timeless and pre-existing truths. However, their work actually involves effortfully constructing the notions of the human and the organic community they claim to simply reveal. The way the writers in this study employ narrative strategies, address paradoxes and contradictions, and choose among different alternatives provides insight into the way that a modern human rights belief system takes form. These texts illuminate the way that thinking about human rights is always constructed, always a compromise – a matter of choice, rather than a matter of fate.

### Eighteenth Century Origins: The Enlightenment, Natural Rights, and Citizenship

I aim to position the writers of the wartime period within a fraught history of thinking about rights in the Western world, the broad shape of which I will outline in the following pages. In her writing about the social and political conditions of the twentieth century in *On Revolution* and *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Hannah Arendt emphasizes the significance of the Enlightenment legacy. As signaled by the American Declaration of Independence in 1776 and the French Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen in 1789, the era of the American and French Revolutions witnessed the emergence of the earliest herald of what in the twentieth

century would be called “human rights.” Arendt argues in *On Revolution* that “the very idea of equality as we understand it, namely that every person is born an equal by the very fact of being born and that equality is a birthright, was utterly unknown before the modern age” (40).

However, the Enlightenment conceptualization of rights was built on a framework that would make it unconvincing in many ways to twentieth century human rights thinking. Specifically, their declarations of freedom rested upon a theory of natural rights that would translate imperfectly into contemporary universal human rights.

The new idea of the Enlightenment thinkers that Arendt points out is the realization of “natural rights,” rights that are not acquired within the political sphere but derive from the very fact of being human. The American Declaration of Independence states familiarly, “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness” (US 1776). The French Declaration of the Rights of Man asserts in similar language “the natural, unalienable, and sacred rights of man” and “recognizes and proclaims, in the presence and under the auspices of the Supreme Being, the . . . rights of man and of the citizen” (France 1789). The wording of the declarations resonates with contemporary thinking about human rights, drawing as it does on the concepts of absolute equality and independence from oppressive social structures. However, the religious references in these documents have very significant implications for the way in which the Enlightenment thinkers imagine rights. Natural rights derive their meaning only from a concept of nature, which for the eighteenth century thinkers was still metaphysical, referring ultimately to the divine. The drafters of the American Declaration appeal to rights that are inalienable because they are granted by “the Laws of Nature and of Nature’s God.” Of course, this is one (but not the only) instance in which the eighteenth

century vision of rights contains a paradox, since the Enlightenment was a time of increased secularization and the thinkers of this time were in part reacting against the tyranny of the monarchy enabled by divine right. In *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Arendt notes that “since the Rights of Man were proclaimed to be ‘inalienable,’ irreducible to and undeducible from other rights or laws, no authority was invoked for their establishment; Man himself was their source as well as their ultimate goal” (291). However, while Enlightenment thinkers may reject the claims of monarchs that authority is handed down to a select few and claim for the people the right to self-government, their theory of the human person is still fundamentally religious. As indicated by the language of the rights declarations, the rights of the human person are still underwritten by a divine authority. No matter how socially oriented these thinkers were, their vision of rights was ultimately grounded in a metaphysical source, something that transcended society and human judgment.

This religious grounding for rights would become a pressing issue in the twentieth century; however, Arendt suggests that the tension between the growing emancipation from the authority of God and the need to draw on such an authority was already present in previous centuries. In the secularizing modern world, “recourse to God” was still necessary in the “task of foundation” of a new society, and “this latter part of the task of revolution, to find a new absolute to replace the absolute of divine power, is insoluble because power under the condition of the human plurality can never amount to omnipotence, and laws residing on human power can never be absolute” (*Revolution* 39). There is therefore already a paradox at the very heart of rights and a society built around them. The foundational thinkers about rights in the West still must turn, at least nominally, to a higher authority to enshrine the supposedly independent rights of man.

Arendt furthermore suggests that the problems of universality were also present in early formulations of rights. The revolutionaries, she argues, were seeking a form of unconditional truth in their efforts to understand human nature. For the Enlightenment thinkers, “truth . . . had to be valid for all men . . . Truth, in other words, was supposed to relate to and correspond not to citizens . . . and not to nationals . . . Truth had to relate to man *qua* man, who as a worldly, tangible reality, of course, existed nowhere” (53). The ideal which the Enlightenment thinkers pursued was a notion of the unadorned person – “man *qua* man.” Though this proved an ever-elusive concept, the effort to understand the human with recourse to nothing but human society was an endeavor that gained urgency and purpose in the Enlightenment period. “Without the French Revolution,” Arendt argues, “it may be doubted that philosophy would ever have attempted to concern itself with the realm of human affairs, that is, to discover absolute truth in a domain which is ruled by men’s relations with one another and hence is relative by definition” (*Revolution* 53). Finding the absolute in the relative and reconciling the universal and the particular in human rights are problems that are introduced at the beginning of the modern period of rights discourse and will come to the forefront in the twentieth century. While these problems lie dormant in eighteenth century proclamations of rights, they will acquire new urgency in the crises of the twentieth century.

In addition to grounding human rights in a metaphysical authority, eighteenth century rights ideology would tie a recognition of personhood firmly to citizenship within the nation-state. This did not represent a problem for thinkers who imagined that rights achieved their inalienability from their naturalness, but would pose a challenge to universalism in the twentieth century. For instance, in his *Second Treatise on Civil Government* (1689), Locke lays out his

influential vision of the formation of communities in which individuals acquire rights and responsibilities:

Men all being naturally free, equal, and independent, no-one can be deprived of this freedom etc. and subjected to the political power of someone else, without his own consent. The only way anyone can strip off his natural liberty and clothe himself in the bonds of civil society is for him to agree with other men to unite into a community, so as to live together comfortably, safely, and peaceably, in a secure enjoyment of their properties and a greater security against outsiders. (32)

Enlightenment thinkers imagine a “state of nature” in which people have perfect liberty, but they understand that state as strictly hypothetical, due to the obvious necessity of living within society and imposing some limits on human action. Philosophers like Locke therefore imagine an ideal state, reflecting the desires and interests of the individual and based on the concepts of consent and agreement. In *The Social Contract*, Rousseau explains that the task, upon rejecting traditional forms of government, is to “find a form of association that will bring the whole common force to bear on defending and protecting each associate’s person and goods, doing this in such a way that each of them, while uniting himself with all, still obeys only himself and remains as free as before” (6). Enlightenment thinkers did not see rights as originating from within a social context, nor did they lack a vision of the human person outside of the sociopolitical realm. However, these descriptions highlight the way that their thinking about proper governmental function quickly made the realization and protection of rights dependent upon belonging to a nation and established the citizen as the only true referent of rights, with the actual human person as supremely important, yet for all intents and purposes as hypothetical as

the “state of nature.” This strong connection of rights and national citizenship is a clear challenge to universality and the claims of the inalienability of rights.

Furthermore, a focus on natural rights precluded Enlightenment thinkers from having a truly universal concept of the human, allowing them to expel many groups of people from inclusion in that category, even theoretically. Not the least among the paradoxes of this era was the fact that a society so dedicated to the establishment of rights and the protection of human equality could also be so ravaged by glaring social inequalities and such obviously inhumane practices as slavery. In his analysis of eighteenth century thinking about human nature, Aaron Garrett notes that one of the founding principles of Enlightenment thought is that “human nature is everywhere uniform and unites humankind both as objects of study and as subjects capable of enlightenment” (160). However, Garrett goes on to note that, in Enlightenment texts, as soon as these principles about humanity are laid out, “they are violated . . . In the works of Hume, Diderot, Montesquieu, Kant, and many lesser lights, men do not seem terribly uniform but are divided up into sexes, races, national characters, the sighted and the blind, and many other categories” (160). The Enlightenment thinkers did not, even in theory, have a truly universal concept of the human person. These subhuman “categories” constitute one of the first signs that the concept of human equality, so “self-evident” and triumphantly proclaimed, rested on a shaky foundation.

While Arendt points out some of the philosophical difficulties of thinking about rights as liberated from pre-modern traditions, Giorgio Agamben points out another danger in the split between the concept of the human – the person who is nothing but human – and the citizen – the person incorporated into the state – enacted by liberal democratic systems. In *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, Agamben argues that, in the modern state, there is a distinction

between “zoe,” natural life, and “bios,” the subject of political life. The human person represented in zoe is sacred, supposedly removed from public life and untouchable by the state. On the other hand, “bios” refers to the public citizen who has rights as well as obligations within the state. However, while zoe names the human person who is supposedly sacred and free from being acted upon by the state, Agamben argues that “sacredness is instead the originary form of the inclusion of bare life in the juridical order, and the syntagm *homo sacer* names something like the originary ‘political’ relation, which is to say, bare life insofar as it operates in an inclusive exclusion as the referent of the sovereign decision” (85). The very fact that the natural life of the individual is held as sacred and exempt from involvement in the state actually creates an “inclusive exclusion” which allows the state to violate the natural rights of the individual, reducing the human person to “bare life,” a state in which individuals can be acted upon by the state without restraint but cannot act within the state. As we will see, the divide between bios and zoe and the potential for the condition of bare life will have grave implications during the social crises of the twentieth century.

### Human Rights and the Twentieth Century

The legacy of the Enlightenment and the liberal ideology it yielded continues to influence society in the twenty-first century, but this legacy became increasingly fraught in the later years of the nineteenth century and erupted into full-scale crisis in the early part of the twentieth century. In “The Crisis of Liberalism and the Politics of Modernism,” Janice Ho notes that, after the eighteenth century revolutions, “the forward momentum of liberal values across ‘civilized’ states seemed nearly unstoppable for most of the 19<sup>th</sup> century” (48). However, the start of the twentieth century witnessed a collapse of liberal democracy throughout much of Europe. As Ho

argues, “we can read the crystallization of the crisis of liberalism in three major events of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century: the First World War between 1914 and 1918; the 1917 Russian Revolution; and Adolf Hitler’s ascension to power in 1933” (49). War and totalitarianism are the end result of the crisis of liberalism. Its causes can be largely attributed to the nineteenth century expansion of imperialism and the glaring inequalities of European society. Liberalism was a value system that emerged from the middle classes to oppose the tyranny of the elite and emphasized the right to private property and the pursuit of wealth. Imperialism therefore seemed both a natural consequence of liberalism, and, with its disregard for the rights of its subject peoples, the antithesis of liberal ideals. Arendt describes how the growth of imperialism did lasting damaging to the faith of the masses in the liberal nation-state: “Imperialism was born when the ruling class in capitalist production came up against national limitations to its economic expansion . . . Of all forms of government and organizations of people, the nation-state is least suited for unlimited growth because the genuine consent at its base cannot be stretched indefinitely” (*Origins* 126).

Eventually the excesses of the middle classes and the strain put on the nation-state would lead to a widespread disillusionment with liberalism and the emergence of terrifying new forms of government. During and after the period of the Second World War, when the shape and nature of fascist and totalitarian states could be glimpsed more fully, writers and thinkers would be left to grapple with both the tattered legacy of liberalism and the monstrous political doctrines that had emerged to take its place. For both twentieth century human rights thinkers and the writers in this study, important questions would remain about the soundness of liberal ideology, whether the crises of the twentieth century arose from inherent flaws within liberal ideals or simply a failure to uphold those ideals, and whether or not liberalism could be modified and adapted to serve the interests of a traumatized modern society.

The postwar period sees the emergence of the concept of universal human rights, proclaimed especially in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights. This is an ideology whose proponents see themselves performing an historical course correction after the horrors of the Second World War. This period is often imagined as both the beginning of a new era in the history of rights and the fulfillment and perfection of the promises of the Enlightenment tradition. Universal human rights, as imagined in the postwar years, undertake both to realize the basic principles of the eighteenth century declarations and to surpass their limitations. However, as the writers in my study understand, the war and its catastrophes did not offer a second revolution in human rights so much as accentuate the various fractures and paradoxes present within the thinking about rights and open up, for those willing to have them, difficult discussions about what it means to define the human person and the extent to which a notion of universal human rights is possible or practicable.

The official political writing of the postwar period represents this time as a moment of triumph for rights, and given the nearly insurmountable horrors of the war, it is tempting to buy into a perspective that incorporates fascism, even the Holocaust, into a narrative of continuity and progress. The preamble of the Universal Declaration asserts that “recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice, and peace in the world” (UN General Assembly 1948). The wording sounds familiar. The UDHR echoes the language of the eighteenth century declarations, asserting that rights are “inherent” and “inalienable,” keeping the notion of the naturalness of rights but doing away with any reference to a Supreme Being. The first line of the document furthermore stresses its universal aims. Rights will be extended to “all members of the human family,” a totalizing gesture the Enlightenment thinkers did not attempt. The UDHR goes on to

note that “disregard and contempt for human rights have resulted in barbarous acts which have outraged the conscience of mankind, and the advent of a world in which human beings shall enjoy freedom of speech and belief and freedom from fear and want has been proclaimed as the highest aspiration of the common people.” In its preamble, this document positions itself as a response to the atrocities committed during the war and promises that the ultimate fruit of those atrocities will be the coming of a new era of respect for human rights.

If this declaration treats as unproblematic and continuous the threads connecting the Enlightenment period and the postwar years, it is not alone in doing so. In her 1948 speech, “The Struggle for Human Rights,” delivered in Paris, Eleanor Roosevelt gestures towards the appropriateness of this city as a site to speak on the matter of human rights and tells her audience, “We are fighting this battle again today, as it was fought at the time of the French Revolution and of the American Revolution.” It is a somewhat odd statement, given the importance of universality to twentieth century thinking about human rights and the eighteenth century revolutions’ entanglements with nationalism (not to mention the French Revolution’s degeneration into violence). However, both Roosevelt and the UDHR reveal the deep indebtedness that twentieth century society had to the Enlightenment period. Even into the twenty-first century, the narrative that there was steady progress towards the fulfillment of human rights since the Enlightenment, for which the twentieth century wars were only a galvanizing spark, continues to have appeal. In his study of how the human rights discourse developed in response to twentieth century atrocities *After Evil: A Politics of Human Rights*, Robert Meister references the existence of “the mainstream story of ascendant human rights, based on the universal meaning of Auschwitz” (2). In her controversial book *Inventing Human Rights: A History*, Lynn Hunt optimistically draws attention to the connections between the

eighteenth and twentieth century rights declarations. She argues that, “for nearly two centuries, despite the controversy provoked by the French Revolution, the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen incarnated the promise of universal human rights.” The 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights is, for Hunt, the fulfillment of that promise: “although the modifications in language were meaningful, the echo between the two documents is unmistakable” (17). It is Hunt’s project to trace the unbroken journey from the eighteenth century Enlightenment to the second, more perfect twentieth century Enlightenment.

It is important to note the narrative about the development of human rights discourse in the twentieth century that emerges in contemporary human rights scholarship. Contrary to mid-century declarations of rights, universalism did not originate entirely out of a response to the war, and it was not as clean and uncomplicated a concept as its aspirational description suggests. Concepts of universalism predate the mid-century moment. The League of Nations, founded after the end of the First World War, represented an earlier attempt at the development of a universalist ideology. In *The Guardians: The League of Nations and the Crisis of Empire*, Susan Pedersen argues that, though it failed to prevent another catastrophic war and despite its imperialistic ties, the League represented “the first great experiment in international government” that was “complex and consequential” (5). Pedersen turns her attention especially to the mandates system, in which the League of Nations granted member nations “mandates,” or authority to govern former colonies of defeated powers. She argues that ultimately “the mandates system of the League of Nations became the site and stake of a great international argument over imperialism’s claims” (5). The League’s international character meant that “the crowd holding entry tickets to Geneva, while certainly largely European and almost entirely white, was nevertheless too large, too polyglot, and – over time – too riven with antagonism, to be

marshalled behind a single banner” (5). The drive towards a more universalist approach to politics and justice therefore was nascent in the time before the outbreak of the Second World War, but in a vague and amorphous state. The League’s failure to protect populations in Ethiopia, Spain, and elsewhere from fascist aggression in the 1930s only deepened the fractures in its version of internationalism.

While universalist impulses that had arisen in the time before the Second World War had been tentative and often impracticable, the wartime moment itself represents a time of rupture and the opening up of foundational problems with both Enlightenment thinking and universalism. In the wake of the war, a theory of universal rights emerged that claimed to smooth over these ruptures, both to reinvigorate traditional rights ideology and reach new goals of universal rights. However, this new vision of rights had a complex entanglement with the problems of the past and an oversimplified understanding of its own ideals. Twentieth century rights ideology, while claiming to be merely the realization of what was self-evident, was in fact always being scripted anew and shaped in reaction to history, rather than propelling history forward.

Most postwar human rights thinkers focus on how the very concepts of the liberal human rights tradition broke open during the wartime period and continued to fracture throughout the twentieth century. Arendt, for instance, refers back to the eighteenth century origins of rights thinking in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, but she does so in order to point out how the paradoxes and problems that were embryonic in the early stages of the liberal era came into maturity during the chaos of the prewar and wartime years. Arendt refers back to the writing of thinkers such as Locke and Rousseau, who first proclaimed the independence of the human person and then quickly went about establishing the absolute centrality of the national

community for protecting and supporting that person. She observes that “man had hardly appeared as a completely emancipated, completely isolated being who carried his dignity within himself without reference to some larger encompassing order, when he disappeared again into a member of a people” (291). This was always a problem within liberal rights ideology, but twentieth century refugee crises gave it an urgency it had not had before. Arendt notes that “the full implication of this identification of the rights of man with the rights of peoples in the European nation-state system came to light only when a growing number of people and peoples suddenly appeared whose ordinary rights were as little safeguarded by the ordinary functioning of nation-states in the middle of Europe as they would have been in the heart of Africa” (291). During the war, masses of people were expelled from their native countries, in events such as the expulsion of ethnic minorities after the German invasion of Poland and the mass displacement resulting from the annexation of the Sudetenland. It became apparent that, in the Western framework of rights, there really was no such thing as “human rights” but only “the rights of the citizen.” No longer citizens of a nation-state, European refugees could in practice claim no rights at all.

Arendt furthermore relates her personal experience with this dreadful state of affairs in her essay “We Refugees.” She notes that, as a Jewish refugee, she and others like her suffer “the fate of human beings who, unprotected by any specific law or political convention, are nothing but human beings.” The individual is, of course, supposed to have “inalienable” rights even in the state of being nothing but a human being. However, Arendt comments that “we actually live in a world in which human beings as such have ceased to exist . . . since society has discovered discrimination as the great social weapon by which one may kill men without any bloodshed” (118-119). Individuals can be thrown into or out of a particular category – such as “citizen” or

“refugee”—and either acquire rights or cease to exist. In her recent book *Placeless People: Writing, Rights, and Refugees*, Lyndsey Stonebridge reaffirms the notion that the refugee crisis of the 1930s revealed the inherent slipperiness between human rights and citizen rights. Stonebridge notes that “there have always been refugees, but the forced mass displacement of people in the twentieth century was something new” (3). She references the autobiography of Jewish refugee author Stefan Zweig and comments that his memoir “records the moment when many of those in the twentieth century who had thought themselves as citizens of the world discovered that they had become citizens of nowhere, or, more precisely, non-citizens, stateless, the placeless people” (2). The refugee crisis not only reveals the danger of being cast into a condition of political non-existence faced by newly stateless people but also reveals the lie of the promise of universal personhood, which had endured through European history as a comforting illusion.

While critics like Arendt and Stonebridge see in the refugee crisis the first warnings of the implosion of rights, Giorgio Agamben traces the problem of the person cast out of citizenship to its most extreme manifestation in the war, the Nazi concentration camps. In *Homo Sacer*, Agamben outlines the theory of how modern states contain the potential to reduce individuals to “bare life,” the terrifying condition in which individuals have no rights but can still be acted upon by the state. In *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*, Agamben reveals how this potential is realized during the war. The victims of the concentration camp met the worst fate of those who are expelled from citizenship within the nation-state. They should still have inalienable rights as humans, but without the visibility and protection granted by citizenship, their unadorned humanity is a liability. The reduction of concentration camp victims to bare life has profound implications for modern society. Agamben suggests that the situation of

the camp inmates further troubles an understanding of what a human being is, since these individuals remain human while transcending the commonly perceived limits of human life. Agamben argues that “the atrocious news that the survivors carry from the camp to the land of human beings is that it is possible to lose decency and dignity beyond imagination, that there is still life in the most extreme degradation” (60). In Auschwitz, Agamben argues, “what is called into question is the very humanity of man, since man observes the fragmentation of his privileged tie to what constitutes him as human, that is, the sacredness of life and death” (81). A true reckoning with the horrors of the concentration camp, Agamben suggests, would require a harrowing reevaluation of Western ways of thinking about what it means to be human and the ways in which our concepts of “human” have boundaries and categories that actual human life does not observe.

However, implicit in Agamben’s argument is the suggestion that Western society – and particularly human rights discourse – failed to learn the most important lessons of the war. It is not just that twentieth century atrocities exposed the fissures in liberal rights doctrine, but that the twentieth century never really moved on from that space of fracture and disruption. Human rights thinking in the aftermath of the war and in the later twentieth century fails to align with a teleological narrative of progress. Ultimately, the strains of human rights thinking that develop later in the twentieth century do not entirely resolve another of the problems that is inherent in the liberal tradition of rights and is, Arendt suggests, unavoidable in any human rights theory: the extent to which concepts of human rights are based in human social life, burdened with the impossible task of conjuring the absolute from the relative, and entangled with political agendas and institutions. Twentieth century human rights find themselves plagued both by these inherent problems with rights discourses and by the inability or unwillingness of thinkers and world

leaders to recognize the paradoxes of human rights and the ultimate need always to question and reimagine human rights.

In *Human Rights, Inc.: The World Novel, Narrative Form, and International Law*, Joseph Slaughter offers an interpretation of the echoes between the eighteenth century declarations and the UDHR that differs from Lynn Hunt's optimistic account of continuity between the Enlightenment and the UDHR. Rather, Slaughter argues that "the recent experience of the Holocaust and the two World Wars provided the most spectacular illustration of the failures of the Enlightenment in the very places where it was said to have been achieved," and notes that "the UDHR is a tacit acknowledgment of those failures, even as it recuperates from the natural law traditions what Costas Douzinas (after Ernst Bloch) calls marvelously its 'promise of the "not yet," ' the promise of an Enlightenment still to come" (15). The UDHR is certainly the heir to the Enlightenment tradition, but it is a complicated inheritance. Slaughter argues that "the UDHR projects a human person that is not quite 'natural man' (the deposit 'of Nature and of Nature's God,' in Thomas Jefferson's phrasing in the American Declaration of Independence) and not quite 'positive man' – a creature fully interpellated by society, its institutions, and its laws" (61). Slaughter suggests that twentieth century human rights law both continues to hold on to idealistic Enlightenment concepts of the human, from which it draws its claims to universality, and to gesture towards the idea of a socially constructed human. Slaughter notes that, "without warrant or sanction, without the premise of Nature or the dictum of an executor, contemporary human rights law is enthymematic, requiring that what is taken for granted be – therefore and thereafter – obsessively recited and rearticulated" (71). Unlike eighteenth century rights, which were at least ostensibly rooted in a metaphysical source, twentieth century rights law constitutes a tautology, based on nothing more than its own assertion of itself.

For Slaughter, the tenuousness and inconsistencies of a discourse of rights that proclaims itself as obvious and established are not necessarily a fatal flaw. He notes that he sees human rights law as “a complex of contested – and often contradictory – principles still in formation, whose fissures, discontinuities, and inconsistencies are both the source of its continued emancipatory potential and the evidence . . . that, when members of the international community contemplated human rights, *everyone* had something else in mind” (16). Slaughter notes that the UDHR was not a unified vision that either broke completely new ground in the thinking about human rights or represented a more perfect realization of Enlightenment ideology. However, he sees in the fragmented and unfixed nature of the document the potential for flexibility and growth rather than chaos.

While Slaughter focuses on the fragmented ways in which twentieth century human rights theory understands the human person, others have drawn attention to the extent to which, in theory and in practice, the supposedly universal twentieth century human rights regime has continued to be entangled with the nation-state. Discounting the notion that the postwar moment represents a breakthrough for the history of human rights, Samuel Moyn argues that “in recasting world history as raw material for the progressive ascent of international human rights,” historians “have rarely conceded that earlier history left open diverse paths into the future” (19). Moyn’s larger argument is that the current emphasis on universal rights emerges only after the end of the Cold War and the resolution of the tension between world superpowers, not as the result of a continuous drive towards universalism in which the postwar period was a pivotal moment. Moyn argues that, despite its universalist rhetoric, “the Universal Declaration retains, rather than supersedes, the sanctity of nationhood . . . it more retained a memory of the rights of man and citizen than it pointed ahead to supranational governance through law” (*The Last Utopia* 171). In

*Placeless People*, Lyndsey Stonebridge echoes the idea that the nation-state continued to play a central role in the vision of the UDHR: “as the drafters well understood, the key to protecting rights was never actually going to be universal human rights for all – that grand ambition came later.” In the postwar moment, “buttressing the freedoms necessary to keep the state safe was thought to be the best protection against tyranny” (15). In the moment of universalism’s supposed triumph for human rights, the nation-state and its implications, both good and bad, for the rights of the individual, remained as significant a presence as ever.

### Literature and Human Rights

Growing alongside a body of scholarly work that examines the histories of human rights is a burgeoning interest in examining the ways that literature and human rights discourses intersect and influence each other. The criticism around human rights literature proceeds both hopefully and cautiously, with the belief that the relationship between literary studies and human rights can be either beneficial or damaging. Critics point out that both literature and literary studies can profess overly simplistic promises of both the ease with which rights can be achieved and the ability of literature to facilitate this goal. The study of human rights literature can be problematic when it puts forth the idea that literature can help to realize human rights in the real world simply by stirring empathy and giving representation to the human person. To avoid a naïve or bad faith approach to human rights literature, contemporary critics interested in parsing the role of literature in human rights discourse tend to pursue one of three, often intertwined, avenues of criticism. The first is the endeavor to understand how literature not only reflects but also composes an image of the human person and a rhetoric of human rights. Secondly, critics have turned their attention to the ways in which literature critiques and fills in the gaps of

traditional liberal rights ideology. Lastly, human rights literary critics often embark on cautious and self-questioning engagements with the ways in which writing's capacity to provide representation and to promote empathy remains a stubbornly important, if always complicated, undertaking.

It can be very tempting to romanticize the relationship between human rights and literature; indeed, literature itself can easily become a vehicle for romanticizing the nature of the struggle for rights. Lynn Hunt's *Inventing Human Rights* has become a significant target of criticism for this reason in recent times. As already mentioned, the central argument of this book is that the eighteenth century planted the seed of human rights beliefs that then slowly flowered over the succeeding centuries. Hunt argues that art, and especially literature, provided the primary driving force behind this flowering. She states that she intends to "make much of the influence of new kinds of experiences, from viewing pictures in public exhibitions to reading the hugely popular epistolary novels about love and marriage" to argue that "such experiences helped spread the practices of autonomy and empathy" (32).

Other critics have criticized Hunt's simplistic and utopian approach to thinking about literature and rights.<sup>1</sup> In his essay "Genre, Critique, and Human Rights," Mark Antaki argues that, "in cultivating a literary sensibility . . . it is important to resist succumbing to the myth of law and literature," a myth that consists of the idea that "literature somehow 'completes' law," that literature provides the affective and aesthetic complement to the dry reason and logic of the law (975). As well as rejecting this thesis, Antaki criticizes Hunt's tendency to equate the evocation of feelings of pity for a person, whether fictional or real, with human rights progress.

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<sup>1</sup> For instance, Joseph Slaughter, in *Human Rights, Inc.*, and Samuel Moyn, in his essay "On the Genealogy of Morals" are both dismissive of Hunt's romanticized narrative of the untroubled development of rights and literature's role in that development.

Referencing Arendt's thinking in *On Revolution*, Antaki argues that "whether or not pity leads to terror, as Arendt believed it had in the French Revolution, pity is a form of cruelty insofar as it is invested in the persistence of the suffering to which it claims to respond" (980). This concern that the stimulation of sympathy or pity is not only insufficient but potentially counter-productive to the project of human rights frequently haunts contemporary literary human rights criticism.

Antaki references *Inventing Human Rights* as an example of literary human rights analysis gone wrong. However, he also lays out a vision of how literary studies can engage more subtly and productively with the problems of human rights. Antaki suggests that readers should look more critically at how various genres of writing think about and portray rights, considering the rhetorical strategies, the victories, and the limitations of literature that is concerned with human rights. Antaki considers Robert Meister's *After Evil* an example of more profitable human rights criticism: "whereas Hunt's cultural-historical turn to the epistolary novel suggests that the novel helped to unleash a 'natural' empathic self to be embrace and celebrate, Meister problematizes the 'self' his examination of genre reveals" (985). Literary analysis done right can examine how literature, as well as law, works to visualize and construct an image of the human person and a particular way of representing human experience, rather than simply acting as a mirror to reflect the pre-existing, self-evident human self.

Joseph Slaughter's *Human Rights, Inc.* approaches the relationship of literature to human rights in a similar way. Like Hunt, Slaughter is interested in how the novel, especially the Bildungsroman, with its roots in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, has contributed to making the human person more comprehensible. However, unlike Hunt, Slaughter does not make an argument that novels simply help to make readers more empathetic. He argues instead

that “both human rights and the idealist *Bildungsroman* posit the individual personality as an instance of a universal personality, as the social expression of an abstract humanity that theoretically achieves its manifest destiny when the egocentric drives of the individual harmonize with the demands of social organization” (20). Slaughter argues that the human person is a co-creation of legal institutions and cultural productions. The novel form helps to articulate the way that rights work in modern society and the relationship between the individual and the state. However, unlike Hunt, Slaughter submits the novel to critique. Instead of treating literature as though it merely unveils pre-existing truths about human rights, he reveals how writing both constructs and defends the human person that it claims to be natural and self-evident. He also deconstructs the problems that arise out of the way in which law and literature go hand-in-hand to conceptualize human rights: “The person that emerges from the law and literature in this analysis is, in every way, a *persona ficta*, an often incoherent, self-contradictory, improbable creature that is neither the atomistic individual of libertarian philosophy nor merely the product of social determination” (20). As mentioned before, Slaughter sees possibilities as well as problems with the fragmented nature of the subject of contemporary human rights, but he emphasizes the need to look critically at the process by which literature theorizes human rights.

A strain of human rights criticism that is often interwoven with the project of analyzing how writing helps to construct rights ideology is the turn to positing literature as an instrument for critiquing traditional ways of thinking about human rights. Since, compared to the work of people like Meister and Slaughter, this criticism must apply more of what Antaki calls the “salvific belief” in the power of literature to its analysis, its proponents often proceed with caution, careful to bear in mind the inherently precarious nature of viewing literature as a way of correcting flaws and injustices within social systems. Elizabeth Anker’s recent book *Fictions of*

*Dignity: Embodying Human Rights in World Literature* is an example of this kind of criticism.

Anker begins her study with a nod to the fact that attempting to advance a theory of human rights is a notoriously fraught endeavor: “In fact, it has become a near truism to say that human rights have only paradoxes to offer” (2). However, as is common in many critical treatments of literature and human rights, Anker is nevertheless insistent that it is a worthwhile project, and that literature plays a vital role. Like many human rights critics, Anker turns to postcolonial texts to argue that these texts can critique – and, to some extent, correct – problems within traditional liberal human rights thinking. Anker notes that one of the paradoxes of the liberal human rights tradition is its commitment to the protection of bodily autonomy and the fact that somehow “liberal human rights discourses and norms exhibit a profound ambivalence toward embodiment” (2). Anker’s work therefore falls into the pattern of human rights literary studies dedicated to parsing literature’s ability to critique liberal rights traditions.

In *Placeless People*, Lyndsey Stonebridge also turns her attention to how literature can reveal the flaws and fractures within human rights thinking – or can fail to perform this critique. She considers writing emerging from the mid-century refugee crisis and argues that “the best writing did not simply describe a new reality . . . but registered that a world which has accepted that by simply dropping into the gaps between nation states people could become political and juridical non-persons has already torn the fabric of reality in an outrageous way” (25).

Stonebridge is interested not just in representing the plight of the people affected by the refugee crisis and eliciting empathy but in studying how literature depicting this crisis can reveal the fissures in traditional thinking about Western society’s capacity to protect rights. Stonebridge furthermore includes observations about the way in which literature’s role in human rights thinking can potentially be more insidious. She notes that there has sometimes been the impulse

in modernist literature to romanticize the condition of the refugee.<sup>2</sup> She quotes Edward Said's 1984 essay "Reflections on Exile": "Exile is strangely compelling to think about but terrible to experience" (10). Writing about the state of exile, Stonebridge argues, can either sanitize and sentimentalize refugeeism, or lean into the abject nature of this experience. Stonebridge praises Said's work for refusing to yield to the common temptation to humanize refugees. While humanizing victims of human rights abuse is often seen as progressive, Stonebridge argues that "on the contrary, to humanize the inhuman is to lend dignity to a condition that by robbing people of citizenship . . . has deliberately denied that dignity" (11). Stonebridge furthermore reiterates Antaki's argument that the end goal of writing about human rights should not be to create empathy: "compassion, empathy, and pity do not stand outside the story of the modern refugee, but are fundamentally intrinsic to its unfolding – and ongoing – tragedy" (13-14).

While some human rights critics focus on the way that literature participates in or critiques traditional human rights ideology, other critics uphold the necessity of thinking about how literature provides representation to individuals and populations whose rights are imperiled. While many critics, like Antaki, are highly skeptical of the impulse to see writing as a pathway for the advancement of human rights via increased awareness, others, such as James Dawes and Elaine Scarry, emphasize the continued importance of thinking about the representation of trauma and atrocity – the possibilities and necessity of such thinking, as well as its thorniness. Dawes' *That the World May Know: Bearing Witness to Atrocity* and Scarry's *The Body in Pain* both posit literary portrayal and interpretation of suffering as work that is necessary but must be

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<sup>2</sup> Many high modernist writers lived as expatriates, and Stonebridge notes that modernist literature has sometimes tended to turn the state of exile into an aesthetic, "crafting new modes of fictional being out of its deprivations," and creating an intimacy with exile that "cast the political history of displacement into the shadows" (8).

approached with caution and without the simplistic “salvific belief” that such representation constitutes a perfect solution to the many problems of human rights. Dawes turns to a variety of mostly firsthand texts describing later twentieth century atrocities, especially the Rwandan genocide of the 1990s. Turning his attention to novels that depict such atrocities, Dawes writes that, “the most basic narrative pull of so many of the novels that take human rights violations as their central plot concern . . . is hope. What draws readers through the landscapes of ruined bodies is the hope of a just conclusion” (193). There is the sense always that there must be some connection between the representation – the simple, graphic pointing-out – of atrocities and the attainment of justice, that this representation is work that must be done. However, Dawes is very cautious not to oversimplify the relationship between representation and justice. He notes that a clean, just resolution “was something New York might offer, but not South Africa. There was too much history here, too much bad history, for that kind of completion” (193). Dawes notes that communities that have been particularly traumatized require more complex and more cautious literary approaches to justice. As others have done also, he points to a bad example of human rights fiction: Kathy Reichs’ contemporary thriller *Grave Secrets*, which “uses a quick-and-easy human rights set-up to gild her book with moral purpose and elevate it within the genre” (194). As well as noting that the representation of suffering is not a clean pathway to justice, Dawes notes the dilemmas inherent in the ethics of such representation. *That the World May Know* opens with questions about the project of documenting atrocity: “Who has the right to speak, and how far does that right extend? How are these stories being used, and for whose benefit? What difference do they make?” (4) He also references Theodor Adorno’s well-known quote that “to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric,” without yielding entirely to its logic. Dawes notes, however, that the “contradiction between our impulse to heed trauma’s cry for

representation and our instinct to *protect* it from representation . . . is a split at the heart of the human rights advocacy” (9). For Dawes, therefore, the project of representation proceeds with a sense of urgency but also a number of caveats.

Although Elaine Scarry is not as explicitly concerned with the topic of human rights as some other critics, her writing has significant bearing on this subject. *The Body in Pain* specifically dwells on the representation of physical pain and suffering. Like Dawes, she takes up the problem of representation and sees it as important, but not untroubled. She is furthermore interested in secondhand representation as a kind of necessary evil. “Because the person in pain is ordinarily so bereft of the resources of speech, it is not surprising that the language for pain should sometimes be brought into being by those who are not themselves in pain but who speak *on behalf of* those who are” (6) It is necessary for the experience of pain not only to be represented, but to be represented secondhand. While Scarry is not unaware of the problem of empathy and the depiction of suffering, she insists that “pain is difficult to express, and . . . this inexpressibility has political consequences” (20). Scarry is not making the argument that empathizes with suffering characters will make readers stronger human rights activists, but she does insist that expression in writing plays a critical role in understanding the real human costs of political actions. Both she and Dawes confront directly, albeit with nuance and caution, the need for writing to depict the realities of human suffering.

### Modernism and Human Rights

I aim to demonstrate how the wartime writers in my study contribute to the discussion of literature’s role in human rights discourse, but also how they provide a missing piece in our thinking about literary modernism and its engagement with human rights. The study of modernist

literature has largely skirted around this movement's potential engagement with human rights thinking. Aside from modernism's divergence from literary forms traditionally associated with human rights, such as the realist novel, there are several reasons why this may be. The first is the privileging of "high modernism," which, as a canon, is associated often with the early twentieth century and is characterized by a distinctive social aloofness and a disavowal of concepts such as the coherent human individual and the objective reality of the social world. In *Late Modernism: Politics, Fiction, and the Arts between the World Wars*, a work whose larger purpose is to advocate for a new focus on late modernism as an important movement in its own right, Tyrus Miller argues that around modernism there has sprung up "a kind of academic folk wisdom" (4). Modernism is "the destruction of tradition . . . the depersonalization of art; the radical subjectivization of art . . ." (4). In the story of modernism, "'origins,' 'rise,' 'emergence,' 'genealogy' are key terms" (5). This "folk wisdom" concerning modernism casts the movement as fairly antithetical to an artistic human rights project, which must see art as more firmly rooted in society and willing to engage with social traditions. Traditional views of modernism that focus on high modernism and perceive it as fundamentally anti-humanist can hardly find in modernist literature fertile ground for the development of a human rights discourse.

An additional reason why critics have often not discovered a human rights interest in modernism might have to do with how studies of modernism have considered the political and social concerns of modernist writers. Plenty of attention has been paid to the political affiliations of writers of the 1930s and 40s – whether right-wing, left-wing, or otherwise. Thorough studies of modernist writing leading up to the outbreak of war, such as Samuel Hynes' *The Auden Generation: Literature and Politics in England in the 1930s* and Valentine Cunningham's *British Writers of the Thirties*, see the choice between fascist and communist ideologies as the dominant

theme underlying major canonical writing of this period, but focus on the political leanings of the writers without necessarily seeing them as connecting the problems of fascism and communism to the questions about rights and citizenship that bubble beneath the surface of the time.

However, the fascist and communist movements and the war opened up important questions about how human nature and human community were to be understood. Both fascism and communism challenged traditional liberal thought on these matters. The fascist movement privileged an authority based on brute force over democratic values, and communist ideology, with its focus on the collective, posed a threat to the ideal of individual freedom. The war itself brought the question of how far “human” overlaps with “citizen” to the point of crisis with the creation of masses of refugees. Expelled from citizenship in their native states, these refugees were in effect stripped of rights, highlighting the reality that the apparently obvious fact of being human was not enough to secure human rights. Studies of modernism, however, have frequently not considered how modernist writers engage with these human rights questions in their choices of fascism or communism.

Critics have focused on the responses modernist writers had to the cataclysms of war and other social forces without finding that these writers see the war as an opportunity (or imperative) for reimagining the human person or human community. At the outbreak of war, Cunningham notes that T.S. Eliot closed down the *Criterion*, “with grim anticipations as to the ‘immediate future’ and ‘the continuity of culture’, feeling that he and civilization were being ‘nailed to the cross’” (43). Stephen Spender, Cunningham says, “had his moments of rather glib Marxist optimism when he suggested that ‘the Crisis’ was rather good for literature” (44). Cunningham notes how the circumstance of war led to a watershed moment both in worldview and in literary purpose for these writers but does not connect Eliot’s feeling of dread over the

fate of civilization or Spender's sense that the war provided new imperatives for writers to the human rights concerns that were developing at the time or their implications for literature. Judy Suh's more recent book, *Fascism and Anti-Fascism in Twentieth Century British Fiction*, makes compelling arguments for broadening the modernist canon to include middlebrow fiction in a consideration of modernism's political engagement. She argues that her texts "direct our critical attention to fascism's transformation of political discourse in the attempt to control through biopolitics all areas of modern life, from high politics and civil institutions to interpersonal relationships and the very core of personal beliefs and behavior," (10). Suh turns her attention to genre and considers new and more domestic ways in which modernist writers think about fascism, but this still leaves room for a discussion about how modernism might address more fundamental human rights issues.

In addition to the political leanings of the modernists, critics have focused more broadly on their social concerns, particularly giving consideration to the significance of the nation to writing during the time of the world wars. However, these studies of modernist social engagement have often also not gone so far as to see modernist writers as grappling with human rights issues. Marina Mackay's *Modernism and World War II*, for instance, examines how the pressures of wartime precipitated a guilty compromise with nationalism on the part of writers like Virginia Woolf. Pericles Lewis, looking a bit further back in *Modernism, Nationalism, and the Novel*, argues that a national "race consciousness" became significant to writers like James Joyce, at a time when "the concept of 'race' still had the flexibility . . . to refer not just to a rigid biologism but also to the 'moral' factors, such as customs and institutions, that later anthropologists would distinguish as 'culture'" (37). These studies suggest the importance of nationalism, in various forms, to modernist social engagement, without necessarily connecting

modernist treatments of the nation to the tangled role that the nation-state played in contemporary human rights debates.

While many engagements with the political leanings of modernist writers touch upon their concerns with topics such as nationalism and socialism without representing them as human rights thinkers, recent movements within modernist studies leave room for the development of a modernist human rights discourse. Many contemporary modernist critics are interested in both broadening the canon of relevant and important modernist texts, especially beyond the traditional high modernists, and in expanding the conversation about the role that modernist writing plays within twentieth century social and political spheres. In “The New Modernist Studies,” Rebecca Walkowitz and Douglas Mao argue that “were one seeking a single word to sum up transformations in modernist literary scholarship over the past decade or two, one could do worse than light on *expansion*” (737). Modernist criticism has shifted to be more inclusive, focusing on texts written beyond Europe and North America and outside of the traditional, narrow timeframe often thought of as the modernist period. Furthermore, “in addition to these temporal and spatial expansions, there has been what we are calling here a vertical one . . . in which canons have been critiqued and reconfigured; in which works by marginalized social groups have been encountered with fresh eyes and ears” (738). In their introduction to *Bad Modernisms*, Walkowitz and Mao furthermore suggest how new trends in modernist studies aim to rediscover the radicalism of modernist art. Modernist productions were once seen as inherently revolutionary and counter-cultural, but over the course of the twentieth century, modernism underwent a process of domestication, “supported by a university culture that . . . transmitted modernist values as twentieth-century standards” (6). More recent attention to modernist literature, however, has reconsidered modernism’s radical potential, or “badness,” by

looking beyond the traditional canonical works and sentiments of modernist literature, to examine more marginalized writers and more subversive positions. Walkowitz and Mao explain: “The old story in which heroic modernist outsiders assault a complacent bourgeoisie has . . . been complicated by the observation that there were numerous ways of being outside in the early twentieth century – many of which invited a marginalization far more enduring than that briefly experienced by Picasso or Eliot” (7-8). There is new openness both to writers outside the traditional canon and to new considerations of the work that modernist writing can perform.

Within the larger circle of recent modernist studies is a nascent body of work that does examine the place of modernist literature in thinking about rights, and Lyndsey Stonebridge is a significant voice in that conversation. In their introduction to a special rights-centered issue of *Critical Quarterly*, Stonebridge and Rachel Potter invite us to think of the time preceding 1948 as a moment when texts “stage human rights as an ideological battleground,” where “rights were not a set of decided aspirations; but undecided, up for grabs, worth fighting for, on the horizon”(10). Stonebridge and Potter suggest that, just as a set of human rights remained nebulous and undefined in the mid-century, so did the nature and the destiny of the individual to whom rights apply. They argue that, in the time before the signing of the Universal Declaration, the individual was “both free and abandoned,” potentially untethered from the constraints of the nation-state but perhaps entering a new condition of homelessness (4). Although the introduction to the journal issue suggests it will concentrate on a study of the intersections of modernism and human rights, most of the entries do not focus on an analysis of literature from the modernist period. There are a few interesting considerations of human rights from a sociopolitical viewpoint that do not include attention to literature, and a few studies of human rights from beyond what is conventionally thought of as the modernist period, including one article devoted

to Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, published in the 1980s. This collection perhaps suggests that there is still plenty of room for attention to the ways that a variety of modernist writers engaged with human rights. In *Placeless People*, Stonebridge suggests that to see modernism as engaging with human rights is a matter not only of reinterpreting the literature of the period but of making decisions about which literature should be the focus. She notes that, rather than engaging with the problems of the refugee crisis and mass displacement "modernist literature . . . often seemed to peel itself free of the world, claiming in its own literariness an aesthetic liberation from the constraints of territorial sovereignty" (8). The aloofness of modernist literature, Stonebridge suggests, is perhaps only partially a function of literary criticism, and partly to be found in the nature of the literature itself.

This study focuses on authors and texts who represent an under-studied dimension of literary modernism. These writers are neither politically aloof nor political extremists, tending neither to withdraw into a world of art separated from the social world nor to denounce more moderate positions in order to embrace fascism. I call these writers "activist" modernists for their commitment to pursuing positive social and political change through their art. The writers in this study write in different genres and make divergent claims, but I see them collectively as constituting an important chapter in the literary representation and exploration of social problems – such as nationalism, individual identity, and the legacy of liberalism – that are still very relevant today. While modernism has historically been defined by a turning away from convention and the use of extreme formal and stylistic experimentation, I focus on a group of writers from the 1930s and 40s who, in their artistic productions, look to the ways in which the traditional representational tools associated with liberalism – especially the conventions of realist fiction and the novel – can be modified, reimagined, and combined with more modern forms –

especially documentaries and journalism – to make sense of the past, present, and future of the wartime and postwar moment.

I demonstrate that late modernists interested in the most pressing problems of human rights, including the importance of the nation-state and the possibilities of universalism, often find themselves confronting the complex history and the uncertain promises of liberalism. These writers are unable to embrace liberal ideals unquestioningly in the wake of its early twentieth century failures, but the threat of totalitarianism also heightens the appeal, and perhaps necessity, of liberal values. This group of writers combines the narrative strategies of the fictional forms associated with liberalism, especially the bildungsroman, with other representational forms, such as reportage. In *The Meaning of Treason*, Rebecca West applies the narrative structure of the bildungsroman to her reports on the treason trials of British fascists, testing out the extent to which liberal narratives about human development can explain or correct the impulse towards fascism. John Hersey writes a novel about the Holocaust that is painstakingly constructed to resemble a series of journal entries, to graft one of the most unsettling events of history onto a liberal story about continuity and rebirth. Martha Gellhorn pens a novelistic account of her own experiences of the 1930s refugee crises in order to explore the possibilities for the novel form to express and explain a wide-scale historical process of dehumanization. Together, these writers create an important body of late modernist writing that engages with the problems of human rights, the nation, and the liberal legacy that still haunt our society today.

### Chapter Overview

This study contributes to the broadening of modernist studies by drawing attention to modernist writing that, far from withdrawing from historical realities, explicitly engages with the

thorniest issues of twentieth century human rights discourse and contains important implications for an understanding of how human rights are formulated in the contemporary Western imagination. In what follows, I consider mid-century texts that respond to several major aspects of the wartime landscape – the nature of fascist ideology, the European refugee crisis, the Holocaust, and the rise of Soviet totalitarianism – to analyze how writers see the various crises of the 1930s and 40s as prompts for engaging in a discussion of human rights. The first chapter examines Rebecca West's *The Meaning of Treason* (1947), a report on the treason trial of Nazi propagandist William Joyce, and Rex Warner's *The Aerodrome* (1941), a novelistic anti-fascist parable. Both deeply interested in understanding the appeal of fascism, these texts ultimately uncover the tangled threads that connect fascism, the nation, and rights. While *The Aerodrome* is a novel and *The Meaning of Treason* a piece of reportage, both texts ultimately rely heavily on narrative, and particularly the narrative strategies of the bildungsroman genre, to both diagnose the ills of their time and offer a remedy. For West and Warner, the story of fascism is one in which individuals wander away from the safety provided by the traditional structures of the nation-state, tempted away by fascism's false promises of new kinds of social power and freedom. These narratives attempt to reveal the nation as the natural and eternal context in which the humanity of the individual is fully realized. However, through their narrative contortions and dutiful attention to historical detail, *The Aerodrome* and *The Meaning of Treason* also ultimately betray the fact that the nation is an entity that must also be imagined and defended. Furthermore, positioning the nation as the source of human rights requires West and Warner to elevate it to a quasi-religious status and to obscure the dangers represented by nationalism.

The second chapter steps slightly back in time to consider three texts from the late 1930s and early 40s that are set in Europe during the build-up to the war. Eric Ambler's spy thriller

*Background to Danger* (1937), Phyllis Bottome's novel *The Mortal Storm* (1937), and Martha Gellhorn's novelistic depiction of the annexation of the Sudetenland *A Stricken Field* (1940) describe and interpret the chaos and the mounting terror of the situation in Europe during the rise of the fascist states. Whereas Rebecca West and Rex Warner are primarily concerned with the threat of fascist thinking to traditional liberal structures, Ambler, Bottome, and Gellhorn give their attention to the terrorizing behavior of some nations, the diminishing sovereignty of others, and the masses of victims and refugees left disenfranchised as a consequence. These writers also produce stories in which lone protagonists, largely intended to be representative of the wartime European individual, navigate their way through a perilous new social landscape. In these stories, however, rather than finding salvation within the timeless embrace of the nation, the heroes must decide their place in the world independently and individually. Identity is fiercely individual and is threatened rather than supported by social and political institutions, especially the nation. These three novels offer a theory of the universal person, but such a figure ends up being just as fabricated as West's and Warner's fantasies of the nation. Ambler, Bottome, and Gellhorn construct empowered and independent characters that exist more easily in fiction than within the complex conditions of reality, in which individuals cannot entirely be detached from a variety of sociopolitical contexts.

Whereas the second chapter addresses novels concerned with the rising threat of fascism to the social structures of Europe and the political plight of refugees, the third chapter focuses on several firsthand and secondhand accounts of the most dire consequence of fascism – the Nazi concentration camps. The contrast between the survivor memoirs, such as Primo Levi's *If This Is a Man* (1947), and secondhand chronicles of the Holocaust, whether fictional or nonfictional, highlights the way that wartime writers used narrative to interpret the events of the war. A

defining characteristic of the accounts of Holocaust survivors is their resistance to the impulse to draw meaning from the horrific experiences of the camps. Rather, their stories remain stubbornly fragmented and abject. On the other hand, West's "Greenhouse with Cyclamens" series, published in 1955, and John Hersey's historical novel *The Wall* (1950) are committed not only to making sense of the Holocaust but to threading even the darkest events of the war into a narrative that yields a moral. "Greenhouse," West's reflection on the Nuremberg Trials and postwar Germany, twists the Nazi genocide and the various sins of the war into a narrative about the ultimate triumph of justice despite the evils that have crept into modern society. *The Wall*, a detailed novel about a Jewish family in the Warsaw ghetto, similarly draws the Holocaust into a soothing story about the restoration of peace despite the profound losses of the war. These texts illuminate the ways in which narrations of twentieth century history, drawing on storytelling conventions and liberal desires, can construct a notion of the historical inevitability of the victory of human rights.

While the first three chapters are primarily committed to texts that address Nazism, the final chapter examines two texts that serve as critiques of Soviet totalitarianism, Arthur Koestler's *Darkness at Noon* (1940), a fictionalized account of the Moscow Trials, and George Orwell's famous dystopia *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949). Like most of the texts in this study, these two novels turn to a simplified narrative with a single protagonist to tell the story of a significant element of twentieth century history. While both *Darkness at Noon* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* are well-known as critiques of the Soviet state, both novels approach these critiques from a human rights perspective, treating communism as a failed attempt to change the human condition through revolutionary means. These narratives interrogate the relationship of human rights to political action and the pursuit of power. As with other texts with deep human rights

interests, both of these novels set up a binary distinction between the natural character and condition of human existence and the unnatural state of affairs that is responsible for the horrors of war. Both Koestler and Orwell represent totalitarianism as the consequence of an unnatural and aberrant love of power and an effort to claim greater authority and control over the direction of history than people are intended to have. In the stories these writers tell, the antidote to the Soviet horrors lies in a re-embrace of the nature of the individual and a valuing of the local and closely interpersonal over international political ambitions and the love of power. Both *Darkness at Noon* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* advocate a particular view of the human person – in both novels, intensely private and independent – and of the most natural community to which the individual belongs – in *Darkness*, a mystical, nonpolitical community uniting all people, and in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, a reformed, socialist vision of the nation. However, in these texts, both the human person and the communities to which the individual naturally belong have to be constructed imaginatively; they do not simply reveal themselves once the unnatural social structures of twentieth century society are swept away.

The writers of the 1930s and 40s confronted an historical moment when nothing seemed certain other than that society appeared to have come apart at the seams, and even the most basic rights of people were easily disregarded. These writers are unique in their thorough and thoughtful ambition to create a theory of human rights to respond to the confusion and disorder of their world. The problems the wartime writers address – the protections and dangers of nation-state sovereignty, the troubled aims of universalism, the ever-elusive figure of the human person – remain central and imperfectly resolved issues today. In the time around the Second World War, thinkers and writers saw and felt these problems acutely but had no readily available framework for answering them. It is therefore valuable to examine the stories they write to bring

order and clarity out of a potentially deadly chaos. While it may be tempting to credit literature with the elegant power simply to clear away falsehoods and correct errors of judgment, such a view of the role of literature misunderstands the nature of human rights. Rather than simply reflected or captured in writing, human rights are composed of language, narrative, and rhetoric. Therefore, the literature that concerns itself with the underlying issues of human rights, while it cannot provide a perfect resolution to the problems of twentieth century history, can provide valuable insight into how human rights are produced.

## CHAPTER ONE: THE FAMILIAR AND THE FOREIGN: HUMAN RIGHTS, THE NATION, AND THE RISE OF FASCISM

### Introduction

Rebecca West's *The Meaning of Treason*, an account of the treason trials of William Joyce and other British fascists, and Rex Warner's *The Aerodrome*, an allegorical novel about the perilous appeal of fascism, emerge after the outbreak of war and before the signing of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948. These texts address themselves to the problem of fascist ideology's infection of mid-century society. This interest, not just in combatting fascism, but in understanding it as a disease afflicting otherwise sound social systems causes *The Meaning of Treason* and *The Aerodrome* to develop into texts that advance a theory of human rights for the twentieth century. Though the mid-century would soon witness the emergence of a new discourse of human rights, West and Warner write from within a moment of profound cultural and historical uncertainty. Rather than simply choosing an intact, already available belief system to defend, these two writers must articulate for themselves a philosophy that can answer the core questions that the fascist catastrophe raises: What are the fundamental ideological and political bases for the recognition of the humanity of individuals? From what ultimate authority are human rights drawn? What is the ideal community to support and promote human rights? In seeking to understand the nature of fascism, West and Warner ultimately embark on an exploration of the key questions underlying the human rights problem. For both writers, the reckless, totalizing, and megalomaniacal nature of fascism is evidence that the proper structures of human rights are to be found in its opposite: the checks and balances of tradition and the

moderation within liberal thought. Therefore, in both *The Meaning of Treason* and *The Aerodrome*, the sacred foundation of rights is (a simplified and idealized version of) the liberal nation-state. In the view of these two writers, the chaos and disregard for rights that arises within fascism occurs as a result of the choice to abandon the natural parameters of national belonging.

The pull of narrative, especially the narrative conventions of the realist novel and the bildungsroman, heavily influences the way West and Warner theorize rights and understand the wartime moment. Though working in different genres, both writers tell stories focused on individual protagonists to explain the phenomenon of fascism. This storytelling approach contours the way in which fascism can be understood, heavily emphasizing (and treating as entirely rational) the actions and choices of individuals, and also shapes the way in which West and Warner construct the truth about human rights and fascism. Like most writers interested in defending a theory of rights, West and Warner do not see their project as a series of choices and priorities – the complex negotiation of facts and beliefs in which some views are heightened and others obscured. Rather, they present their narratives as proofs that simply point out pre-existing truths and disentangle natural from unnatural states of human existence. The stories they tell, in which concepts of right and wrong can be flattened, the acts of individuals can be given great historical weight, and the backdrop of the nation can be shaped to fit the narrative, provide insight into the complex process that is part of the formation of any human rights theory.

It is important to emphasize that the ideas within *The Meaning of Treason* and *The Aerodrome* represent just one twentieth century theory of human rights. This theory, privileging the nation-state, is obviously not in perfect alignment with the theory of universal rights often associated with the immediate postwar moment, but neither is it out of step with the actual practical and ideological approaches to the rights discourse of the mid-century period. As noted

by human rights critics like Samuel Moyn, this period, and the rest of the twentieth century, continued to be shaped by the influence of nation-state sovereignty. West and Warner are not universalists in their thinking about human rights, but nor are they untouched by the cultural currents that give rise to the Universal Declaration. While these writers draw heavily from the liberal tradition that posits the nation as the home of rights, they are not unaware of the cracks in Enlightenment thought that have widened during their time or of the many complications with putting such great faith in the nation. Like the drafters of the UDHR – and perhaps inevitably like most human rights thinkers – they are simply more interested in healing these wounds than in opening them up. West and Warner weave together narratives that reconcile the contradictions and fill in the absences inherent in the human rights project, implicitly insisting that a cohesive if not unflawed story of human rights is preferable to a surrender to chaos. However, unlike the drafters of rights declarations, West and Warner allow the reader to see the rough suturing work they perform. Although they assemble the complex and at times inscrutable elements of their historical moment into a narrative that advocates strongly for the primacy of the nation, West and Warner do not entirely suppress the aspects of their history that do not fit this narrative. Despite the esteem in which these writers hold the nation, some of the realities of nation-state functioning and the dangers of nationalism assert an uneasy presence within both texts. Both writers insist that a turning away from the sanctuary of the nation-state to a universalist doctrine is untenable. However, their texts acknowledge – implicitly and explicitly – the imperfections of a nation-based rights ideology. In complex ways, therefore, these texts reveal the imaginative methods, the narrative strategies, and the ethical compromises that are always a part of constructing a human rights theory.

## The Enlightenment Rights Legacy and the Nation-State

In their thinking about the restoration of justice and social order in the wake of the war, West and Warner draw on the Enlightenment tradition, the philosophical foundation for rights ideology in Western society.<sup>3</sup> Their privileging of the nation-state is in part a consequence of their reliance on traditional liberal thought, in which the realization of rights is strongly tied to citizenship within the nation. Imagining rights against the backdrop of monarchy and tyranny, Enlightenment thinkers were concerned with liberating the individual from oppression due to unjust hierarchies and establishing equality within a contained social system. As Hannah Arendt argues in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, “the Declaration of the Rights of Man at the end of the eighteenth century was a turning point in history . . . independent of the privileges which history had bestowed upon certain strata of society . . . the declaration indicated man’s emancipation from all tutelage and announced that he had now come of age” (290). In this new age, “man appeared as the only sovereign in matters of law as the people was proclaimed the only sovereign in matters of government” (291). At the dawn of this rights tradition, then, a community of equals – the democratic nation-state – became the basic unit of society. Since this community was composed of equals, the realization of individual rights was strongly tied to the power of the nation to which the individual belonged.

However, in Enlightenment thinking, the national community is seen as the manifestation of individuals practicing their equal rights; it is a political expedient for the expression of rights,

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<sup>3</sup> It is generally accepted that the eighteenth century Enlightenment provides the groundwork for rights ideology. Hannah Arendt, for instance, gestures to the foundational nature of this time period in *On Revolution* and *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. Furthermore, historians like Joseph Slaughter and Samuel Moyn emphasize that even twentieth century universal human rights, which supposedly supersede earlier rights traditions, continue to draw heavily on Enlightenment notions. See the introduction for a more thorough overview of these arguments.

not the source of rights themselves and certainly not the source of meaningful human identity. In explaining the development of just societies of people in *The Social Contract*, Rousseau emphasizes that these communities are a product of necessity and not of nature, that merely grow out of the individual's need to protect their natural rights. He argues that, "the oldest of all societies, and the only natural one, is that of the family." However, as soon as childhood ends, "this natural bond is dissolved" (50). From that point, a "common liberty" is a "consequence of man's nature," and "man's first law is to watch over his own preservation . . . as soon as he reaches the age of reason, he becomes the only judge of the best means to preserve himself; he becomes his own master" (50). The individual is completely sovereign and independent in the "state of nature." Due to the pressures of reality, however, the state of nature is only ever hypothetical. Rousseau argues that "men reach a point where the obstacles to their preservation in a state of nature prove greater than the strength that each man has to preserve himself in that state." At this point, "the only way in which they can preserve themselves is by uniting their separate powers in a combination strong enough to overcome any resistance, uniting them so that their powers are directed by a single motive and act in concert" (60). This extremely pragmatic approach to the formation of nations stands in sharp contrast to the zealous nationalisms that would later develop in Western society and still thrive today. The nation, in Rousseau's conceptualization, is merely the instrument through which individuals gain protection in a society of equals. However, it is, as Arendt notes, all-important in this new society built on the concepts of equality and natural rights. Rousseau notes that stipulations of the social contract "are reducible to a single one, namely the total alienation by each associate of himself and all his rights to the whole community. Thus . . . as every individual gives himself absolutely, the conditions are the same for all, and precisely because they are the same for all, it is in no one's

interest to make conditions onerous for others” (60) In the Enlightenment thinking, all individuals subjugate themselves to the community. However, this is not because the collective is more important than the individual or because it represents a source of meaning greater than the individual, but rather just because a common surrender to the communal will is imagined as the most effective means of protecting the well-being of the individual.

Whereas a consequence of Enlightenment thinking about individual rights is that rights become inseparably linked to communal belonging – and later to nation-state citizenship – the rights with which Enlightenment thinkers endow the individual are still natural rights that derive their authority from nature, and therefore ultimately from God. In his *First Treatise of Government*, John Locke rebuts the argument that the Bible supports the authority of the monarch. However, he makes his case still with recourse to the Biblical text. For instance, Locke dismisses the notion that the dominion God gives Adam over the animals justifies the rule of the monarch, but not because this argument is rooted in the book of Genesis. Rather, Locke argues: “Every man had a right to the creatures, by the same title Adam had, viz. by the right everyone had to take care of, and provide for their subsistence. And thus men had a right in common. Adam’s children in common with him” (12) Locke still locates his theory in divine will; only to Locke, divine will grants equality to all rather than special power to certain classes of people. It is true that the Enlightenment was a period of relative secularization, and thinkers like Locke perhaps turned less to religion than their predecessors to interpret and prescribe the functioning of the social and political realm. Arendt says of the eighteenth century that “from then on Man, and not God’s command or the customs of history, should be the source of Law” (*Origins* 290). However, it is not that a notion of the divine is entirely absent from these foundational rights texts, but rather that divine will recedes further into the background, is reinterpreted to

accommodate a theory of natural rights and equality, and is no longer used to sustain social hierarchies. It is important, however, to remember that natural rights were still imagined to stem, to some degree, from a divine source. This allows Enlightenment thinkers to be less troubled than their twentieth century counterparts by the specter of a hollowness at the center of human rights. They do not agonize, as later thinkers would, about the tautologies and paradoxes of human rights.

The idealized community that Locke and Rousseau imagine is, in reality, not so tidy an entity, either in concept or in practice. Rather than a straightforward compact entered into by equals, the nation is a messy and complex historical object, and is more properly understood as constituted by the interplay of three elements: the nation, the nation-state, and nationalism. In *The Construction of Nationhood: Ethnicity, Religion, and Nationalism*, Adrian Hastings explains that a “nation” is essentially a community of people, “formed from one or more ethnicities, and normally identified by a literature of its own” that “possesses or claims the right to political identity and autonomy as a people.” A “nation-state” is “a state which identifies itself in terms of one specific nation whose people are not seen simply as ‘subjects’ of the sovereign but as a horizontally bonded society to whom the state in a sense belongs.”<sup>4</sup> Finally, “nationalism” is primarily “the belief that one’s own ethnic or national tradition is especially valuable and needs to be defended at almost any cost through creation or extension of its own nation-state” (4). These three concepts are intertwined, matters both of fact and of belief. The nation, the state, and nationalism overlap and blur together in ways that distort this community that remains the basic

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<sup>4</sup> Hastings goes on to make the important point that the perfect unification of “nation” and “state” is an ideal, often “a dream as much as a reality” (3). Ernest Gellner also notes, in *Nations and Nationalism*, that the number of potential nations on the planet “is probably much, *much* larger than that of possible viable states” (2).

unit of human rights, at least practically, from what it was in the Enlightenment imagination. The complications of modern nationhood make it both appealing and problematic as a suprahuman grounding of rights in a more truly secularized world and a society increasingly aware of the potential inability of the human figure to stand alone.

I will argue that Rebecca West and Rex Warner situate the nation-state at the heart of human rights by conceiving of it as an almost religious entity with an existence that is larger than the sum of its individual citizens. However, the nation-state had long since become fertile ground for this kind of conceptualization. West and Warner simply co-opt a transcendent view of the nation for use in human rights theorizing. In *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson famously describes how the grafting of ethnically and culturally cohesive communities to a mechanics of state power and the rise of nationalist sentiment provide a useful solution to the decline of religious faith. In the absence of dominant religious worldviews to promise a deep mythical structure underlying human existence, a predetermined path, and the hope of continued experience after death, the nation provides for these basic needs of the human psyche, offering “a secular transformation of fatality into continuity, contingency into meaning,” a way “to turn chance into destiny,” and an image of “a solid community moving steadily down (or up) history” (11-12, 26).

However, while the nation is promising as a meaningful category of identity and certainly as a practical framework of social and political protection, it also has both limits and dangers as the guarantor of human rights. As already discussed, there is the problem that the preeminence of the nation-state in the political imagination inevitably ties human rights to the rights of the citizen. As those who lived through the mid-century wars were well aware, the nation-state system could also easily lead to war between nations and could facilitate rights abuses committed

at the level of the nation-state. In *Nations and Nationalism*, Ernest Gellner explains how nationalist sentiment can easily come to the service of the perpetration of international hostilities: “It may be that . . . partiality, the tendency to make exceptions on one’s own behalf or one’s own case, is *the* central human weakness from which all others flow; and that it infects national sentiment as it does all else, engendering what the Italians under Mussolini called the *sacro egoism* of nationalism” (2). It is easy for nationalist pride to obscure the actually evil doings of a nation. Though West and Warner see the nation-state as a bulwark against the rise of fascism, Gellner connects the significance of nationalism in society directly to fascism, and he is not alone. In *Nationalism and the State*, John Breuilly notes that some people “are led to deny that German National Socialism is a form of nationalism because its creed of racial inequality is incompatible with the nationalist vision of a plurality of unique and free nations.” Breuilly acknowledges that while Nazism is certainly not the inevitable end state of all national sentiment, “it is absurd to exclude Nazism as a form of nationalism” since “it drew upon earlier nationalist ideas and movements, insisted that the supreme values were those of the national community, and couched much of its appeal . . . in terms which drew upon earlier traditions of German nationalism” (3). Nationalism is far from synonymous with fascism, but the nationalist tendency to prioritize the national group as a value unto itself, based on its superiority to other groups, can make nationalism compatible with fascism.

West and Warner advocate firmly for the invaluable significance of nationhood to rights, but they do not, and could not, entirely resolve the problems of the nation-state system. In the narratives they construct, they simply choose the story of the nation – and its hero the citizen – as the best of all available stories. However, while it has its problems and its compromises, this choice of narrative is not just the quaint and naïve impulse of an outdated moment. The story in

which the nation-state is central to human rights continues to carry weight today. In *Nationalism and Particularity*, Andrew Vincent argues that in twenty-first century political theory there has been “a gradual but marked shift of interest away from universalist forms of argument towards favouring communities and groups” and that “the notion of universal characteristics of human nature, universal human needs, values or rights have been viewed with increasing skepticism from many quarters” (1). The role of the nation and its relationship to and competition with universalist doctrine is a negotiation that continues to play out today.

### Narrative, National Belonging, and Rights

While the moral messages that the *The Meaning of Treason* and *The Aerodrome* attempt to impart emerge from the complicated historical legacy of the nation-state and nationalism, the way their wartime stories are woven together to create meaning draws on a literary legacy that employs realist narrative strategies in the harmonizing of the individual and the national community. West and Warner are the heirs to a tradition of liberal human rights literature that developed throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and took the form of the realist novel and its subgenre, the bildungsroman. The realist novel develops alongside the Western liberal tradition and is well-suited to the purpose of developing and reinforcing the liberal ideals that prioritize both the sanctity of the individual and the supremacy of the nation-state, and position the two as inherently inter-related. Ian Watt’s *The Rise of the Novel* (1957) provides a useful framework for understanding the characteristics of the novel and its social embeddedness. The novel form that rises in the eighteenth century is defined by realism, meaning that it presents what appears to be “a full and authentic report of human experience,” drawing on the assumption that literature can put a faithful mirror up to life and therefore enjoy a close relationship with

objective reality (28). The novel follows the imagined journey of a fictional individual who is constructed as an ordinary and realistic person, with ordinary and realistic life experiences. This focus on the ordinary individual depends upon the presumption that “the society must value every individual highly enough to consider him the proper subject of its serious literature” (60). Watt emphasizes furthermore that, much more so than previous literary forms, the novel unfolds within both spatial and temporal settings that feel realistic, making reference to specific street addresses and dates, and even carefully describing interior settings. This attention to the specifics of time and place further allows the novel to consider the development and identity of the individual within a social context. However, the attention to minute detail that allows the author to develop the individual within a realistic social setting also ties the heroes and heroines of the novel to particular communities and relies on the assumption that character and reader already share a community – especially a national community – that is already well-known and taken for granted. In *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson influentially argues that the development of print capitalism and the explosion of publications in vernacular languages “laid the bases for national consciousnesses,” making individuals who read a certain language “aware of the hundreds of thousands, even millions, of people in their particular language-field, and at the same time that *only those* hundreds of thousands, or millions, so belonged” (44). This nationalistic aspect of the realist novel will create some difficulty for later writers who try to draw on the conventions of the novel in historical contexts in which the community as well as the individual needs to be described and defended.

A particular instance of the novel – the bildungsroman – is often seen as especially important to a literary human rights project. Bildungsromans feature young protagonists, who, through the course of the novel, achieve a harmonious integration with their community. This

novelistic plotline facilitates the conceptualization of a similar harmonizing between the individual subject and the national community. Joseph Slaughter, in *Human Rights, Inc.: The World Novel, Narrative Form, and International Law*, argues that the bildungsroman is the critical literary form for making visible the paradoxical figure of the human. In the bildungsroman genre, this figure is imagined as natural and preexisting any concept of human rights, and yet also a posited figure, in need of being described and developed. Slaughter explains that the bildungsroman helps to imagine the individual who is the subject of human rights, as it “configures a developmental plot that is simultaneously tautological . . . and teleological” (99). Franco Moretti, in *The Way of the World: The Bildungsroman in European Culture* (1987), further emphasizes the connection between the teleological process of individual development in the bildungsroman and the growth and development of the nation. Moretti observes that localization in time and space is central to the work of the bildungsroman: in works of this genre, “it is essential to build a homeland for the individual” and “it is also indispensable for time to stop at a privileged moment” (26). Moretti also argues that the bildungsroman is fundamentally anti-revolutionary. It thrives in times of “ordinary administration” and constitutes “a constant elusion of historical turning points and breaks,” making it clear why this genre would have proved a difficult model for writers who self-consciously understood themselves to be situated at an historical turning point (12). The characteristics of the realist novel in general, and the bildungsroman in particular, make it clear how these forms work well to describe a vision of the individual, the community, and the integration of the two in liberal society.

Importantly, both West and Warner draw on the techniques of the realist novel, and especially the bildungsroman, to narrate the contemporary history of their time. *The Aerodrome* is both a parable of the rise of fascism and a traditional coming-of-age novel about a young man

who is briefly tempted away from his proper development within the village that represents the English nation. *The Meaning of Treason*, though it is reportage and not fiction, also constructs its telling of the rise of fascism and the postwar treason trials along the lines of the bildungsroman, casting those on trial for treason as the failed heroes of bildungsromans, whose fall into fascism results from their inability to recognize the national community as the true source of their humanity and the background for their personal development. West and Warner craft narratives that create a certain truth out of the chaotic events of the war. These narratives both manage to hold together as lucid and cohesive arguments that the nation-state is the shelter of human rights and yet also betray, with their attention to the complexities of historical detail, the occasional incapacity of history and human concerns to fit into such an argument. The contrast between the claims that West and Warner make to the naturalness of their theses and the obvious artifice involved in the telling of these stories – not to mention the many imperfections and complexities of the nation as the grounding for rights – is indicative of the vexed process of all human rights theorizing.

#### National Loyalty and Anti-Fascism in *The Meaning of Treason*

Rebecca West covered the treason trials of William Joyce, John Amery, and other British traitors for *The New Yorker*, and compiled her writings into *The Meaning of Treason*, published in 1947. The book begins with a detailed account of the trial and appeals of Joyce, known to the British public as “Lord Haw-Haw,” who had become famous as a broadcaster for the Nazis. After describing Joyce’s trials and execution, West turns her attention to a thorough analysis of Joyce’s life and the factors that caused him to choose fascism. The later sections of the book are devoted to descriptions of the trials and courts martial of other individuals, including John

Amery, the ne'er-do-well son of a well-respected English politician, and British POWs recruited by the Nazis. In many ways *The Meaning of Treason* is a strange and uneasy text. West constructs a narrative that frames fascism as the result of the decision on the part of individuals to abandon the protections as well as the limits of the liberal nation-state. *The Meaning of Treason* argues that the nation-state is the natural and obvious setting for the development of the human personality. To this end, West contrasts the moderate and restrained traditions of the liberal nation with the excesses and horrors of fascism, casting the traitors as tragic cases who could not understand the obvious truth that they could only find salvation by yielding to the constraints of their native nations. However, it is possible to perceive in this smooth and persuasive narrative about the naturalness of the nation-state as the foundation for human rights the actual artistry that goes into constructing a story that purports to be only the revelation of a pre-existing truth. I will examine the way West uses the strategies of the bildungsroman to emphasize certain aspects of the fascist movement and downplay others, and to smooth over the wrinkles and problems of the nation-state system that she nevertheless cannot entirely erase from her story.

While West is well-known for her graceful prose, she saw her writing as above all a form of social activism at a critical historical juncture. Her wartime writing aimed to understand the history of her time, to diagnose its illnesses, bring to light its virtues, and restore to it guiding values and belief systems. Even in the darkest moments of the twentieth century, West did not falter in her essentially optimistic view of society, especially a society structured by the rule of law and taking sustenance from deep cultural tradition. Her travel writing epic *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon*, published in 1941, offers a rich account of Yugoslavia with the purpose of defending its national heritage against the invading Nazis and calling out the indifference of

those who support appeasement. West's biographer Carl Rollyson calls *Black Lamb* "a tour of history, which was also her journey, the story of a writer who constantly sought her own heaven on earth," underscoring the hope that West placed in human culture and the idealism with which she pursued a social agenda through writing. *A Train of Powder* (1955) is a collection of postwar essays largely focused on trials that West sees as significant to an understanding of justice and deviance in the twentieth century, most famously the 1945 Nuremberg trials. These earlier and later works, along with *The Meaning of Treason*, are rooted in classical liberalism. The critic Lionel Trilling notes that West holds a "special place in our intellectual life because she maintains a liberal democratic position together with a strong traditionalism" (Trilling qtd. in Rollyson 261). In his introduction to *Rebecca West Today*, Bernard Schweitzer qualifies that assessment somewhat, arguing that "the only ideological generalization that fits West with any degree of accuracy is that she was basically a Liberal with a capital L" (30). It might be that West was "basically a Liberal" because liberalism was the historical ideology most adaptable to her goals of understanding her society and rescuing it from twentieth century threats. Referring to *A Train of Powder*, Lyndsey Stonebridge notes that "the very lavishness of her writing puts pressure on the surface of things as part of a drive to yield a meaning, a moral meaning, that otherwise seems hauntingly absent" (29). More in keeping with the tenets of formal realism than the fragmenting impulses of modernism, West sees writing as an instrument capable of deciphering a world that, though sometimes obscure, does ultimately contain meaning – moral meaning, Stonebridge argues – to be discovered.

Moral meaning is also what West seeks in *The Meaning of Treason*. In order to make the story of the British traitors yield historically significant answers, West approaches it from a perspective that is essentially liberal, believing in the benevolence and potential of society and

the agency and coherence of the individual. She puts the account of the traitors into the form of storytelling closely associated with this liberal viewpoint – the bildungsroman. Looking at this chapter of the history of her time through the lens of the bildungsroman and its Enlightenment philosophy produces a compelling reading of the stakes of human rights in the age of fascism, in which fascism is understood as the result of individuals forsaking the meaningful, stabilizing culture and tradition embodied in the nation. In her reporting, West tends to write about real people as though they are characters in a novel, and the bildungsroman genre, which charts the path of the hero into maturity and the achievement of harmony with his society, provides an important narrative model for the development of the individual personality. West sees the traitors as the failed heroes of bildungsromans, and diagnoses fascism as a failure both of personal development and of the willingness to accept the familiar community (the nation) as the medium that nurtures as well as limits the individual. She argues that individuals are tempted into fascism when the weakening of national loyalties and liberal views of human development renders them unable to evolve into well-adjusted, socially determined adults, a process that depends on the individual's recognition of his/her own identity as dependent on the national community and a willingness to accept certain responsibilities and limitations within that community. According to West, "most of the traitors . . . had fallen into this preventable error of regarding their slight superiority to the average as an overwhelming superiority . . . which gave them the right to reject all traditional values and assume that every action and opinion of the community was wrong" (163). West considers the life stories of each of the traitors on whom she focuses, generally starting from childhood, to examine how each of them deviated from the proper path. For William Joyce, the trouble was that society would not offer him the power and influence he craved, and he could not learn to temper his infantile thirst for domination and

control. As a young man in Ireland, Joyce “preferred the straight-backed aliens in scarlet coats to his compatriots who slouched with hats crushed down on cowlicks” (66). West forgives this error, because “that the smart soldiers created the slouching assassins, that imperialism creates slavery . . . he could hardly have been expected to work out for himself at that age” (66). The problem is that Joyce never works this out. He does not mature into an adult recognition that the compromises of the nation are preferable to the tyrannies of imperialism, or fascism. West concludes that “therefore the Fascist movement was a godsend to him. Its leader . . . was determined not to modify but to obliterate all those standards by which Joyce would have been excluded” (19). She suggests that, for members of the British Union of Fascists, of which Joyce was briefly a part, “life was a boy’s dream” (82). Fascism offers to Joyce a superiority he has not earned and excuses him from the need to accept his shortcomings or the responsibilities he has to the community.

John Amery serves as another useful specimen for West. True to her habit of compiling deep biographical historicization of each individual’s treachery, she writes that Amery’s story “began years ago in the Augustan age, among children of promise” (212). She goes on to recount the meeting of John Amery’s father and the young Winston Churchill. This anecdote establishes the national privileges into which Amery was born and emphasizes Amery’s personal responsibility for the path his life took, in keeping with the view of the individual as rational and self-determining. She describes Amery’s childhood, in which he found himself often in trouble. West says of his adolescent misdeeds, “one can but say hopefully that he will not always be fifteen. This is, however, not necessarily true” (215). Just as with Joyce, the problem with Amery is that he does not grow up. West connects his immaturity to his fascist turning. Outside of England, Amery and others like him were seduced into working with fascist states “by greed,

love of adventure, and the hope of being accorded a value, which, till then, all societies had denied them. John Amery was irresistibly attracted by the hope of attaining this triple gratification which had always been denied him by his loving but so conventional family” (217). The case of Amery is slightly different from that of William Joyce, but West argues that the two men were drawn to fascism by a similar fatal immaturity.

Throughout her account, West repeatedly associates the themes of immaturity and stagnation with the problems of treason and fascist leanings. In many ways, her argument is compelling, seeming both a logical and necessary way of thinking about fascism on a personal level. She disparages those who wanted to see Joyce pardoned as siding with moral arbitrariness and anarchy, in opposition to a system in which individuals must be held accountable for their actions and their own fates. In fact, West’s treatment of Joyce resonates with Hannah Arendt’s analysis in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, in which Arendt describes Eichmann as “a failure in the eyes of his social class, of his family,” and who saw in the fascist movement an opportunity to transcend the bonds of normal society (33). The view that the fascists simply deviated from a difficult but navigable path that would have led to their full incorporation into a fulfilling society depends upon the notion that individuals are the rational, self-determining creatures of Enlightenment thought and of the bildungsroman genre. “The moral sense of a man is clairvoyant,” West writes, a powerful reaffirmation of the idealized figure of the liberal individual (184).

West’s privileging of liberalism and reference to one of its classic genres, the bildungsroman, rests on a vision of the individual as rational and self-directed and sees fascism therefore as the result of individuals choosing the wrong path. Complementing this comforting view of the nature and purpose of the individual is a vision of the background into which

individuals logically fit. If fascism and the devastation it brings are the result of a failure on the part of the individual to accept limits and to fit into the social structure in which he finds himself, then that very social structure – with its traditions and its rules – must hold the answer to protecting human rights from being savaged again by fascism. A defense of the nation-state as the safeguard against fascism underlies West’s defense of the conviction of William Joyce. Joyce was Irish by background, American by birth, and never legally a British citizen. However, during the war, while broadcasting for the Nazis, he was in possession of an illegally obtained British passport. Joyce was convicted of treason on the argument that he had owed England loyalty while accepting the protection the passport afforded. His conviction was controversial, however. M.A. Doherty, in *Nazi Wireless Propaganda: Lord Haw-Haw and British Public Opinion in the Second World War*, argues that there would come to be a “quite widespread and even guilty feeling in Britain that Joyce was hanged more for the sake of vengeance than for the sake of justice,” since “he wasn’t British and never had been” (1). For West, however, “the doom of our time is woven through” the efforts on the part of Joyce’s lawyers to argue semantically that he was not guilty of treason (59). She notes that Joyce “would have walked out of court scot free if society had been conducted on lines as arbitrary as is imagined by those who are Fascist, who desire . . . government by the minority on a non-contractual basis” (22). For West, the conviction is important, because Joyce is not just guilty of abandoning one nation to whom he was merely legally attached for another that happened to operate differently. His treason itself was a fascist act, the forsaking not only of the particular community that had sheltered him but of the very commitment to that most liberal of ideas, the social contract. In response to the legal quibbling over what constitutes treason, West offers her own definition: “It is the betrayal of familiars to strangers . . . of those to whom one is bound by real interests to those who, being foreign, will

treat one as a foreigner and maybe, in the end turn against one” (276) By connecting this idea of the betrayal of familiars to the term “treason,” an act of disloyalty to a nation-state, West situates not just any community, but the national community, as the natural outgrowth of human empathy and attachment, the harbor of the social contract, the protector of human rights.

West justifies a commitment to the virtues of nationalism throughout her writing about the war. In “Greenhouse with Cyclamens I,” a 1946 essay covering the Nuremberg trials, nationality infuses her analyses of the key players. The prosecutors are distinguished by country of origin, none privileged over the others. West notes with amusement that, in their postwar leisure activities, “the Allies reacted according to their histories. The French, many of whom had been in concentration camps, rested and read . . . The Americans gave those huge parties on which the type was fixed in pioneering days” (10). During the trial itself, she says of the defendants that “not the slightest trace of their power and their glory remained, none of them looked as if he ever could have exercised any valid authority” (4). For West, the Nazis on trial are deviants who tried to sidestep national traditions and exert an unnatural authority, now facing judgement before the representatives of the Allied nations, the figures of legitimate power. As with the Joyce trial, their fascism is interwoven with their abandonment of the nation. West furthermore defends her belief in the nation in a 1952 letter to Lionel Trilling. She addresses his critique of her work: “. . . in a review of *The Meaning of Treason* you alleged that the ideal of nationality on which I lay so much stress is an outmoded superstition laid aside by all reasonable people.” Chastising Trilling gently as someone unfamiliar with the realities of postwar Europe, West relates her experiences with “exiles and refugees.” She argues that, “in none of them has the idea of internationalism and universality had any strength, it was nationalism, the pride of a people in their own country and in their own culture, which kept them in a state to have an

international use and universal value” (*Selected Letters* 259). West expresses in no uncertain terms the vital role the nation plays at this critical moment in history.

West turns to Europe’s heritage of Enlightenment ideals to guide her socially activist writing about the treason trials. However, she does not find that liberal ideals and the literary forms attached to them are sufficient to tell the stories or uncover the secret meanings behind twentieth century events. Though I have argued she draws on the logic of the bildungsroman, West does not address the problems of fascism and treason by writing a novel. Though fiction would perhaps allow for a cleaner mapping out of the ideals to which she is so committed, West’s investment in confronting contemporary events leads her to a thorough and detailed journalistic approach. However, the journalistic form of *The Meaning of Treason* is often antithetical to the task of discovering (or even imposing) moral meaning on history. The form the text takes is more adapted to a fragmented and inconsistent worldview that often discredits West’s own driving narrative tying together individual development, national loyalty, and fascism.

West’s role as reporter as well as author requires her to attend to the messy details of real lives and events, which in particular troubles her vision of the nation. In *The Meaning of Treason*’s more abstract moments, the nation is a perfect and untroubled entity to which the individual owes loyalty, within which the individual can find salvation. However, this is an image of modern Britain that often cannot be sustained. In a moment of candid observation, West looks around the courtroom and notes that it “was by now in a state that would have puzzled those Americans who think of the British as a comfortably homogenous people” (15). When represented by actual people assembled in a courtroom, “the British” reveal themselves to

be an incoherent group, composed of divergent opinions and belief systems as well as various ethnic backgrounds.

West's journalistic attention to the case of William Joyce, a man with Irish heritage being tried for betraying England, also inevitably encounters the sticky matter of British imperialism and the challenges it poses to an untroubled adoration of the nation-state and what it can offer to the individual. Jed Esty argues that imperialism created a "tension between the open-ended temporality of capitalism and the bounded, countertemporality of the nation," fatally disrupting the bildungsroman's nationally-bound stories of development (*Unseasonable Youth* 5). West finds that it complicates the storyline she constructs around Joyce and the other traitors. Referring to Joyce's decision in youth to join the Royal Irish Constabulary, West comments that "these native Irish who had made that choice often felt a love of England which struck English people as excessive and theatrical," and goes on to conclude that "to the end of his life this love of an obsolete England persisted in William Joyce, to be rebuffed by contemporary England" (16,17). Even while so much of her argument rests upon an impassioned appeal to love of country (and specifically to the love of England), when West looks into Joyce's personal history and finds such a love, she expresses amazement, regarding it as "excessive" and incommensurate with the realities of the nation. West goes on to claim that:

It was this love, slanting across time, which made him a Fascist. He had been brought up to believe in an England who held Ireland by force, and felt betrayed when Home Rule was given. This meant an actual, material betrayal. The family had to leave Ireland, like many other loyalist Irishmen. Thus William Joyce found himself exiled from his real motherland, Ireland, which his blood must have

loved, and confined in England, for love of which he had betrayed Ireland, and which showed no gratitude for that sacrifice (18).

The central narrative of *The Meaning of Treason* holds that the traitors made a simple and morally disastrous choice to abandon a well-defined and compassionate community. However, this narrative, while often compelling, becomes tortured when West tries to apply it to a detailed study of William Joyce. His roots are in Ireland, the land “his blood must have loved.” His first failure, in West’s eyes, is the preference for an imperialistic England over his home country. West argues that it is this love of the might of imperial England that drives him towards fascism. However, she also insists that he is guilty of treason against England, to which she elsewhere argues he never should have felt any allegiance in the first place. Adopting a journalistic form, West must adopt also the skepticism towards sweeping, optimistic narratives that comes with it. A combined commitment to nationalism and to detailing the realities of Joyce’s situation forces West’s analysis into strange convolutions.

If West’s dedication to the social harmony the nation-state can offer does not always hold up under the pressure of her obligations as a reporter, neither does her assertion that fascism is primarily a failure of individual development and national loyalty. While the narrative of failed maturation is compelling to a point in the cases of William Joyce and John Amery, West stretches it to its breaking point when trying to put it to a wider application. The last section of the book is largely dedicated to British soldiers who were tempted by the Nazis out of POW camps and is titled “The Children.” In West’s description, the members of the British Free Corps – a unit of the German army recruited from POW camps – were “the children among the traitors, the ones who thought like children, and felt like children, and were treacherous as children are, without malice, only because someone was giving away sweetmeats or because the

whole gang was chasing the dog” (245). Their treasonous acts, West argues, are caused also by a lack of adult thinking, only of a slightly different nature than the immaturity that doomed Joyce and Amery. One of the reasons this assessment is problematic is the fact that many of the individuals she refers to in this section in fact *were* children, such as Kenneth Edward, who was fifteen when he was captured by the Nazis (245). West qualifies her argument by gesturing to the fact that there were other very young men who did not go astray in the face of danger or temptation. However, the case of the young POWs is so clearly different from the case of those like Joyce and Amery, who made very intentional decisions to work for the Nazis, and West’s argument is less compelling where they are concerned. West’s analysis of fascism as the product of wrong individual choices and national disloyalty frays further when she turns her attention to the larger historical forces at work and considers fascism as a broad sociopolitical movement (which she does only glancingly). She notes that Joyce “had nothing in common with the rank and file of fascism, which was drawn from the mindless, traditionless, possessionless urban populations that are the children of the machine.” These masses, West argues, “will work to put into power any men who say that they will be able to conjure up . . . goods by command. Such simplicity is infantile, and must be tainted by the first ugly brutishness of the infantile mind” (188). West’s connection of the fascist impulse to childishness, while compelling when applied to individuals, begins to feel vague and insufficient when applied to whole populations. Here an apt evaluation of the personal failures of the traitors warps into an upper-class paternalism that is also somewhat present in her discussion of the young POWs, most of whom are drawn from working-class backgrounds. The text’s argument about how the subject of the individual should be approached in the wake of the war is therefore caught in a double bind, unable to let go of

traditional liberal ideas about individual development and unable to reconcile those ideas completely with historical realities.

*The Meaning of Treason* is therefore a text divided against itself. West's message about the salvific qualities of the nation-state threads its way uneasily through a work of reportage that frequently contradicts this message. The question that remains is why the text maintains its contradictions, why West cannot seem either to reject the nationalism that is challenged by her historical analysis or to transcend it in favor of some less questionable answer to fascism and the human rights problem. I argue that the journalistic form of *The Meaning of Treason* and the liberal, nationalist narrative it attempts to put forth do not only rub against and conflict with each other, but that their commingling results in a revelation about a key difficulty of grounding rights in the mid-century. *The Meaning of Treason* cannot resolve or rise above its contradictions because it tentatively succeeds in performing a crucial task of human rights theorizing. West's study locates in the nation-state a grounds for human identity, a wellspring of truth, justice, and meaning that is, from West's historical standpoint, a necessary foundation for human rights. The text manages to make of the nation not only a site of bonding and a convenient political body, but a kind of semi-divine organism. *The Meaning of Treason* is a jumble of incompatible ideologies from one perspective. But in another way, it is precisely when West's idealism meets the momentous events she describes that her fantasy of the nation becomes possible.

The uneasy marriage of a narrative logic borrowed from the idealized bildungsroman and a description of the thorny realities of the treason trials – while paradoxical on the surface – ultimately allows for the formulation of the nation as a quasi-religious entity. The structuring logic of the book's central argument is not new. By the 1940s, liberal ideals of the individual and the nation were well established (if not untroubled) in Western society. However, as West herself

emphasizes, her subject matter *is* something new. William Joyce, she says, “was something new in the history of the world” (3). Joyce is the perfect specimen of a modern type, “a human being whose character lies limned before the eye with the particularity of an anatomical drawing, so that it can be comprehended as never before, and judged” (188). The case of William Joyce is not only the story of an individual but a profound moment of historical judgement. For West, the postwar moment of the treason trials is one of those “lapses in time when the present and the past are not joined,” when order and justice have been lost or suspended and it remains to be seen if and how they will be found again. West is intent on providing the connective tissue and bringing judgement to bear on Joyce and the other fascists. West’s analysis of Joyce as an individual who faltered in his path to determination and shook off the traditional bounds of the nation-state for the glamor of fascism combines with the story of Joyce accused of betraying the English nation and tried by that nation in an historic event that will decide whether or not justice will be restored. The looming significance of the trial elevates the failed-bildungsroman narrative to a tale of damnation where salvation was possible, and raises the nation to the status of the divine. Rather than just a failure of proper development, West often speaks of treason as a process of being led astray spiritually, tempted away from a godlike source of truth. She refers to national loyalty at one point as a naturally developing “faith.” The traitors “felt themselves lost because they had betrayed it, and . . . they looked up to these men who had been true to it as, according to ancient cosmogonies, the damned look up at the happy in heaven” (297). West uses this spiritual language at other moments to describe what has happened to the traitors. Introduced to fascism in Britain, William Joyce “was led into temptation” (71). In arguing that he was guilty of treason even if his broadcasts did not sway a single soul, West insists that “the offence was . . . that the Judas hidden in a man’s bosom should have been shown coming out of his hiding and pretending

to prophesy,” that he should have tried to tempt others away from the true faith. Those who worked for the Nazis “had been battered by huge, irrational waves, tides obeying the moon of Hell” (111). John Amery was possessed by an “inhabiting devil” (225). West repeatedly sees the betrayal of the nation as the abandonment of truth in favor of following false prophets.

The liberal notion of the individual finding freedom and the full expression of the personality within the nation-state warps and deepens into a view of the nation-state as the metaphysical underpinning of society, making it clear why West cannot forgo nationalism as the basis for human rights in favor of the universalism that will shortly be seen as the direction of modern human rights thinking. She says of Joyce that his ideology “frankly admitted the international character of fascism, which makes a man ready to be traitor to his country . . . and loses its dynamic power if it does not act by and through this readiness for treachery” (89). For West, “international” becomes synonymous with “fascist.” The very concept of internationalism is sacrilegious because it requires truth to be located outside of the nation. This deep mistrust of internationalism is not limited to *The Meaning of Treason*. Referencing West’s writing about the Nuremberg trials in “Greenhouse with Cyclamens I,” Lyndsey Stonebridge argues that it is her “faith in the power of the nation-state that underpins West’s sense that Nuremberg failed to become an experience. Nuremberg was a ‘defective composition’ really because ‘it was international, and international law . . . is a mist with the power to make solids as misty as itself’” (41). Whatever the shortcomings of the nation-state, it is a solid substance. Despite the promises of internationalism to overcome the limitations and even the iniquities of the nation, it is a mist, and human rights cannot be grounded in something misty.

*The Meaning of Treason* holds its contradictions together in a fragile balance, not because West is unaware of the splintering to which she subjects her own argument, but because the

conflicting forces at work in the text maintain the mirage of an answer to the human rights problem. The vision of West's more dispassionate reporter's eye, which sees the problems of the nation and potential falseness of its promises, could tear apart the liberal nationalism she wants to defend. However, her attention to the urgency of the historical moment can also prop up a commitment to ideals that are so obviously troubled. Carl Rollyson concludes that West's meticulous defense of Joyce's conviction is a struggle against herself, that "a part of her also believed that the individual has a right to throw off allegiance . . . Rebecca concedes at the end of *The Meaning of Treason* that there is a case for the traitor and that all men should have a drop of treason in their blood" (244). West is not unconscious of the incongruities in her argument, but she is determined not to let them undermine her project of seeking social justice. For West, giving in to the contradictions that trouble an understanding of her historical moment would be akin to those who would see William Joyce walk free due to a lack of agreement about the precise meaning of the law, "thus being assured that life was moral nonsense" (65). Meanings for human existence must be found despite and even within the ideological and historical conundrums that plague the twentieth century.

#### Rex Warner and the Re-embrace of Tradition

Rex Warner also views his writing as a means of understanding and combatting the underlying causes behind the fascist movement. Though *The Aerodrome* and *The Meaning of Treason* explore their social worlds through different literary forms, the common commitment of West and Warner to discovering the ills of their society and proposing a cure leads both writers down strikingly similar pathways and presents them with similar possibilities and dilemmas. Although *The Meaning of Treason* is a sprawling journalistic analysis of wartime events and *The*

*Aerodrome* is a work of allegorical fiction, as flat and simplistic as *Treason* is multilayered and complex, Warner's novelistic search for meaning in the mid-century is also largely shaped by the push and pull of inherited liberal ideals and more current modernist sensibilities. As with West, Warner's choice of form is motivated by the need to represent and interpret large-scale historical movements. Perceiving his society as poised between the stable traditions of the past and the emerging dangers of the present moment, Warner constructs a parable in which an old-fashioned village and a futuristic aerodrome stand in for the English nation and the fascist state, allowing complex, abstract, and fluid social phenomena to be compressed and easily examined. This allegorical form lends itself to an argument concerning the state of twentieth century society. Like West, Warner argues that the nation is the natural backdrop to human existence and the source of rights. *The Aerodrome* is also a narrative that is constructed with the purpose of naturalizing nation-state supremacy. Warner establishes the contrasting images of the village – timeless and organic – with the aerodrome – futuristic, unnatural, and encroaching slowing upon the terrain of the village – to serve as a parable of the conflict between liberal nationalism and the rise of fascism. The allegory of the village and the aerodrome allows Warner to position the nation, represented by the village, as the natural and obvious setting of human life. The novel then tells a traditional coming-of-age story in which its central character, Roy, a young man of the village, is first tempted by the appeals of the aerodrome before reconciling with the life of the village. As in *The Meaning of Treason*, *The Aerodrome* presents its driving narrative as simply a process of revelation; the novel follows its hero on a journey that unfolds naturally as he navigates the false promises of the fascist state to arrive finally at the obviously superior liberal nation-state. However, it is also possible to perceive the artifice of this often compelling narrative. Warner's interpretation of his historical reality draws heavily on the conventions of

fiction, and he, like West, cannot entirely smooth away the some of the limitations and inadequacies of the nation.

Although not taking on the task of reporting from the front lines of twentieth century crises like Rebecca West, Rex Warner was also committed to pursuing a social agenda through his writing. Warner, though a socialist during the prewar years, ultimately shared with West a desire to transcend political movements in order to discover deeper and more constant forces at work in the social world. Throughout his career, he endeavored to articulate a guiding philosophy for the troubled twentieth century and remained confident in the socially transformative power of literature, even if his ideological and literary goals were never fully realized. In his essay “On Freedom of Expression,” Warner outlines his ambitious view of the role of literature: “This is what may be called the political task of literature – to hold the mirror up to nature, so show men how they live and what is meant by their own words and manners, to investigate everything under the sun, to retain the tradition of the past and to explore the future.” For a writer, Warner argues, “his view of individuals must be closer and more intimate than the view taken by statesmen; his estimate of general principles must be wider and more far-reaching than is possible for a particular legislator” (160-161). This reflection on the task of the writer reveals Warner’s own view of the intersection of literature and human rights, even if he does not use those terms. Literature, he argues, has the unique power to peer under the surface of the human world, to understand human nature and to preserve and advance human culture in ways beyond the shallow and restricted reach of the law and its representatives. Warner was furthermore committed to the search for the form of literature that could perform this grand revelatory function in a way particularly appropriate to the midcentury moment. In *The Will to Believe: Novelists of the Nineteen-Thirties*, Richard Johnstone argues that, for Warner, “the

major problem was the appropriate choice of novel form to express the relationship . . . between individual and society” (46). Like *The Aerodrome*, Warner’s earlier novels largely blend realism with elements of allegory. *The Wild Goose Chase* (1937) is the highly symbolic tale of an epic journey that attempts to define the ideal hero for the modern age. *The Professor* (1938) stages a confrontation between communism and liberalism as the ideology more adapted to meet the fascist challenge, signaling a temporary compromise with the far left in Warner’s shifting perspective. As John Coombes argues in “The Novels of Rex Warner,” the novels “bear witness to the exigencies, in Western Europe, of the compromise of revolutionary potential with established liberalism in a problematic common project of antifascism” (222).

While Warner’s earlier work might have produced an uneasy union between traditional liberalism and more radical ideas, Warner settled more firmly on a commitment to liberal tenets around the outbreak of the war and after the Moscow Trials had resulted in widespread disillusionment with communism. By the 1940s, Warner had come to be skeptical of revolutionary impulses, while maintaining his belief that society was in a state of crisis that could and should lead to change and advancement. Like West, he turned to the traditions of the past to serve as steady guides for the future. In his 1946 essay “The Cult of Power,” Warner expresses a view of revolution as motivated by authentic material deprivations and injustices:

One may notice the rationalist revolt against religion, the socialist revolt against the hierarchy of the state, the revolt of writers and artists of the ‘ivory tower’ school against society at large . . . They all had in common, like most revolts, the conviction that they were aiming at a kind of freedom from various forms of constraint that were hampering the human spirit . . . And in support . . . came the stark facts of poverty, unemployment and war to convince even the least

theoretical minds that something was wrong with the whole system of ideas on which their fathers relied (20).

Warner's cataloging of revolts expresses a certain fatigue with the notion of overthrowing the traditions of the past. These revolutions were understandable responses to the obvious and pressing problems of the moment but were ultimately misguided, ineffectual, and even dangerous. Warner comes to a similar conclusion to the one West reaches in *The Meaning of Treason*: fascism itself results from the rebellion against the structures of traditional communities. Warner argues that "Hitler and others all over Europe . . . had inherited the legacy of the moral anarchists; they, too, had revolted against the past and yet felt the insecurity, hated the dissipation of the present" ("Cult" 25). To Warner, "the only reply to the cult of individual or racial power and violence is the actual practice of general justice, mercy, brotherhood, and understanding" ("Cult" 28). In other words, the horrors of fascism can be counteracted by a re-embrace of a liberal code for human behavior and co-existence and of the qualities of community – law and loyalty – generally associated with the liberal nation-state.

Although concerns about the rise of fascism appear in Warner's earlier novels, *The Aerodrome* is his most comprehensive effort to tell the story of the fascist movement. Like West, he endeavors not only to attack fascism but also to understand it as a social disease and propose a cure. To analyze the nature of fascism and explain how it spread through Western society, Warner turns to the Enlightenment models that he sees as most reliable for understanding the relationship between individual and society. In this model, the individual is rational and autonomous and develops within the bounds of the community. The central narrative of *The Aerodrome* develops along the lines of the classic literary vehicle of Enlightenment thought, the *bildungsroman*. At the beginning of the novel, the hero Roy is at a point of dissatisfaction and

uncertainty in his life in the village. He has been raised by the village Rector, but is soon to learn that this man might not be his real father. He must embark on the path of maturation and the search for origins and belonging that is characteristic of the bildungsroman. At the dinner party that opens the novel, the Rector says of Roy that “his character, though undeveloped, seems likely to develop along sterling lines” (27). Roy then must undergo a process of deciding the lines along which his character will develop. He faces challenges similar to those of the traditional hero of the bildungsroman – establishing himself in appropriate relationship to family and other community members, giving up the fantastic desires of youth to reconcile himself to the realities of adulthood.

Like the hero of a bildungsroman, he longs for society to offer a perfect reflection of his own desires and to take the form of a destiny waiting to be fulfilled. The uncertainty of his birth is a setback, but Roy, narrating in retrospect, notes that “at this time I still felt that for me at least life must inevitably be good” (92). Life in the village, however, continues to disappoint. It is characterized by chaos and instability. Its leaders cling to the feeble authority of religion, its crowds are emotional, its public spaces are prone to scenes of drunken brawling, and, worst of all, its people are fragile and mortal. Despite its stark contrast to the old and organic community of the village, the aerodrome – both as a physical structure and an attitude – creeps slowly into the spaces and life of the village, with the brash and arrogant airmen ultimately asserting an unnatural dominance over the traditional authorities of the village. The commencement of the aerodrome’s more overt takeover of the village is the sudden and unglamorous death of the Rector. At his funeral, the hero notes that “with a dead body in the upper room . . . both the presence and the certainty of death were never . . . far from our minds . . . Nor did it seem to anyone that there was anything noble or sanctified about that presence and that influence” (77).

The only certainty of life in the village is death's seemingly certain power to eradicate anything "noble and sanctified." Fleeing the specter of death, the hero enters into a love affair with Bess, a young woman of the village, and "fancied that in her love there was some security" (113). However, this quickly turns to frustration when he discovers that Bess does not return his affection, a possibility he had not imagined: "I fancied that her ideas and feelings must be, by some law of nature, not unlike my own" (114). The hero fears at this point in the story that he will be unable to locate in the society of the village either a stable framework for his own assured development or a mirror held up to his deepest desires.

The coming-of-age challenges and frustrations of the hero of *The Aerodrome* are familiar. However, unlike the heroes of the bildungsroman, Warner's young man faces a uniquely twentieth century obstacle to his proper development: the allure of the fascist state. In the structure of the novel, fascism can be seen as a temptation away from completing a process of personal development. At the point where the hero struggles to come to terms with the imperfections of his society, the aerodrome intervenes to offer an alternative. Roy becomes one of the airmen who once disgusted him, seduced by the promise of the Air Vice-Marshal that the aerodrome can offer to its young men the opportunity "to escape the bondage of time, to obtain mastery over yourselves, and thus over your environment" (206). The aerodrome offers to deliver something previously only the subject of fantasy: the transcendence of the restrictions that society and the course of ordinary life place on individuals.

While Roy falls to temptation, he eventually realizes the mistakes and miscalculations he has made. After his experiences at the aerodrome, Roy turns back to the village at the end of the novel with a new perspective on the kind of society it contains and what it can offer him:

In contrast with the villagers, with women, with clergymen, and squires we [Airmen] were simple, carefree, and direct, having made ourselves the servants of a single will and imagination, constituting as a result an instrument that could shape like clay, cut through like butter the vague, amorphous, drunken, unwieldy, and unsatisfactory life that was outside our organization . . . Yet I began to see that this life, in spite of its drunkenness and its inefficiency, was wider and deeper than the activity in which we were constricted by the iron compulsion of the Air-Marshall's ambition (289).

Warner's hero eventually comes to appreciate the richness of the village-nation, his native community, on which he depends and which should be embraced despite its vagaries and limitations. Finally completing the process of maturation interrupted by his seduction into the fascist movement, Roy grasps the flaws of the aerodrome and returns to the village with a new, more adult understanding. Using the bildungsroman plot to understand the individual, the nature of society, and how the two fit together, Warner crafts a narrative that suggests the fall into fascism is the result of a failure of personal development within the community. Like the men on trial in *The Meaning of Treason*, Warner's hero experiences frustrations with the imperfections and obligations attached to his traditional community. He violates the social contract through which he owes loyalty to the society of his birth in favor of the new social powers and licenses promised by the fascist movement. The historical traitors are tragically beyond redemption, but in Warner's fictional account, the hero eventually finds his way back onto the right path, offering a novelistic guide for how society could be saved from fascism through a sober and restrained commitment to traditional liberal ideals of how individuals should relate to their communities.

Roy's storyline, drawn from traditional liberal models, relates Warner's central message about the connection between individual development and fascism. Warner is committed to imposing moral meaning on the chaos of the wartime moment. However, aligned with his authorial purpose to "investigate everything under the sun," and the sense that the midcentury is a pivotal moment, he is also committed to a truthful and thorough assessment of the major historical forces at work in society. To this end, he fits his tidy bildungsroman narrative into an allegory designed to represent the modern threat of the fascist movement and the traditional alternative, the English nation. The novel begins shortly after the Air Force has begun its occupation of the village. Roy notes that the aerodrome "seemed a visitor from another world" (16). The Air Force is alien to the village, and seemingly without any authority other than brute strength, this institution usurps the sovereignty of the village, adopting an attitude of brazen disrespect towards the traditional community. The officers of the Air Force harass the villagers, and the institution demands the surrender of their land. The villagers come to live under the shadow of the aerodrome. Furthermore, the frightening ideology of the Air Force leaders strongly resembles fascism. The Air Force, as Roy tells the reader, "constituted no revolutionary party actuated by humanitarian ideals, but seemed to be an organization manifestly entitled by its own discipline, efficiency, and will to assume supreme power" (249). The Air Force is a representation of Warner's understanding of fascism as a hollow revolution, an overthrow of historical traditions lacking any legitimate purpose or noble intention and not underwritten by any authority other than its own arbitrary ability to grasp power.

If the aerodrome encapsulates the fear of the spread of fascist ideology (and perhaps an invading fascist power), then the occupied village must naturally represent the English nation-state, as it stood in 1940, threatened by the rise of fascist states. Marina Mackay, in "Anti-State

Fantasy and the Fiction of the 1940s,” interprets the village as a pastoral fantasy of England, arguing that “this is what constitutes Englishness, the manor house and the church . . .” (35). If the village is meant to represent England specifically, it also functions as a representative of the English nation more generally. Like Rebecca West, Warner’s depiction of the nation is focused on the ideas of familiarity and common heritage. Throughout the novel, there are hints of communal identity and action. At the dinner party that opens the novel, Roy converses with a village authority figure and discusses “the prospects of our village cricket XI for the coming season” (23). The village represents itself at an agricultural show, which brings together “farmers and labourers with . . . county gentry,” united across classes to show off their collective accomplishments (55). One of the village’s landmarks is the pub, a site of communal bonding for its citizens. Entering after the death of his father the Rector, which had been first caused and then trivialized by members of the Air Force, Roy finds a nurturing atmosphere of shared grief and respect among those who know him: “Those who noticed me stopped talking and one or two came forward and shook hands with me . . . and I saw in their faces . . . more affection and respect for the dead man than anything else which I had seen that day” (109). Like the nation, the village affords to its citizens opportunities for self-fulfillment and recognitions before the community. Encouraged by his family, Roy can be confident of his “excellent chance of obtaining a high place in the examination for the Civil Service,” an opportunity to develop his talents as well as fulfill a social obligation (54). Roy reflects that “the authority of squire and parson in the village . . . had been wisely and tenderly exercised” (82). The villagers must submit to authority, but their rulers are reasonable and their governance is not arbitrary.

The novel’s allegorical form allows Warner to set fascism and the traditional nation side by side and examine them, to present what he sees as the choice facing the citizens of modern

society. However, the allegorical story meant to demonstrate the nation and the rise of fascism as oppositional forces between which the individual must choose, while at times illuminating, is not an unqualified success. Although Warner's account is fictional, he shares Rebecca West's commitment to an honest depiction of wartime circumstances. Though Warner is dedicated to seeing the nation as the ideal community and fascism as a threat to its existence, there is also an impulse in *The Aerodrome* to portray realistically both the nation-state and its relationship to fascism. Warner's own writing therefore introduces some skepticism into the novel's idealistic message of twentieth century salvation. Despite the stark differences the novel asserts between the humble village and the imposing aerodrome, both institutions occupy the same geography. The aerodrome clearly represents the rise of fascism as a force that is alien to the life of the village, but the Air Force does not seem to represent a foreign state. In *Culture in Camouflage: War, Empire, and Modern British Literature*, Patrick Deer argues that the novel "slowly subverts and parodies the propaganda of Deep England and the People's War, which projects the heroic image of British citizenry and military unified and fully mobilized to defend a rural English landscape under siege" (84-85). Deer sees the novel as indicating the lack of unity between the British people and the military, but his interpretation also suggests that the intrusion of fascist sentiment into traditional British life does not require the invasion of a foreign government. The ideals of "Deep England" and the militaristic sadism of fascist systems can arise from the same society.

The village and the aerodrome, though visibly very different institutions, occupy the same landscape. Similarly, Roy's storyline, though it is overtly about the journey to escape the temptation of the aerodrome for the safety of the village, ultimately uncovers the interrelatedness of the two. Roy has been raised by the Rector and his wife, major authority symbols of the

village, who admit to him early in the novel that they are only his adoptive parents. After learning that the Rector is not his father, Roy overhears the Rector confessing to the youthful murder of a friend and romantic rival. Both the revelation that the Rector is not his father and that this man was driven by a passionate jealousy to murder are a part of Roy's rejection of the messiness of village life. He then encounters the authoritative Air Vice-Marshal and the Flight-Lieutenant, representatives of the Air Force. After joining the Air Force, Roy puts aside the aspirations and role models of his past. During training, Roy notes that, "if I wished to imagine a person in whose footsteps I would be proud to tread, I would set the figure of the Air Vice-Marshal, a figure of greater strength, more solid purpose, and more extensive power" (193). As the novel reaches its conclusion, however, Roy learns that the Air Vice-Marshal is the friend that the Rector only thought he had killed. Before the Rector attempted to kill him, the Air Vice-Marshal impregnated the Rector's wife. He is therefore Roy's actual father. It is also revealed that the Flight-Lieutenant is Roy's brother. The purpose of this convoluted drama may be to illustrate that the aerodrome's freedom from the messiness of traditional life is an illusion, but this is a blade that cuts both ways. An argument that the fascist Air Force is really not so different from the nation implies that the nurturing, wholesome nation is perhaps not so different from the fascist institution. The village and the aerodrome – and the citizens of each – might be meaningful distinct, but they share an origin, and the borders between them are rather permeable. This fact contributes to the trouble the novel has with upholding the nation as the ideal that Warner wants to construct. Roy's journey is complete when he realizes that the village/nation is preferable to the fascist aerodrome, even though the aerodrome initially seems to run along lines that are smoother, more efficient, and more logical compared to the chaos of the village. Warner's point is that Roy, and the twentieth century person, must accept the limitations of life

within a traditional community and the falseness of the promise of fascism. However, the novel ultimately paints a more complex portrait of the relationship between the nation and the fascist movement, troubling Roy's epiphany at the end of the novel that the life of the village is "wider and deeper" than that of the aerodrome. When the Air Vice-Marshal pleads with him to reconsider his return to village life, Roy "contemplated as he bade me the long record of crime and deception into which I had been born and had lived, but saw in that no reason to change my mind. If there had been guilt in the village, there had been guilt also at the aerodrome, for the two worlds were not exclusive" (328). Roy – and Warner – offer a rather more dispassionate defense of the nation than could be desired.

Critics have noted the dissatisfying conclusion to the novel. Richard Johnstone notes that "the conclusion of *The Aerodrome* is a kind of elegy, a sad rejection not only of the 'old order' but of the 'new order' as well." (59). John Coombes reads the end of the novel in a similar way, seeing Warner as effecting "a kind of vapid social and political reconciliation between the 'traditionalism' of the village and the 'modernism' of the Air Force – between, in effect, feudalism and fascism" (230). Rather than a compromise between liberalism and fascism or an abandonment of the task of finding meaning in the universe, I see Warner as unwilling to give up a central belief in the promise of the nation despite allowing his own writing to reveal the potential shakiness of that belief. Warner's study of fascism and nationalism contains contradictory elements. In particular, it struggles to maintain a separation between the nation-state and the fascist state and an argument that the community of people that comprises the nation is fundamentally superior to the community of people that forms the fascist organization.

However, I argue that Warner uses his own narrative's contradictions to construct a comforting illusion about the nation. As the hero of *The Aerodrome* frankly admits, there does

not seem to be a clear dichotomy between the activities of members of the village and of the aerodrome; both the villagers and the Air Force recruits display problematic behavior. However, Warner's allegorical representations of the nation and the fascist state still allow him to portray the nation as a source of truth and meaning and fascism as a kind of false prophet. The novel accomplishes this by thinking about "community" as potentially detached from the collective of individuals it contains. Nations as well as political movements are broad, abstract, and complex, but Warner's allegory reduces "England" and "fascism" to discrete physical spaces – a village and an aerodrome – facilitating a vision of the nation and the fascist state as objects in and of themselves, rather than collections of people or the invisible currents of ideas and belief systems.

While the village and the Air Force might exchange individuals, the allegory allows Warner to describe them as separate entities and to portray the nation as fundamentally superior. Warner very intentionally depicts the village/nation as rising organically from the earth. Standing at the edge of the village, Roy looks out to see "meadows . . . drawn up like a blanket into folds and creases to cover the shoulders of the further hills, and here and there one can see the big tufts of woods . . . There are no villages in sight . . . But on our side of the river, away on my right hand, I hear the Church clock striking eleven" (15). The village is tucked away in a bend in the river, with only the tolling of the church bell to give away its existence. The aerodrome on the other hand consists of "long hangars" and "depots for the storage of arms," man-made, quickly built structures that were "so disposed and camouflaged that even from quite close at hand they appeared merely as rather curious modifications of the natural contours of our hills" (17-18). The village/nation is something organic and timeless, while the fascist aerodrome is only constructed by human hands, temporary and fragile though it may appear formidable. The Air Vice Marshall tells his recruits, "Your purpose – to escape the bondage of time, to obtain mastery over

yourselves, and thus over your environment – must never waver” (206). The fascist Air Force is ultimately hollow, not only because of the viciousness of its beliefs, but because it is constructed by modern humans, with the purpose of rendering modern humans independent of anything but themselves.

The people of the village might be fragile and imperfect, but they are only the temporary inhabitants of a community that is a product of the natural world, timeless and time-tested. As in *The Meaning of Treason*, the individual’s journey towards or away from the nation is almost similar to a religious quest in which the hero must come to accept the true faith. The novel opens with a description of Roy before he has abandoned the village, “lying in the marsh . . . my face in the mud and the black mud beginning to ooze through the spaces between the fingers of my outstretched hand” (13). Roy confronts the condition of being a villager. He is earthbound and frustrated with the limitations that his life in the community imposes on him. He is soon tempted away from the village into a society where he can escape the gravity of village life in a very literal way. This temptation ultimately occurs during a church service. During the Rector’s funeral, Roy “listened intently to the words of the funeral service, for their beauty and even their harshness seemed to soothe; but from time to time I found my attention distracted by the straight figure of the man in uniform” (102). During this traditional religious service, Roy turns toward the allure of the Air Vice- Marshal. However, it is not Christianity that Roy abandons here but the community of the village. His abandonment is couched in the terms of a fall from religious grace, wherein he decides to depend on himself rather than subordinating himself to something larger. This scene reinforces the way that the village/nation takes the place of religious faith in the novel. Roy eventually comes to see the village as offering salvation. As previously noted, the novel does not seem to offer a very satisfying justification of this viewpoint. Johnstone argues

that the novel's conclusion is "an acceptance of the incomprehensibility of the universe, a final acceptance of limitations" (59). However, while Johnstone sees the novel as giving up on the task of understanding the world, his analysis describes an essentially religious worldview. No one religion attempts fully to explain the workings of the universe. Religious faiths only offer a promise that there is a metaphysical underpinning to a seemingly chaotic world and ask their adherents to submit to a design they may not fully understand. At the end of *The Aerodrome*, Roy yields to such a faith, but it is not a mysterious God to which he gives himself over but the nation, a natural and organic community whose individual members may stray but whose ultimate design is always true.

### Conclusion

*The Meaning of Treason* and *The Aerodrome* are suspicious of their own idealism yet unable to let it go completely. West and Warner turn to the only truly complete and substantive ideology available to them – liberal Enlightenment philosophy – to understand their world and propose a way forward from the devastation of the war. Their attention to the messy realities of twentieth century Europe and their modernist perspective often counteract the narratives that West and Warner want to espouse, in which fascism can be avoided by good choices on the part of the individual and the nation can be a shelter for human rights. *The Meaning of Treason* and *The Aerodrome* both ultimately warp Enlightenment privileging of the nation into a view of the nation as an almost divine entity. Both texts recognize that this image of the nation is at least partly illusory but use the various elements that comprise them – the urgency of the treason trials in *Treason* and the allegorical simplicity of *The Aerodrome* – to maintain that illusion, because there is no truly compelling alternative. West and Warner fear to let go of the nation, because it

promises a solid foundation for the establishment of human rights. They see this commitment to a possibly imaginary ideal as preferable to the abandonment of any structuring ideal at all.

## CHAPTER TWO: BARE RIGHTS: HUMAN RIGHTS BEYOND THE NATION- STATE IN ANTI-FASCIST WARTIME FICTION

Whereas Rebecca West and Rex Warner contemplate the nature and origins of fascism as an ideology, other wartime writers turn their attention pointedly to the social consequences of the rise of fascist states. This chapter will focus on three texts that explore conditions in Europe in the tumultuous period immediately preceding the outbreak of World War II: Eric Ambler's spy thriller *Background to Danger*, Phyllis Bottome's novel of anti-fascist propaganda *The Mortal Storm*, and *A Stricken Field*, Martha Gellhorn's semi-autobiographical account of a journalist navigating Prague after the annexation of the Sudetenland. Like *The Meaning of Treason* and *The Aerodrome*, these three texts are part of a body of socially engaged late modernist literature that does not just attack fascist ideologies but sees in the rise of fascism the imperative to re-examine questions that lie at the heart of human rights discourse, interrogating the nature of the individual, the virtues of social bodies and political ideologies, and the presence or absence of metaphysical truths underlying human existence. Like Rebecca West and Rex Warner, Ambler, Bottome, and Gellhorn work within a context in which rights encounter a multi-faceted crisis. Like West and Warner, these writers also create narratives whose purpose is to provide clarity in a moment of chaos and confusion.

However, for these writers the encounter with mass displacement suggests different conclusions about the meaning of the war and a different story about human rights. The writers in this chapter focus on individuals who find themselves isolated and disenfranchised amidst the

degenerating conditions of prewar Europe. *Background to Danger*, *The Mortal Storm*, and *A Stricken Field* follow their solitary heroes on a journey during which they develop into prototypical images of the universal human person during a time when the nation-state as well as other social and political institutions seemed to provide shaky grounding for individual identity. The protagonists of these three texts find empowerment for social activism and heroic deeds, not by appealing to any sense of communal belonging, but by turning inwards to cultivate their own qualities as individuals. They achieve greater freedom for themselves and others by crossing borders and disregarding political categories. Ambler, Bottome, and Gellhorn use strategies of storytelling and character development to craft a certain ideology of human rights. They each use the heroes of their stories to make visible an ideal of the human person who is not dependent on the nation-state or other structures to have shape and meaning. However, these stories from the dawn of the war use the conventions of different kinds of narratives – from the effortless heroism of the spy in the thriller, to the heightened empathy afforded to the individual heroine in the melodramatic novel – to tell these stories and make their morals seem inevitable and obvious. As with *The Meaning of Treason* and *The Aerodrome*, there is a tension in these novels between the easy and compelling narratives they construct to bolster the viability of the universal human person and the actual complexities of the historical moment that creep in around the corners of their stories. Most notably, there is an anxiety inflecting each of these texts that this triumphant image of the human solitary human may ultimately be untenable or inherently imperiled. While the universalist aspirations of these texts are appealing and often convincing, they risk remaining, like the ideals consolidated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, more imagined than fully realized, lacking solid ground on which to grow.

Ambler, Bottome, and Gellhorn see the nation and other institutions and systems that claim to provide meaning and order as mostly empty in their promises and do not attempt any intellectual acrobatics in order to hold them up as bastions for the protection of human rights. Instead, these writers embrace the absence of suprahuman structures of meaning that so troubles West and Warner and seek to recognize the naked humanity of the individual, liberated from the restraints of national or political categories. Their three novels serve as explorations of the consequences for twentieth century belief systems and for literary representation of rejecting a more-than-human source of truth and advancing instead an independent vision of the individual person. The independence from larger systems of meaning the writers in this chapter seek opens up both possibilities and problems. In the absence of suprahuman structures such as religious or nationalistic narratives to provide interpretations and assign values, it falls to the individual to create meaning and order out of the events of history. Furthermore, when no such over-arching structures impress a particular identity on the individual, there appears a potential hollowness at the heart of human rights. The authors in this chapter must confront the question of whether or not it is even possible to disentangle the figure of the human person from national and cultural contexts, and then must contend with the consequences for human rights if such a project is possible.

Regarding the first of these issues, each novel presents a hero or heroine who must negotiate the world unattached to any established system of meaning. By letting the individual be the judge and the storyteller, each novel achieves a clear-eyed perspective of the historical situation and is free to observe and report on the base reality of the distress and injustices suffered by individuals, as well as to represent these individuals as human beings independent of any system that would attempt to prescribe the meaning of their characters or their lives, with the

narrative eye unallied to any particular cause, set of beliefs, or political unit. In this way, Eric Ambler is able to focus on the violence and brutality of fascism and the human cost of the political conflicts in Europe, without placing his loyalty in the hands of his native Britain or choosing between right-wing or left-wing positions. Phyllis Bottome can reveal how the Nazi state does not merely conflict with the ideologies of other nations but conspires to tear apart the lives of individuals and families. Martha Gellhorn can represent the annexation of the Sudetenland as not just a political maneuver but an occasion of intense human suffering. However, *Background to Danger*, *The Mortal Storm*, and *A Stricken Field*, with varying degrees of consciousness, reveal the potential dangers of this autonomous worldview. Ambler and Bottome create characters, who, in their fierce independence of thought, struggle to find the foundation for collective action to combat fascism that their world so desperately needs. Martha Gellhorn's journalist heroine agonizes over the steep responsibility of storytelling and representation and the possible inadequacy of the individual eye and voice.

Furthermore, Ambler, Bottome, and Gellhorn encounter a number of complications with the project of disassociating the human person from traditional systems of meaning. The first complication is a practical and political one. In promoting a human rights imaginary in which the individual is nothing more than an individual and does not derive an identity from traditional political categories, the writers and their characters sometimes face difficulties in detaching the human person from conventional structures, or suffer the potential loss of the benefits that such structures have traditionally provided, from social and civic advantages to the resources for organized social action. Secondly, these texts occasionally struggle to understand the nature of the mechanism by which individuals are incorporated into the state and subjected to its power. In turning away from traditional sociopolitical structures and the ideologies underlying them, the

writers instinctively look to the most seemingly apolitical aspects of the individual – the material reality of the body, the interior and private experiences of day-to-day life – as refuge from transcendental structures that seek to order human existence and prescribe its meaning. However, as influential human rights scholar Giorgio Agamben would later argue, modern democracies dissolve the distinction between *zoe*, the supposedly inviolable natural life of humans, and *bios*, the political existence of the citizen, and the exercise of sovereign power holds the potential to reduce everyone to “bare life,” a state of being in which individuals are both inside and outside the rule of law and essentially without rights. The writers therefore often attempt to locate the freedom of the individual from the power of the state at the very site (the individual’s simple, unadorned existence as a human) at which the modern person is actually most vulnerable. Finally, Ambler, Bottome, and Gellhorn ultimately all, to different degrees and in different ways, experience as an enigma and a challenge the concept of the human person detached from the social and political classifications that have historically defined human identity. Even in novels determined to embrace such an autonomous image of the individual, the writers encounter this hypothetical person as a blank space who is both difficult to envision and potentially exposed to exploitation due to the lack of a stabilizing, rights-granting identity larger than the individual.

The mid-century context of the three novels in this chapter holds an important place in the history of human rights, not as a watershed moment of liberation and enlightenment, but because it encapsulates many of the challenges – philosophical, social, and political – with defining and protecting human rights in the modern world. An experience common to most wartime thinkers was the sense that traditional belief systems underlying human existence had begun to decay, as signaled by the rise of fascist movements. The existentialist movement, which gained ground around the time of the war, responded by embracing the lack of any structure that

transcends human existence and individual choice. Jean-Paul Sartre argues that the desire to rely on a system such as religion to guide one's beliefs, identity, and actions is an example of "bad faith," which is "a lie to oneself . . . the one who practices bad faith is hiding a displeasing truth or presenting as truth a pleasing untruth" (*Being* 48-49). Instead of taking refuge in a comforting but false belief system, it is desirable for individuals to embrace the task of creating meaning and identity for themselves. Sartre's contemporary Albert Camus also casts suspicion on ideologies, social institutions, and other systems that provide individuals with predetermined structures of belief. Echoing Sartre's insistence that meaning must be created on the basis of human judgment, Camus describes the figure of the rebel, an independent thinker who throws off the prescribed order: "the rebel is a man who is on the point of accepting or rejecting the sacred and determined on laying claim to a human situation in which all the answers are human – in other words, formulated in reasonable terms" (*Rebel* 21). Like Ambler, Bottome, and Gellhorn, these philosophers do not see a loss of traditional belief systems as problematic, necessitating either the urgent revival of religious or liberal social structures or the turn to radically new fascistic or totalitarian social orders. Rather, the specter of a metaphysical void is for the existentialists an opportunity to advocate for the independence of human thought and identity. The writers in this chapter can be seen as pursuing a kind of existentialist human rights project, in which the figure of the human person does not need to be subsumed into all-encompassing greater-than-human narratives. However, this existentialist undertow creates tensions in the three novels. Ambler, Bottome, and Gellhorn all, to some degree, embrace the idea that the individual can have authorial power over the creation of meaning, but they must also present their ideas about the human person as pre-existing and eternal.

The independence and innateness of the human person in the universalist doctrine acquires even further complications in these works. One problem confronted by the writers in this chapter and by all universalists is the possible impracticability of universalism as a viable theory. Whereas the ultimate ideal of a universalist doctrine is its ability to visualize human rights independently from traditional structures such as national citizenship, even a universalist belief system is still haunted by the need for some sort of ultimate authority to grant and protect rights, and by the possible absence of such an authority. Whereas the Universal Declaration's aspirational purpose is to free humanity from the tyranny of governments and the narrow scope of national citizenship, it still must imagine rights as stemming from and authorized by some sort of power structure, presumably the United Nations. The language of the Universal Declaration emphasizes actions that will be taken to protect the rights of individuals and underscores the notion that each individual is seen or recognized. However, the document tends to speak in passive voice, highlighting actions and forces while obscuring the subject of these. Article Four proclaims that "No one shall be held in slavery or servitude," and Article Six mandates that "Everyone has the right to recognition everywhere as a person before the law." However, even if these are the ideals and the necessary conditions of human existence, it remains unclear what power will enforce them.

Furthermore, in his influential work *Cosmopolitanism*, philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah elaborates on the unavoidable paradoxes and irresolvable dilemmas of any universalist theory. Appiah's term "cosmopolitanism" is not synonymous with "universalism" as it applies to twentieth century rights thinking, but the two concepts overlap in terms of their ideological aims. Universalism has perhaps only ever been aspirational and implies a totalizing effect, the global dominance of one system of values. On the other hand, cosmopolitanism has often been achieved

and refers more to the intermingling of different cultures (with their attendant values and beliefs), balancing between the possibility of transcendent values and the need to preserve and respect particularities and differences. Though negotiating a proper relationship to cosmopolitanism continues to be a challenge in the contemporary world, the notion of an identity and a system of values detached from the local and particular is an old idea, and one that has seen various manifestations through time. Appiah notes also that the concept of the cosmopolitan is inherently paradoxical, combining the image of the “cosmos,” the universe, with that of the “polis,” the city, the local community (xiv).

Appiah argues that “there are two strands that interweave in the notion of cosmopolitanism. One is that we have obligations to others . . . that stretch beyond those to whom we are related by the ties of kith and kin, or even the more formal ties of a shared citizenship.” The other significant strand in the idea of cosmopolitanism is “that we take seriously the value not just of human life, but of particular human lives . . . People are different, the cosmopolitan knows, and there is much to learn from our differences” (xv). Appiah advocates for “a partial cosmopolitanism,” rather than the extremes of the nationalist “who abandons all foreigners” or “the hard-core cosmopolitan who regards her friends and fellow citizens with icy impartiality” (xvii). Appiah’s thinking addresses many of the ideological complexities at the heart of universal rights’ efforts to recognize the humanity of all beyond the boundaries of citizenship. Appiah suggests that the universal must always be connected to and compromise with the particular, and that the occasions and terms of those compromises must often be determined individually. Significantly, he situates cosmopolitanism in the realm of the philosophical and the cultural, not in the domain of politics and law. Cosmopolitanism is perhaps the superior and more realistic alternative to universalism, but how it can apply to the human

rights discourse on a large scale remains uncertain. Appiah's work draws attention to the complexities of establishing a system of values that can surpass the local and the customary.

Universalism as a cohesive and practicable theory remains vague and amorphous. However, the writers in this chapter are hardly alone in considering it an admirable goal and ideal. On the other hand, the matter of detaching the individual from traditional structures of identity and support, especially the nation-state, has potentially dire consequences when it occurs in practice. The refugee crises of the twentieth century drew attention to the instability surrounding the supposedly straightforward concept of the human person and highlighted some of the perils of the effort to break free of sociopolitical systems like the nation-state. The problem of the refugee or stateless person is a major focal point of twentieth century human rights discourse. In her influential study, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Hannah Arendt points out that there is a paradox in the Enlightenment legacy of human rights, in which humanity is for the first time recognized as sacred in itself, without needing the sanction of a religious authority. However, the age of the rights of man also inextricably linked personhood and rights to belonging in a community of people: "man had hardly appeared as a completely emancipated, completely isolated being who carried his dignity within himself without reference to some larger encompassing order, when he disappeared again into a member of a people" (291). In the twentieth century, large-scale social and political crises saw masses of people ejected from their home nations without the ability to establish citizenship elsewhere. In the first half of the twentieth century, Europe was rocked by the genocide of Armenians in Turkey, the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia, and the expulsion of Jewish people from their native countries by the Nazis. The resulting waves of refugees brought to light a core problem with Western human rights laws and ideologies, in which individuals are supposed to be guaranteed rights purely on

the basis of their humanity. The refugee crisis revealed the reality that the protection of human rights relied strongly on belonging to a nation-state.

On the subject of stateless people, Giorgio Agamben further clarifies how individuals in modern democratic societies are caught in a system that is deceptive in relation to its definition and treatment of the human person, promising to grant rights to abstract figures known as citizens and holding as always inviolable the human being. Agamben argues that “The ‘sovereign’ structure of the law, its peculiar and original ‘force’ . . . has the form of a state of exception in which fact and law (or the exception and the rule) are indistinguishable (yet must, nevertheless, be decided on)” (*Homo Sacer* 27). In other words, the sovereign power (the rule of law) in liberal democratic societies establishes itself by assigning itself the prerogative to suspend the rule of law, so that the law the sovereign stands for and its abandonment become one and the same. The naked humanity of the individual consists of an “inclusive exclusion” at the heart of society, because this humanity is supposedly set outside of the bounds of the state, in which people participate as citizens. However, when the sovereign power exercises its authority to suspend the rights of citizenship, individuals within society find themselves in a double bind in which they exist both inside and outside of the law. Individuals have no rights, but are still subjected to state power. Furthermore, the sovereign exercises its power over not the political existence of its subjects – which ceases to exist in the state of exception – but over the natural life of humans that supposedly stands outside of the political realm. The state of exception remains an inherent potentiality within modern society, and so all modern individuals are vulnerable to becoming “bare life” or *homo sacer*, the “sacred person” who has “the capacity to be killed but not sacrificed” (85). *Homo sacer* can be banished from citizenship but still be acted upon by the state, since, as “bare life,” he or she is still subsumed into the state. This is the

situation of the refugee, the displaced person, or the concentration camp victim, who can be killed with impunity but cannot be sacrificed (i.e., subjected to juridical processes). In their studies of the war, Arendt and Agamben observe that the supposedly most sacred object of human rights – the human person who is nothing but human – is actually the human figure in its most vulnerable position. As it turns out, these critics note, the trappings of citizenship and cultural belonging, supposedly secondary to human existence, are absolutely necessary to safeguard human rights. Ambler, Bottome, and Gellhorn, in various ways, encounter this problem in their efforts to create a vision of the universal human person.

### *Background to Danger and the Solitude of Spies*

Eric Ambler's 1937 spy novel *Background to Danger* tells the story of a journalist named Kenton who finds himself journeying dispiritedly by train through prewar Europe. En route to Vienna, he runs into the mysterious Herr Sachs, who claims to be hiding from the Gestapo and asks Kenton to smuggle some documents across the border. The cash-strapped Kenton agrees, and journeys to Sachs' hotel room later to return the documents only to discover that his mysterious friend has been murdered. Kenton is from that point embroiled in a fight between fascist forces, for whom Sachs was working, and the friendlier Soviet agents, Andreas Zaleshoff and his sister Tamara, whom he will endeavor to help. Kenton is positioned within the context of the pre-war European situation, thrown in with central European fascists, eastern communists, and British capitalists, and is left to his own devices to make allegiances and decisions as he sees fit. Ambler uses the figure of the journalist to represent the individual detached from a set of politics or a given community, whose individual judgment is sacrosanct and whose duty it is to report faithfully on historical experience. Through Kenton, Ambler expresses a deep mistrust of

the nation-state, which he sees as at best arbitrary, and at worst, thoroughly corrupt. However, Kenton also remains wary of pledging total loyalty and investing meaning in any alternative system. While he works with the Soviets, Kenton keeps them at arm's length (as does the novel), careful to position them more as the bullied victims of the fascists than as the representatives of a thoroughly sound ideology on their own. Kenton shares some values with his communist companions, but the novel makes it clear that his commitments can and will shift according to his individual judgment. Standing apart from any discrete group, Kenton's focus as an observer is on the violence and suffering that fascism inflicts and the brutal realities of the war of ideologies.

*Background to Danger* seeks to position the individual as the basic unit of society, creating a character whose heroism stems from his solitary lifestyle and detachment from loyalty to any particular social organization or group. The novel is often successful at crafting this narrative of individual autonomy, convincingly demonstrating how prioritizing individual judgment over group allegiance can act as a defense against the corruption of both fascism and communism. However, the novel does not entirely shy away from the limitations and the possible unfortunate consequences of its hero's isolated position. Ambler's hero is still entangled with larger social systems, in both desirable and undesirable ways, and in the moments when he does manage to detach from such systems, he is often left as vulnerable as he is empowered. Furthermore, Ambler is not unaware of the way in which the morals of his story – the preeminence of the individual and the inherent dangers of ideological and political groups – is dependent upon his chosen literary form. The hero of the novel draws heavily on the figure of the fictional spy, whose independence and heroism are not necessarily viable models for real human life.

Ambler uses the spy thriller genre to make an argument both about the nature of institutions – including the nation – and about the role of the individual. *Background to Danger* employs the secretiveness, trickery, and prevalence of disguises characteristic of its genre to highlight the falseness of the structures that individuals often rely on to give definition and meaning to their lives and to enact justice in the social world. Ambler particularly and repeatedly takes aim at the nation-state. Though most of the novel's action will take place in central Europe, the novel opens in London, where we meet Mr. Balterghen, oily chairman of Pan-Eurasian Petroleum, whose office is furnished with “a red Turkey carpet . . . a Second Empire Desk and a Chinese lacquer cabinet, a neo-Byzantine bookcase and six baroque chairs plus a Drage-Aztec cocktail cabinet . . .” (3) The novel takes the reader to the center of the nation's capital and into the office of a powerful man. This office is covered with the symbols of imperialism, alluding to the capitalistic and predatory nature of the nation. Mr. Balterghen attends a meeting that introduces the political conspiracy at the center of the novel. Fascist agents within the Romanian government intend to steal certain Russian documents that, while actually outdated and irrelevant, could inflame the population, leading to anti-Soviet sentiment and a drive towards sympathy with Nazi Germany. Mr. Balterghen and his colleagues are in league with the fascists due to their desire to discredit the Romanian communist faction not for political but for economic reasons, as left-leaning journalists have tried to meddle with their claims to oil fields in the country. Facing criticism for his interference in political matters with grave implications for ordinary citizens, Balterghen defends himself: “We are business men and we are anxious to do business with the Rumanian Government. We are not interested in politics” (7). Here this representative of the English nation reveals the way that the nation can serve as a hollow shell, supposedly enclosing liberal belief systems and democratic virtues, but easily deployed for self-

serving and devious purposes. As well as the English nation, Balterghen and his associates function as symbols of international capitalism, another form of universalism supposedly superseding local and national boundaries. Ambler's universalist vision develops in opposition to this more mercenary universalist doctrine. Balterghen is so far estranged from the ideas for which the nation is supposed to stand that he does not feel the burden of any political responsibilities. In *The Spy Story*, a study of the way that spy thrillers and detective novels reflected wartime realities, John Cawelti and Bruce Rosenberg note that, although fiction such as *Background to Danger* often expresses anxiety over the coming international war, "The figure of the corrupt tycoon and the arms merchant so prevalent in these stories raises some question as to whether the homeland is worth fighting for" (48). Ambler's novel repeatedly emphasizes that nationality, so crucial a part of life in wartime Europe and so firmly attached to individual identity, is often merely a façade.

A category without content, national identity can be taken on and off like a mask. When the novel first introduces Kenton, the reader is told that he "looked more like an American than an Englishman, and was actually neither. His father had come from Belfast, his mother from a Breton family living near Lille" (8). Kenton himself embodies the falseness of nationalism and is not swayed by a belief in the virtue of nations or even in the authenticity of national identity, the system of meaning to which individuals are meant to be most loyal in the wartime context. When he first meets the Soviet agents Zaleshoff and Tamara, they share a similar national ambiguousness. Kenton remarks with surprise that the two "both speak English with an American accent" (75). To this Tamara replies that "Our mother escaped from Baku with us to America, through Mexico, where I was born. But she never took out the proper papers . . . we spoke Russian better than English, so we claimed Soviet citizenship. It is quite simple" (76).

National attachment is a matter of accident or convenience, not an essential or meaningful quality.

Kenton's journeys and his involvement with the fascist-communist plot only deepen his mistrust in nationalism. After stumbling upon the murdered Herr Sachs, Kenton becomes a suspect and at one point tries to flee across the border into Czechoslovakia. Kenton is aided by an Englishman named Mr. Hodgkin. It becomes clear that Mr. Hodgkin believes the charges against Kenton but has decided to help him escape due to their shared nationality. To Kenton's horror, his countryman explains that, "If this was England, I'd hand you over to the nearest copper I could see," but then launches into a diatribe against foreigners to explain why he prefers to ally himself with a murderous fellow Englishman (107). After listening to this, Kenton escapes across the border, "sick at heart" but on terrain that left him with something "better than the view from Mr. Hodgkin's promontory" (109). Kenton's own beliefs develop in counterpoint to those of someone like Mr. Hodgkin. While this English traveler is willing to place his worldview entirely into a nationalist context and decide matters of loyalty based on national kinship, Kenton grows ever stronger in his insistence on independence of thought and association.

Cawelti and Rosenberg describe the typical Ambler novel as tracing a journey "from ennui to *engagement*" (104). Kenton starts off relatively uninterested but eventually is motivated to action, in a journey that is self-driven and not directed by outside forces. Kenton decides to take a stand against the fascists out of a personal and purely human – rather than political – distaste for their violence and brutishness. Significantly, the novel never translates his resistance to the fascist agents into any commitment to an alternative system of beliefs that would seek to determine the identity, loyalties, and fate of the individual. Though Kenton agrees to assist the

Soviet agents, he never involves himself with communist rhetoric nor gives his new friends any grounds to believe that he is helping their cause. When Zaleshoff asks him why he protected the stolen Romanian documents even at some personal risk, Kenton is evasive. He offers an answer only after the question is put to him a second time and even then is noncommittal, saying only that he must have inherited from his parents “two curious qualities – obstinacy and the faculty of resentment” (77) This explanation does not quite satisfy the Soviets, but at that point, an obvious camaraderie has developed between them and the Englishman, and there is an implication that Kenton is motivated in part by affection, letting personal rather than political attachments guide him. To the fascist goon who abducts him, Kenton offers a more forceful explanation:

You made the mistake of supposing that I could be successfully intimidated. It is a mistake that quite a number of persons of your kind are making in Europe today. The Nazi concentration camps and the Italian penal islands are full of men who have refused to compromise with violence . . . I used to wonder how they could suffer so much for the sake of such transitory things as political principles. I realise now that there’s more in it than that. It’s not just a struggle between Fascism and Communism, or between any other ‘-isms.’ It’s between the free human spirit and the stupid, fumbling, brutish forces of the primeval swamp (56).

Kenton articulates most clearly here the novel’s driving beliefs about how the individual should relate to and intervene in the chaos of the wartime society and how justice can be sought out amidst the confusion of conflicting ideologies and the horrors of the fascist machine. Though friendly with the Soviets, Kenton does not see commitment to any ideology as the way to resist injustice or promote social well-being. The individual should draw inspiration instead from “the

free human spirit.” Although Ambler is sometimes seen as taking a left-wing stance, his autobiography reveals his relative independence from political loyalties. His account of the wartime years touches upon concerns over troubling events but does not hint at a commitment to a Communist school of thought. He notes that, in the 30s, “Scruffier authors . . . would be asked to literary get-togethers . . . Since I had inherited my father’s tails as well as his golfing tweeds I could accept invitations from any or all who cared to issue them.” He notes that, “it came to be understood by most of those who attended these functions that the organizers . . . were, if not actually members of the Communist Party, fairly sympathetic to it. If the term fellow-travellers had been used in its present pejorative sense at the time I think that many of us could well have been described that way” (124). Ambler’s attitude towards the Communists reflects that of Kenton in the novel. There is no antipathy in his mindset, but no particular enthusiasm, either. In his rant against fascist brutality, Kenton suggests that such an ideology does not provide a sufficient moral compass, nor the interior resources to stand up against a violent regime.

Rather than seeing the wartime moment as an occasion to embrace any protective system of power, Ambler endeavors to give voice to the pain and oppression suffered by the human victims of fascism. Whereas to someone like Rebecca West, fascism is a temptation into a glamorous false ideology, to Ambler it is the craving for war and for the infliction of pain. When Kenton is captured by the fascists, the goon Saridza goes into a detailed description of the development of torture techniques. He recounts with glee the history of “the rack, the wheel, and the thumb-screw” and goes into the effects of castor oil which “produces a painful effect very much like that resulting from eating green apples, but many times magnified. It also causes internal ruptures and hemorrhages” (55). Significantly, Ambler focuses not only on the weapons of violence but on their effect, on the physical suffering of the victim. Valentine Cunningham

notes that Ambler's use of the conventions of the spy thriller is always weighted "with the intent of addressing the realities of violence that the conventions believed themselves to have domesticated and tamed" (75). Rather than treating the impending war as an occasion for getting lost in the abstract ideas of political ideologies, Ambler is interested in exposing violence and suffering as the brute realities of the rise of fascism and the approach of war.

*Background to Danger's* advocacy for personal insight and responsibility to take the place of commitment to ideology is largely convincing. However, Ambler's hero reaches certain limitations in his solitary journey, and the novel points to some of the possible inadequacies of such a highly individualistic philosophy. Cawelti and Rosenberg suggest that the spy is an inherently lonely and isolated figure and that this literary character provides a good representation of the alienated modern individual: modern people experience "a sense of ambiguity in their relationship to society and to their profession or organization which made them feel like either a participant in a clandestine world, or a double agent, or both" (32). In his embodiment of what it means to be a modern day person, skeptical of the institutions of society, Kenton cannot quite transcend this sense of isolation. At the novel's end, he is off on another aimless train ride, his Soviet friends fading into memory. The ending of the novel evokes another problem with the narrowing of moral and philosophical safe ground to include only the perspective and understanding of the individual. Kenton has helped to foil a fascist plot, but there is no sense that his adventures with Zaleshoff and Tamara have halted the approach of the coming war, nor could the actions and attitudes taken up by Kenton in his travels serve as the basis for a more thorough and robust attack against the rise of fascism. Kenton may not believe in the nation-state, but the nation-state continues to exert power over everyone in Europe and to be the most readily available, if highly flawed, site of law and justice. After becoming a murder

suspect, Kenton considers his options: “Should he make for England? The idea was not altogether unattractive. There, at least, he would be sure of physical safety. On the other hand, his freedom of movement would be severely hampered. If he ventured to set foot outside of England, he could and probably would be immediately arrested” (92). Kenton is an exile by choice. His own nation, whatever he might think of it, can offer him protection and support. By choosing not to return to the country where he belongs in order to pursue his independent ways, Kenton limits his ability to be effective on a truly meaningful scale. As an individual – even of the action hero type – Kenton can act only on the individual level. Structures that supersede and subjugate the individual might be suspect, but they might also be necessary to effect large-scale change.

While the novel’s idealistic view of the individual as sufficient and wholly independent sometimes fails to provide a meaningful model for organized action, the novel also sometimes falls short of its principle of absolute self-determination. Ambler takes pains to represent his characters as untethered to systems of national or ideological belonging, but the novel often struggles with the task of imagining such underdetermined characters. The everyman character Ambler constructs in Kenton is, despite the hero’s own disregard for cultural and national backdrops, shaped by his classically liberal, mostly English background and so it is this perspective that largely dominates the narrative voice in *Background to Danger*. The story’s other primary protagonists, Zaleshoff and Tamara, often dissolve into stereotypes and plot devices defined by their more eastern origins. In the first meeting between Kenton and the Soviet agents, Zaleshoff and Tamara come across as stiff and rather simple-minded ideologues compared to the greater scope and flexibility of the Westerner’s perception. When Kenton asks Zaleshoff about his own loyalties and reasons for being involved in the spy mission, Zaleshoff

responds that “ the Soviet citizen is . . . always ready . . . to place his country’s interests before his private business affairs . . . That, Mr. Kenton . . . explains my position in this affair.” Kenton then is “secretly amused at this naïve evasion” (78). Whereas Kenton is an independent thinker, the Soviets mindlessly adhere to a handed-down belief system. However, the novel obliquely connects the very fact of Kenton’s independence of thought to his Western origins and the liberal democratic society that forms his background, as opposed to the communist social structures that have shaped the two Soviets. If *Background to Danger* does not fully parse the ways in which Kenton’s status as a free-floating individual is actually entangled with ideals that are connected to particular Western social structures, the novel also does not explore the individuality of Zaleshoff and Tamara. The two agents do not voice more of their opinions or beliefs than to recite the party line. In one of the novel’s last scenes, Kenton reflects on his situation, in a fleeing car with “a pitiful band of three – a worried Russian, a girl, a tired journalist with a severe headache and a gun that he didn’t know how to use” (171). Kenton is the only fully fleshed-out individual in that image; the other two are essentialized and presented as part of the scenery. Zaleshoff and Tamara are more symbols of the Communist faction at work in wartime Europe and moving pieces in Kenton’s own journey than fully developed people.

The novel seeks to create in Kenton an image of the person who is *just* a person and is not defined by anything larger than himself. However, Kenton’s independence is still underwritten by the suggestion that he has been shaped by a tradition of liberal nationalism, and it is this very sense of belonging to the West that allows him to be represented as more liberated from any system than his Soviet counterparts. However dismissive Ambler might be of systems that tell individuals who they are and what they must do, throughout the novel he often relents and allows his characters to be co-opted by narratives larger than themselves, either out of an

acknowledgement of the advantages such narratives can provide or due to the difficulty of imagining a person who is truly nothing more than a person, unattached to any overarching system of meaning. As much as the novel eschews nationalism, nationalistic qualities continue to shape Ambler's characters. Kenton's position as an Englishman largely continues to define his perspective (and to provide him with a safety net, however obliquely the novel treats this reality), and many of the complex realities and issues that figures such as Zaleshoff and Tamara might have faced become obscured. They are not representations of multidimensional people, so much as stereotyped Soviet agents and symbols employed for Western use.

The novel's efforts to promote an image of the unadorned and independent human figure are stymied in part by the ways in which national and cultural histories and backgrounds imbue individuals with much of their substance and character. However, another difficulty the novel encounters is the great vulnerability of the human figure who is stripped of the protections of national citizenship. Like other writers who explore human rights issues, Ambler turns to the torture victim to try to capture an image of the elemental human being. The torture victim is a representative of the material, apolitical human body and the human person whose rights are most obviously and immediately being violated. It seems intuitive that to represent this figure would be to represent the human individual in its most sacrosanct and inviolable form. However, such a representational task is perilous. In *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*, Elaine Scarry observes that the function and reality of war is the production of pain, which has the purpose of annihilating the individual. The intent of torture "is not to elicit needed information but visibly to deconstruct the prisoner's voice" (20) Because the person in pain loses a voice, the reality of war's production of pain remains obscure. Scarry notes that "because the person in pain is ordinarily so bereft of the resources of speech, it is not surprising that the

language for pain should sometimes be brought into being by those who are not themselves in pain but who speak *on behalf of* those who are” (6). Scarry suggests that, at the point in which the person is reduced through torture to this most basic state, he or she may simply disappear entirely. At one point, Kenton is brutally beaten in an effort to make him give up his associates. In the midst of the torture, Kenton “opened his mouth to speak, but the words would not come from his throat . . . He wanted to shriek, to scream that he was ready to give in . . . But his conscious brain had lost control of his body. He gasped out a single syllable: ‘No’” (63). Kenton refuses to succumb to the reality of his situation and is able to resist his attackers’ efforts to rob him of independent will and action. Ambler endeavors to access the core of the person in pain, the person who is just a person and to represent the simple humanity that is the ultimate subject of fascist brutality. Just as Scarry argues, Kenton, during a moment of intense pain, seems to lose control of himself and to lose the ability to speak and to act of his own free will. There is a moment when things hang in the balance – for the character and the plotline but also for the deeper project of giving representation to the experience of pain. Kenton, however, is of course a symbol rather than a real suffering person, a tool through whom Ambler can give voice to the suffering victims of war, as Scarry argues writers must attempt to do. Ambler ultimately allows the novel to glance off this difficult subject matter. Rather than confronting the possible annihilation of the individual, or worse, the possibility that there is no basic element of individuality in such a society that is free from the power of the state, Ambler constructs a safety net around his tortured hero, retreating from relentless independence to the comforting structure of the heroic archetype. Kenton manages to find his voice, the voice of the action hero the story needs him to be. In keeping with the thriller genre, Kenton’s suffering serves to register his toughness and resolve and to advance the plot.

The novel descends to the point of unadorned, suffering humanity, but ultimately pulls out of this nosedive into potentially very dark terrain. The character who escapes these close calls with fascist brutality is not the void of Scarry's description, nor is he *homo sacer*, trapped in an abject space both inside and outside of the power of the state. While Ambler might at times use the conventions of the spy thriller to focus on the violence that constitutes wartime society, he here uses the conventions of the genre to avoid a confrontation with certain historical realities. Kenton uses his superhuman powers as the hero of a novel to deliver himself effortlessly from such a situation in which a real victim of fascist violence would have become hopelessly entrapped. Through Kenton, Ambler expresses an abhorrence of fascism, but ultimately his narrative can gesture towards but not fully contend with the fascist state's ability to obliterate the human person who has been divested of all qualities besides their mere humanity.

#### Abandoned or Empowered?: The Individual in *The Mortal Storm*

Published in 1937, *The Mortal Storm* tells the story of a young woman, Freya, the sole daughter in a patchwork family consisting of Professor Roth, a respected Jewish scholar, an Aryan mother, and several Aryan half-brothers. Although Freya's mother and half-brothers are not Jewish, Freya considers herself Jewish, and the crisis she faces at the moment of her entrance to adulthood is the fact that she and her father are persecuted for their ethnic background within their own native land and even within their own family. Freya has just come of age and begun to awaken to the world as the Nazi party begins to take power and to invade the life of her family. Freya must try to find her way in a society whose ideologies are largely insane and frightening. As with Ambler, Bottome's story serves to argue that there is no recourse other than that of individual judgment for deriving meaning from the twentieth century world and for

understanding what it is to be human. *The Mortal Storm* focuses on a unique individual and family, and, just like *Background to Danger*, pits its characters against the forces of their time – fascism, national belonging, and communism – and makes the point that none of them serve as systems of truth. In this novel, set in Nazi Germany, the space of the nation has already been invaded by fascism. There can therefore be no illusion, as there is for West and Warner, that the nation might serve as a sanctuary for the human person. However, just like Ambler, Bottome refutes the idea that there is any other authoritative system of meaning to which the individual can look for truth or justice or can pledge loyalty. Freya Roth and her persecuted father, the characters at the novel's center, increasingly find that it is up to the individual to develop a guiding moral philosophy. The prominent ideologies and structures of meaning of their time are too fallible and too prone to corruption. Like Ambler, Bottome argues that personal experiences and relationships, rather than indoctrination, serve as the ideal basis of human development. In *British Women Writers of World War II*, Phyllis Lassner argues that Bottome, while fiercely anti-fascist, was also disillusioned by Communism and by any system – right or left – that “rested on the lie which is the foundation of all dictatorships – that authority can take the place of responsibility” (Bottome, qtd. in Lassner 217). Just as in *Background to Danger*, *The Mortal Storm* is not dedicated to rescuing any political belief system, but rather to representing the pain, suffering and injustice that result from the rise of fascism, and to constructing a human identity that is free of restrictive social categories. However, as with Ambler's novel, *The Mortal Storm* faces limitations with this strategy in which meaning and identity are decided by the individual and detached from structuring narratives or institutions. Firstly, the individualism that Freya and others boldly adopt often leaves them enlightened, but powerless, with no organizing social methodology for resisting a force like the Nazis.

The novel furthermore has some awareness of the potential hazards for individual identity that accompany the abandonment of institutions and ideological alliances. Among the structures of meaning that Bottome wants to leave behind are the misogynistic structures that restrict her heroine and form part of the basis of Nazism. However, Bottome sometimes struggles with the void that takes the place of these troubling but vivid edifices for securing identity, and she occasionally yields to the temptation to lean on them. Freya Roth encounters some of the same obstacles as Kenton when she detaches herself from the available communal systems of meaning in her society. Bottome endeavors to create a character who is nothing more than human, but the novel sometimes retreats from this task, collapsing back into what Sartre would call “bad faith” when confronted with the vulnerability of this position. Bottome confronts on the one hand the problem of statelessness – in which the individual is cast out of civic participation in society but still subject to the cruelties of the state, and on the other, the problems that arise when an individual aspires to an identity that is not defined by social roles.

In the novel’s opening, its young heroine awakens on the day after successfully completing her medical school examinations, optimistic and ready to engage with an adult world that is still largely unknown to her. However, in her world, the Nazis have risen to power, and Freya is soon to be confronted with a labyrinth of hazardous belief systems that vie for her attention and seek to lay claim to her identity. Phyllis Lassner emphasizes that Bottome believed that wartime Europe was psychologically unhealthy, and saw the “ideological and political alternatives at the end of World War I as ‘static’” (217). It is into this world that Bottome throws her heroine, who must avoid the various ideological dangers that potentially await her. Still young and impressionable, the Jewish Freya adores her Aryan half-brothers, especially older brother Olaf, but her brothers have recently fallen under the spell of the Nazi party, which Freya

finds disconcerting, even if she does not immediately understand its dangers. Freya aspires to be a doctor and has thus far been preoccupied with her professional ambitions, but as she comes into adulthood, she begins to wonder about her place in the world and to become conscious of her role not just as an individual, but as a woman. Putting on a new dress for her younger brother's party, she subjects herself to Olaf's scrutiny. In his new role as member of the Nazi party, Olaf "caught a glimpse of her in the glass; and swung round in astonishment." Examining the both of them in the mirror, he remarks that "For a man not to be fit is a tragedy, just as I suppose for a girl to be downright plain is a tragedy . . . Well, anyhow . . . we've both escaped our tragedies!" (19) Freya is pleased to meet with her brother's approval, yet also made uneasy by the niche that has been carved out for her in the Nazi ideology. Her father, Professor Roth, often serves as the voice of reason in the novel. He explains to her that "since the Nazis believe in force rather than persuasion, and women have less force than men, the Nazi regime must be, to that extent, antifeminine." He cautions that, "One must not forget that many women will like it better . . . Many women who have not tasted the joy and rigour of freedom, prefer to be petted and supported; but not those who have ever worked successfully" (14). Professor Roth expounds upon Nazism as a deceptive system of beliefs that lures the unsuspecting through promises either of unmerited authority or the unwarranted release from responsibility.

Through a combination of her own experiences in the world, her active mind, and her faith in her father, Freya avoids the trap of fascism. She remains on the lookout, however, for an alternative belief system. Shortly, she meets the young peasant Hans. Naïve and unsure of herself, Freya has wandered into the woods and come across a band of peasants attempting to corner a frightened rabbit. Freya incurs their wrath by trying to intercede on behalf of the rabbit, and is rescued from her predicament by the arrival of Hans, and the two soon begin a love affair.

Vulnerable and confused about the world and her place in it, Freya initially looks to Hans for answers, and he offers her a new ideology. It turns out Hans is not only a peasant, but a Communist. He tells Freya, “Rich people are scared of Communists, they won’t think about what the world wants. It’s tired of its rich people, who make wars and live on others; but we needn’t kill them like the Russians did – that I should never want to do . . . anymore than you wanted to see that hare killed! Still, by persecuting and killing us, they may make us kill them!” (30). Hans presents Freya with an alternative worldview, one that promises to answer her need for meaning and security, while being gentler than the Nazism of her brothers, if still predicated on radical change and revolution. Professor Roth, however, intervenes again. He points out to Freya the potential folly of the Communists: “Brotherhood and Peace are the Soviet’s declared aims, but, my child, we historians cannot forget that Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity were the declared aims of the French Revolution. Should you say that France has acted out these aims in every direction?” (135) Roth emphasizes that Communism, like other belief structures, is fallible: though often adhered to unconditionally, it is prone to corruption. He advises, “Let them alone – Nazis and Communists. How do we know that they are not two ways of avoiding the same thing? And this thing . . . perhaps it is common sense” (53). Professor Roth therefore posits as an alternative to systems like Nazism and Communism not another ideology but “common sense,” which he defines as the perception of the world reached by sound, independent individual judgment. He tells his Nazi stepson that people possess “an intrinsic quality which is the creative mind – and when we reach it, we find it safer to deal with than all men’s categories” (67). Freya also eventually finds refuge in this perspective. Though she loves Hans, she does not agree wholeheartedly with his Communist leanings as much as she sees him as an argument against the violent prejudices of the Nazis.

Like the other novels in this chapter, *The Mortal Storm* is an attack on fascism. Pam Hirsch notes that Bottome “witnessed firsthand the rise of fascism in Germany,” and “in 1935, Bottome returned to England and was horrified to find that there seemed no sense of alarm about Hitler’s rise to power. She wrote what was to become her most famous novel, *The Mortal Storm*, with the express hope that it would arouse Britain from its insouciant slumber” (2) Like the other writers in this chapter, Bottome does not respond to the threat of fascism by creating a text that argues for the embrace of an alternative system of power. Unlike Rebecca West and Rex Warner, Bottome is more interested in seeking out the personal, traumatic experience of life within the fascist state than in constructing a political narrative to counteract it. Bottome traces Freya’s journey from obliviousness to the dangers of her world to a state of personal and familial crisis brought on by the rise of fascism. Freya’s family is torn apart as totalitarian ideologies begin to weaken personal bonds. Eventually, Freya sees her once respected father taken to a concentration camp. In a short time, Freya is transformed from a bright and optimistic girl to a woman badly shaken by the act of visiting her father in the camp. Echoing the fascist spy in *Background to Danger*, Professor Roth notes that “we are back in the Middle Ages again, with far more power to inflict pain than those earlier murderers possessed” (250). Before the insult of her father’s imprisonment, Freya must endure the murder of Hans at the hands of her brother Olaf during an attempt to cross the border into Austria. Olaf is so eager to perform his civic duty that he shoots Hans after he is already over the border. After the death, Freya’s brother Emil expresses confidence that Olaf will not face repercussions: “‘To shoot a Communist running away is no murder!’ he explained scornfully, ‘it’s a summary execution!’” (195) The novel endeavors to make the realities of the Nazi state real and personal and makes clear the horrors that have

resulted from the dominance of fascist ideology over personal relationships and individual choice.

However, while Botttome is successful in crafting a portrayal of wartime plight, the novel's appeal to "common sense" and personal responsibility does not always provide a clearly workable answer to the twentieth century human rights problem. Freya's only option, ultimately, is to flee from her poisonous society. Upon visiting her father in the concentration camp, he advises her: "It is to America you should go . . . the University of California is free, you could take your doctorate there and become an American citizen" (252). Like Kenton rambling through central Europe on his own, Freya is vulnerable and ineffective so long as she is untethered to a community or a sociopolitical system larger than herself. However she and her father might mistrust "all men's categories," they are still at the mercy of the belief and power structures created by others. Though wiser than those who have imprisoned him, Professor Roth does not have the means to free himself from his dark fate. Adopting an ever stoic and transcendent vision, he consoles his daughter that this is a war "to exterminate the brotherhood of man! And it will exterminate many men! But brotherhood will survive, since it is an eternal principle, and not subject to torture or execution" (253). This response that the world will correct itself in time is less than satisfying and, though Professor Roth seems content with it, it might provide little comfort to the many victims of the concentration camps.

The problem is not only that the individual is inevitably coerced into participating in larger systems, but also that systems, even flawed ones, sometimes perform the function of keeping the individual from falling into an abyss of invisibility and rightslessness and do sometimes provide useful paradigms for decision-making and determining meaning. In its (reasonable) rejection of many midcentury systems of meaning, *The Mortal Storm* nevertheless

sometimes finds itself in a perilous situation wherein there is no scaffolding onto which rights can be grafted, and the individual slides out of a restrictive category into nothingness. This is one of the possible consequences of Professor Roth's plea for decisions about right and wrong to be made on the basis of "common sense." Professor Roth is sympathetic to the situation of women in the new Nazi regime, and while he is not in particular a Communist sympathizer, he bears no ill will towards the Communists. He says to his stepsons, "we have a right to demand of you . . . tolerance for the opinions of others" (67). He implores Emil and Olaf to adopt a more tolerant attitude towards the Communists. Freya wishes for Hans to visit the family home, while her brothers are adamant that a Communist not be associated with the family. Despite his insistence that Freya and Hans have a right to have their views tolerated, Professor Roth is hesitant to allow Hans to visit against the wishes of the two brothers. He says to Freya, "this young friend of yours may come here, and it is true that you have the right to see him under your own roof. But this right . . . for all our sakes I should have asked you to waive it! There are moments when to be in the right is an unnecessary misfortune" (62). Within the Professor's complicated reasoning is one danger of rule by common sense. If rights can be determined on the spot by the common sense of the individual judge, then they can be taken away just as easily. Fluidity of judgment and perception is often represented as desirable in the novel; it allows Freya to avoid becoming bogged down in the dogma that claims the minds of her brothers. However, rights perhaps cannot be attached to something fluid or left up to the discretion of the individual. In such a belief structure, it is possible for anything to be represented as superseding a right, in the way that the Professor argues that Freya should see the peace of her household as more important than her right to freedom of choice. It seems that rights might need to exist as a standard set, attached to a system capable of their enforcement.

Just as the novel encounters problems letting rights float free of system, so it struggles to part entirely with some structures of meaning that have traditionally provided a foundation for identity, however problematically. Most notably, although *The Mortal Storm* pursues a feminist agenda and is interested in exploring how misogyny intertwines with Nazism, Bottome is still sometimes tempted by the lure of gender essentialism and the certainty of carefully determined gender roles. Bottome represents her heroine Freya as possessed of high-reaching professional ambitions and frustrated by the limited role to which the Nazis want to limit women. However, there are multiple occasions when the novel seems to endorse traditional gender roles. Though Freya's lover Hans does not view her in the same harsh light as her Nazi brothers do, their relationship is often predicated on conventional narratives. At the time of their first meeting, Hans rescues her from a confrontation with a group of rough men. Furthermore, throughout the novel, Bottome has a tendency to connect female identity to the biological role of motherhood. Freya is interested in this topic and asks her mother about childbirth. Freya's mother tells her "it is always a fight – but I knew I'd win; and being used to the utmost of one's capacity is a magnificent feeling. Your father, too, had always wanted children, so that I knew I was giving him his heart's desire" (9). This early passage connects female identity to the boundaries and the functions of the body and ties women to men through motherhood. The centrality of motherhood to female identity strengthens later in the novel. Visiting the farm of Hans' family for the first time, Freya is given an orphaned lamb to carry. Hans' brother Michel insists that Freya should tend to the lamb: "He has not walked yet – his mother died of him! Are not all girls mothers? This one will do instead!" (159). At the end of the novel, Freya flees to America to start a new life, but first she gives birth to the child of the murdered Hans, in a scene that is also not without its livestock comparisons. As Freya goes into labor, the mother of Hans encourages her: "Now

don't you go thinking there's anything to be afraid of! Every cow in the *Stall* knows what it costs to get a calf – and is glad to pay it!" (335). Though Bottome wants more for her heroine than the restrictive and downtrodden roles to which women have been relegated, she does not entirely give up an idea of gender essentialism. Throughout the novel, women are held to have intrinsic value as mothers, and while this might be a restrictive identity, Bottome sees it as a system in which women can nevertheless claim some immutable rights and recognition and therefore struggles to let go entirely of this narrow conception of femaleness, which repeatedly connects women to animals. In the introduction to a 1946 collection of essays written about individuals she admired, Bottome writes that: "I took on purpose individuals of both sexes . . . None of these men was more great because he was a man; and neither of these women less great because she was a woman; but in each the special quality of their greatness was influenced by their sex. You could not put them in each other's places with impunity" (8) In taking leave of traditional narratives that serve to oppress women, Bottome still finds it difficult or undesirable to break free from a gendered sense of identity entirely, as though there may be only a void waiting if the structures that have traditionally created places for women are removed. The novel's wrestling with the tension between individual self-determination and socially determined identities exposes the question of whether or not identities must necessarily develop against the background of social structures such as nationality, gender, or some other type of communal or categorical belonging. It is a question that the novel asks but does not entirely resolve.

Furthermore, *The Mortal Storm* grapples with the issues of statelessness and the questions that this condition raises concerning the possibility of any kind of true individual freedom from the power of the state. Professor Roth believes that he has the power to express a certain independence within the state and that he is separated into personal and political selves.

However, in his final scenes he is imprisoned in a concentration camp. Once someone who held a respected position in an orderly society, Freya's father now "wore the same ill-fitting shoddy garments as the other prisoners; and he was thin as a spectre" (309). The professor now is, in a sense, what the novel has attempted to represent: the figure who is nothing more than human, but of course it is at the point of achieving this naked humanity that the professor is most clearly not free of powers larger than himself. Freya notes what is unusual about the prisoners in the camp: "They were criminals, who had committed no crimes" (309). Professor Roth is caught in what Agamben calls "the state of exception," the space in which the sovereign power of modern society expresses itself by claiming the right to decide when the normal rules will be vacated. The citizens within such a society are therefore subject to finding themselves both inside and outside the law, having violated no rules but nevertheless subject to punishment and death. Ousted from the abstract category of citizenship through the suspension of the rule of law, the naked reality of the human remains and is therefore, through a cruel twist, the object of state power while possessing no agency and no rights. *The Mortal Storm* is uneasily conscious that, despite its lofty ideals about individual liberty, the pursuit of an image of the truly free person must include a reckoning with the problem of bare life. However, like Ambler, Bottome largely dances around this issue. Bottome stops short of allowing the figure of Professor Roth in the concentration camp to become a true portrait of *homo sacer*. Leaving the camp, "Freya had a curious feeling – that was not wholly grief – as if she was carrying away with her – outside the barbed wire fence into the open world – his living heart between her careful hands" (317). While it is important to Bottome's novelistic efforts to end her story on a note of hopefulness, she, like Ambler, provides her character with an escape that his historical counterparts could not have accessed.

The Journalist and the Refugee: Individual Intervention in *A Stricken Field*:

*A Stricken Field* (1940) is Martha Gellhorn's novelistic account of the annexation of the Sudetenland, incorporating elements of autobiography and journalism. Its heroine is young journalist Mary Douglas, who arrives in Prague in 1938 with the intention to tell the story of the refugees who had fled Germany and the German-occupied Sudetenland seeking safe harbor. As with *Bottoms*, it is Gellhorn's purpose to incite Western audiences to action against the Nazis and to expose the harmfulness of a strategy of appeasement. Just as Ambler uses the figure of the journalist to represent the solitary person in a war of nations and ideologies, Gellhorn deploys the character of the journalist as a symbol of the lone individual who must navigate this sociopolitical minefield. As in *Background to Danger*, here it is the role of the journalist to represent an historical situation free from the constraints of nationalistic or otherwise prejudiced perspectives, to order and make sense of a chaotic world, and to represent humanity stripped of political labels. Gellhorn's compassionate, observant heroine exposes the inadequacy of traditional systems like the nation-state for protecting human welfare. Mary Douglas recounts the ways in which nation-states have failed the refugees who are to be cast out of Czechoslovakia and returned to a homeland where they will face only persecution. As with *Bottoms* and Ambler, Gellhorn's perspective, unattached to any particular political alliance, allows her to focus on portraying the human cost of the spread of fascism. Whatever political strategies or social ideologies might be at stake, what is certain is that these human lives have been manipulated and sacrificed.

However, while Gellhorn presents a vision of Europe on the brink of war that is in many ways vivid and compelling, *A Stricken Field* encounters obstacles at the level of meaningful social intervention and of representation. Of the novels in this chapter, it goes about its effort to

hold the mirror up to the victims of the Nazis and to bring them relief most self-consciously and most self-critically. In the creation of the young and idealistic journalist Mary Douglas, Gellhorn explores the role of the journalist and reflects on the anxieties attendant upon entrusting the individual with the task of making sense of history and bringing representation to its victims. In her creation of the refugee characters Mary seeks to help, Gellhorn contemplates both the difficult situation of the displaced people of Europe and the challenges that a story about refugees presents to the effort to represent individuals as merely human, independent of cultural context or national citizenship. While Gellhorn – and her heroine – are committed to the importance of such representation, the novel does not shy away from voicing the concern that solitary individuals are vulnerable to political exploitation and physical violence, as well as philosophical and narrative exploitation.

From the perspective of Mary Douglas on the ground in Czechoslovakia, there is no possibility to take shelter in a belief in nationalism. The situation she surveys is a case study in the nation's ultimate frailty, and the potential for a human rights disaster created by the dominance of the nation-state as a political structure. The refugees she encounters have sheltered in a place where they have no rights as citizens. These individuals have fled their homeland in Germany and the now-occupied Sudetenland, where they would face persecution for their political alliances (or perceived political alliances) as Communists or Social Democrats or for their ethnicity and are now being forced by Czech authorities to return, as this new state recognizes no obligation to them and cannot stand up to the more powerful Germany. As one of the refugees tells her, “ ‘We are not people, we are exiles’ ” (69). These individuals are caught out of time and place, frozen without a nation to which they could belong. One man waits to continue his life as a blacksmith: “he knew he could always find work, if he could first find a

country” (71). Mary Douglas describes one of the safe houses she visits, “furnished with still bodies, waiting in their places for whatever would happen next” (73). Earlier in her stay in Prague, Mary is a passenger in a car filled with other journalists which hits a refugee. Though the accident is minor, the event looms large, because it has brought the man to the attention of the authorities. The stranger and the journalists eventually end up at the police station. The police officers ask him for documentation, and Mary watches him “still searching his pockets, tearing at them, his back twisting and bending to find something that did not exist” (40). After admitting that he is a Social Democrat, the man repeats, “ ‘I am from Romberg,’ . . . giving out the name as his reference, his last link with an ordered, reasonable world” (40). The man is told that he must return to his community, but Mary relates that “he could not return to Romberg, where the people had gone mad, and hunted each other like animals . . .” (42). Later she reflects that “the little gray man in the police station was not one, he was anyone. No, he was one; and one alone matters, and she would never believe in any system where one was not important” (57). The system to which Mary subscribes in her narration is not really a system at all. In the systems in which the little gray man has been caught – Germany, Czechoslovakia, fascism, even the social democracy for which he is persecuted – he does not matter.

Just as remarkable as the power of a withdrawal of national belonging to strip away the refugees’ humanity is the very artificiality of the concept of nation. The unstable residents of Czechoslovakia live with an ever-shifting frontier. Someone shows Mary Douglas where makeshift border markers have been placed, and she is wracked with disbelief: “You did not simply peg up fifty feet of barbed wire and proclaim a new rule.” She reflects on the wholly arbitrary nature of the border: “Why here? Why not farther ahead or farther behind? The land on the other side belonged to the land on this side; it had the same shape. The fields had been

planted by one man, and now he had sown in two countries” (112). The mobile barbed wire border underscores the ridiculousness of nationalism as a meaningful construct. However, the fictional nature of the nation-state did not preclude it from being cruel, oppressive, and corrupt, in the case of Nazi Germany or, on the other hand, weak and ineffectual, in the case of Czechoslovakia (and even the supposedly powerful states within the League of Nations). The people she meets implore Mary Douglas to seek the intervention of the Western democracies. One of her acquaintances, the German woman Rita, tells Mary: “The only chance is pressure from England and France and America. You must write about this, you and your colleagues, quickly, to make an opinion in your countries.” Mary is doubtful, however, noting that “it is immensely easy to make people hate but it was almost impossible to make them help” (55-56). Mary knows that, despite the suffering of the refugees, England, France, and America must consider their own national interests and, in the way of the nation-state system, prioritize the needs of their own citizens.

Whereas Mary Douglas’s position leads her to be deeply suspicious of the promise of nationalism, she, like Ambler and Bottome, is not eager to adopt another ideology in order to make sense of the world. To her, the case of nationalism provides a view into the reality of all sociopolitical systems: arbitrary and constructed by groups of people, they are inevitably based on practices of exclusion. Observing Rita and her partner Peter living their lives in exile, she imagines them “in another country . . . and in danger for other reasons . . . The reasons didn’t matter . . . Sometimes it was one system that oppressed, and sometimes it was another . . . The names of the systems might be interchangeable. In another time . . . Rita and Peter might have been Christians when they should have been Romans, or Protestants when they should have been Catholics” (88). For Gellhorn, it is system itself that is the enemy. Like Ambler and Bottome, she

believes instead in individual morality and in the ability of people to connect with each other on human, rather than ideological grounds. Reminiscent of the professor in *The Mortal Storm*, Mary Douglas reflects that “no one had yet found a system to regiment a man and a woman, no one had yet discovered how to corrupt the good hearts, or turn love into a silly slogan . . . We will win in the end . . . There are still men and women alive in the world” (89). Although Gellhorn does not believe in the power of the nation or of some supra-national body, she contrasts Mary’s idealistic notion of simple “men and women” with the harsh realities that the refugees actually experience. They are in effect just men and women, but there is danger rather than freedom in this position. Like Bottome’s characters, the refugees in *The Mortal Storm* suffer greatly from being detached from the nation-state, even as their author casts doubts on the nation as a viable category of meaning.

While *A Stricken Field* is often compelling and never abandons its belief in the significance of journalism and the possibility of representation, Gellhorn also does not shy away from a confrontation with the limitations of her response to the wartime crisis. Gellhorn represents Mary Douglas as sincere and thoughtful but also uses her to critique the capabilities of individual judgment and to emphasize that Mary, as journalist, must *decide* what has meaning. Gellhorn allows the reader to watch Mary struggle to build narrative out of the sheer and overwhelming reality of Czechoslovakia: “She wanted to place her knowledge in paragraphs . . . But it did not fit in paragraphs and she could see it, plain and informative, colorful but unimpassioned, on a page. There was no beginning, no middle, no end . . . Where shall I begin, everything is as important as everything else, she thought, and what is the end?” (119) This spiral of thoughts alludes to the difficult truth that the crisis she has experienced firsthand will always remain, to some extent, a stubborn reality, untranslatable and untransmutable. Though Mary is an

actor in the story, much of the novel consists of her self-conscious attempts to put everything she sees into a meaningful narrative. Reflecting on her experiences, she recalls “the children singing; the army looming up on the night road . . . the refugees that you passed in the villages, like people escaping a flood . . .” (119) Suddenly intruding into her thoughts is the assertion that “there will have to be a terrible justice, blowing over the world, to avenge all the needless suffering . . . she had seen the innocent punished and insulted, pursued and destroyed . . . she was afraid she would be reporting disaster and defeat her whole life” (120). Mary remains convinced of the relationship between this kind of journalistic narration and justice, but Gellhorn emphasizes the reality that the individual voice may be insufficient to represent a complete reality. Furthermore, as sincerely as she desires to give a voice to the refugees who lack representation, Mary cannot escape the physical and emotional distance between her own reality and that experienced by the refugees. While Rita is making the discovery about what has happened to Peter, Mary is safe in a hotel, requesting cigarettes and a double dry Martini and thinking “if it were Paris . . . I’d have bathsalts” (228). Mary Douglas is not indifferent to the plight of Rita and the other refugees, nor is she oblivious to the sharp disparities within the realities they experience. Gellhorn is, rather, honest about the differences of perspective that separate the Western journalist from her less fortunate subjects and admits that those differences potentially represent a chasm that cannot entirely be bridged. In *Travels with Myself and Another*, Gellhorn dwells occasionally on the degree to which some of the people she encounters on her travels remain obscure and unknowable to her. During her travels in Africa, she reflects that “not understanding Africans bothered me . . . I was harassed by uncertainty; not understanding meant misunderstanding” (234). Gellhorn is keenly aware of the difficulty of

accessing the interiority of others, especially those whose experiences are extreme or unfamiliar and is concerned with the possibility of misrepresentation.

Gellhorn reflects on the plight of the political refugees, the individuals who have been severed from citizenship and therefore left without rights. *A Stricken Field* is interested both in exploring the possibilities for the journalist to imagine and develop an image of the individual without the use of traditional lenses and in interrogating the difficult realities surrounding the individual's incorporation into or exclusion from state power. To that end, the novel focuses on the tale of Rita and Peter, with the narrative voice shifting occasionally into their perspectives to access the interiority of their experiences. Both socialists, Rita and Peter are long-time political refugees from the Nazis and acquaintances of Mary Douglas. After many struggles, the still-young couple have settled into a tentative peace in Prague that is about to be disrupted. Like Bottome, Gellhorn appeals to the common experiences of familial relationships and romantic love to describe the way that fascism, persecution, and war have transgressed into individual lives. Gellhorn sets up a scene of domestic peace, in which Rita and Peter live happily together, and then narrates the heartbreak that occurs when Peter goes missing and Rita lies in bed worried about what has happened to him, finally drifting off to sleep, "dreaming that her head was on Peter's shoulder, as on other nights, when you slept safe and loved, and woke happy in your own home" (154). The author's occupation of Rita's own interior perspective and then the shift to second person, denoting the basic domestic safety that is a familiar reality for many readers and is for Rita a dream, constitutes an effort to make the reader relate to the human victims of vast political maneuvering.

*A Stricken Field* holds out optimism for the meaningfulness of its narration of Rita's experience but also contains a warning about the dangers of a naïve belief in the power of such

narration to construct an image of a completely unfettered individual. Gellhorn encounters the same thorny problem that Ambler allows his novel to deflect: when stripped of everything except for an essential humanity, the human person is left with a powerlessness and a dependence on others for representation, and this dependence gives to others the power to make meaning of the experiences and suffering of the individual. *A Stricken Field* is perhaps most aware of this problem during the scene in which Rita discovers that Peter has been captured by German police forces and finds her way into the basement of the building where he is being held and tortured. Rita hides below where she can hear but not see the torture scene. She thinks, "It was Peter, the body that belonged to her, the fine bones of the head, the gentle hands, the quiet voice . . ." (265) Gellhorn lets the reader know what is happening, but obliquely. As in *Background to Danger*, Gellhorn focuses on the physical reality of the torture Peter endures, "the whistling, the soft jerky crack, the dull sob . . . the sound of leather cutting through the air . . ." (270). Unlike in the scenes in which Kenton is tortured, however, Gellhorn does not make any attempt to access the interiority of this experience. With Rita, the reader can only imagine dimly and witness (some of) the exterior elements of the scene. Gellhorn allows an absence to exist at the heart of this physical experience, not attempting to speak for the torture victim. She has previously constructed Rita and Peter as nothing more than human, taking care to present them as representative of all individuals, not defined by nationality, political alliance, or even circumstance. In keeping with that characterization, Peter here is reduced to the most unadorned figure of humanity. However, Gellhorn allows the reader to feel the potential emptiness of this position and its powerlessness, since as Scarry argues, the person in pain cannot speak for himself. Gellhorn warns furthermore of how, presented as nothing more than blank experience, the suffering of someone like Peter can be made to mean potentially anything, depending on the

storyteller. To the Nazis torturing him, Peter's pain is a means to an end and an instrument in furthering the Nazi design. One of the torturers says to the other, "This man does not exist. He is a thing, like a message in code. He has certain information and we must extract it" (267). Not everyone would handle Peter's experience so heartlessly, but even in the hands of those who mean well, or have no particular intentions at all, Peter's story – and the meaning of his experiences – can be used to serve the needs or designs of every individual storyteller or listener. Even for Mary, who so wholeheartedly wants to help the refugees in general, and Rita and Peter in particular, there is the need to create a narrative and to decide on the meaning of the things she has witnessed. Even within the larger context of the novel, the story of these two characters, so carefully arranged to be images of independent human beings, must be used to serve a narrative and political purpose.

The scene in which Peter is tortured serves to highlight one danger of reducing a person to no more than a human body. If an individual's identity and the meaning of his or her experiences are not drawn from nationalistic or other such ideological categories, they can potentially become a blank space that can be twisted into any shape and made to serve any purpose. However, implicit in this scene also is the specter of the bare life that Peter and the other refugees have become. Mary reflects earlier that "no one had yet found a system to regiment a man and a woman," and the novel attempts to give to Rita and Peter an independent, untouchable existence by focusing on them as individuals and dwelling on the details of their private lives, which are not politicized. However, as with the other novels, there is an uncomfortable awareness that this kind of literary idealism clashes with the reality that the most pure and individualistic aspect of what makes up a human being is what is left when citizenship is stripped away and is therefore, in fact, the site of the human person's greatest vulnerability to

the power of the state. Rita and Peter, like the other refugees, have been ejected from the privileges of citizenship. They no longer have access to any rights or political belonging. However, that does not mean they have successfully separated from the cruelty of the state. The state can no longer assert its power over their political selves, subjecting them to processes such as trial or even execution. However, the state is free to exercise its power over the very things that even Gellhorn badly wants to uphold as sacred: their bodies and their private existences.

Though choosing different genres to tell their stories, Ambler, Bottome, and Gellhorn are united in their purpose of representing the threat of fascism in the approach of World War II and in their insistence that an over-reliance on authoritative systems of meaning or over-arching sociopolitical ideologies has led society astray in the midcentury moment. These three writers, whose stories attempt to explore some of the darkest corners of wartime Europe, argue for the rejection of ideologies, which lead to violence and oppression, in favor of individual judgement and personal responsibility. The privileging of the individual perspective in *Background to Danger*, *The Mortal Storm*, and *A Stricken Field* lead to compelling and vivid images of the wartime world and lead to unflinching confrontations with the human suffering that forms the most basic reality of fascist Europe. These three novels also reveal some of the limitations and complexities that arise with commitment to an individualist system of values rather than loyalty to communal or ideological systems. The embrace of an individual perception of the world and assumption of personal responsibility can be liberating but also disorienting, releasing the individual from both the restrictions and the support of systems that transcend the realm of the personal. In their efforts to represent the humanity of the individual at the most essential level, Ambler, Bottome, and Gellhorn are furthermore faced with a relationship between individual and state that is more complicated, and more insidious, than it first appears.

## CHAPTER THREE: THE MORAL OF THE STORY: NARRATIVE, PEACE, AND JUSTICE AFTER THE HOLOCAUST

The aftermath of the war sees the emergence of the first texts that describe and interpret the experience of its darkest chapter, the Nazi genocide and the concentration camps. In the postwar years both camp survivors and secondhand observers published accounts of the Holocaust. Contrasting firsthand and secondhand accounts of the Nazi atrocities sheds light on how political influences and agendas shaped the way that Western thinkers who did not experience the Holocaust personally understood and represented this historical rupture. I will explore John Hersey's *The Wall* (1950), a novel in the form of an elaborate journal documenting the lives of a group of residents of the Warsaw ghetto, as well as Rebecca West's reflection on postwar Germany and the Nuremberg trials, "Greenhouse with Cyclamens," published in 1955 as part of *A Train of Powder: Six Reports on the Problem of Guilt and Punishment in Our Time*. The chapter will also consider Primo Levi's memoir *If This Is a Man* (1947) and Tadeusz Borowski's *This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen* (1959), the latter a series of roughly autobiographical short stories based on his experiences at Auschwitz. I will demonstrate the stark difference between the interpretations that the firsthand and secondhand accounts offer and argue that this contrast provides insight into the means and motives behind the earliest attempts of thinkers and writers to integrate the Holocaust into Western historiography. Levi's and Borowski's firsthand accounts are fractured and dissonant, insistent upon a confrontation with harsh realities about Western society's potential for catastrophic abrogations of human rights but

averse to the imposition of any moral or narratological meaning on the atrocities they have experienced. West's and Hersey's texts, on the other hand, search diligently for meaning and do not fail to discover it even in the most abject and brutal facets of their subject matter. I will claim that, as with the texts in previous chapters, the two secondhand studies of the Holocaust in this chapter are driven by the need to compose narratives that provide answers, and, especially in the case of the Holocaust texts, offer the promise of healing after the disruptiveness of the war.

For some wartime writers, witnessing the disruptive power of fascism suggested the urgent need to re-embrace the nation-state as the only safe haven of human rights or, alternately, to decry traditional institutions, such as the nation, and endorse a fully liberated, if precarious, individualism. In this chapter, I will explore how a reaction to the Holocaust, inflected with the needs and desires of postwar Western society, shaped the discourse around human rights in the aftermath of the war. This discourse was defined by the tension between universalism, with its emphasis on global community and shared standards of human dignity, and nationalism, a belief system in which human development can only be nurtured within national communities.

"Greenhouse with Cyclamens" and *The Wall* are thorough and insightful attempts to understand the Holocaust, morally, psychologically, and historiographically. However, their studies of the Holocaust are both glaringly imperfect and also partial, unable to take a holistic view of this overwhelming event. Both of these texts endeavor to find a historical through line for the twentieth century that can incorporate the Holocaust without having to tear Western society up by its roots. For Hersey, whose focus is on the suffering of the victims, this narrative concerns the restoration of peace; for West, whose focus is on the perpetrators, the narrative revolves

around the triumph of justice. For both writers, the narratives they construct are written to assure a traumatized society of the inevitable ascendancy of human rights.

The ways in which these writers try to make meaning out of the trauma of the Holocaust is intimately connected with the mid-century tension between universalism and nationalism. Hersey finds himself advocating a universalist perspective informed by his desire to construct a narrative of the return to peace, but this perspective must make concessions to the particularized quality of the Jewish experience in the Holocaust and the localized nature of human bonding. Similarly, West, as she does in *The Meaning of Treason*, advances a nationalistic view of human rights in the postwar era, influenced here by the viewpoint that only nation-states can effect the restoration of justice in the wake of the Holocaust. However, “Greenhouse with Cyclamens,” turning its attention to an international crisis, cannot be as myopically nationalistic as *The Meaning of Treason*. While the nation-state had become a troubled entity well before the outbreak of the Second World War, *A Train of Powder* dates from a moment slightly more distant from the immediate aftermath of the war, in which the horrors of the concentration camps were more deeply felt and acknowledged. The realities of the war put on full display at the Nuremberg trials cause West to deal more directly with the nation-state’s capacity to nurture vicious as well as virtuous value systems and to advocate for a vision of rights realized through international cooperation. The splintering between and within these two texts ultimately reflects the fractured and incomplete way that human rights thinking molded itself in response to the worst consequences of fascism.

Responding to the Holocaust: Opening up the Wound or Sealing the Rupture

The most dominant voices in the field of Holocaust studies today emphasize the Holocaust as a fissure that opened up in Western society, resulting from deep cracks in the foundation of that society. According to scholars such as Hannah Arendt and Giorgio Agamben, the atrocity that unfolded at the heart of the civilized modern world holds the threatening power to dissolve the mythologies of liberal democratic society and deal a devastating blow to liberal human rights traditions. The very fact that Europe had failed so spectacularly to protect millions of its people from unlawful incarceration and genocide seemed to demand a reckoning with the failures of modern society to recognize the sacredness of the human person, even while claiming to champion the rights of individuals. Hannah Arendt insists that the social currents that gave rise to the Holocaust are not limited to Nazi Germany and are not the result of some great historical mistake, but that they flow from a general disinterest on the part of Westerners to see the flaws in their own way of thinking about human rights or to contemplate what the human person might look like freed from traditional frameworks. In her 1943 article “We Refugees,” written after Arendt’s arrival in the United States, she speaks with language that mirrors the insistent, confrontational tone of the concentration camp memoirs: “Apparently nobody wants to know that history has created a new kind of human beings – the kind that are put in concentration camps by their foes and internment camps by their friends” (111). Arendt argues that the stateless people are beginning to understand how deeply sociopolitical categories cut into ideas about what it means to be human, when “you have to be sort of politically minded when you buy your food” (115). People who have not experienced the condition of being a refugee, on the other hand, are happy to deny these realities.

Arendt argues that there had long been severe imperfections in the Western conceptualization of the human person that underwrote the atrocities committed during the war.

However, she also argues that the Nazi crimes demonstrate that modern society had organized itself in such a way as to allow unspeakable horrors to emerge organically from within social institutions. In *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (1963), Arendt's analysis of the implications of the trial of Adolf Eichmann, she argues that crucial to an understanding of the phenomenon of fascism and the horrors of the Holocaust is the construction of social fictions in which notions of humanity as well as imperatives of right and wrong can be manipulated. Putting forth her famous theory of the banality of evil, Arendt posits that "the trouble with Eichmann was precisely that so many were like him, and that the many were neither perverted nor sadistic, that they were, and still are, terribly and terrifyingly normal" (276). Rather than the all-knowing, bloodthirsty villain that the figure of the Nazi is often imagined to be, "this new type of criminal . . . commits his crimes under circumstances that make it well-nigh impossible for him to know or to feel that he is doing wrong" (276). Arendt draws attention to how easily the humanity of individuals can be erased through an almost invisible process in supposedly civilized twentieth century Europe.

Giorgio Agamben furthermore sees the Holocaust as an occasion to interrogate the ways in which modern society is set up to allow for the violation of human rights. In *Homo Sacer*, Agamben argues that modern society holds the power to reduce all individuals to "bare life" – the state of the concentration camp victim – in which they are stripped of rights but can still be acted upon by the state. *Homo Sacer* provides an analysis of how modern society paves the way for the concentration camps. Agamben's later work *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive* explores what the condition of *homo sacer* reveals about concepts of the human in the western world. Agamben dwells on two figures: the *Muselmann*, the name given to those victims of the camp who resembled walking corpses and seemed to have moved beyond anything that could be easily recognized as human, and the survivor, the one who endured the camps without

becoming a *Muselmann* and is left to bear witness. The problem of the *Muselmänner* is that they have endured circumstances beyond the bounds of human experience, lost those qualities (free will, activity of mind, the basic ability to respond to the environment) that define humanness, and have become nonhuman. The problem of the survivors is that they have endured the same circumstances, transcended the same boundaries, and have remained human. Agamben argues that “the atrocious news that the survivors carry from the camp to the land of living beings is that it is possible to lose decency and dignity beyond imagination, that there is still life in the most extreme degradation” (69). The Nazis tried to create a realm where humanity could be destroyed, introducing “caesuras” in humanity, where “people pass into populations and populations pass into *Muselmänner*” (85). What the survivors of the Nazi experiment reveal, whether their readers want to know it or not, is that these borders ultimately fail to define what a human being is, although people who have never been in concentration camps might be content to recognize these boundaries as long as they are able to stay on the right side. Agamben argues that “if one establishes a limit beyond which one ceases to be human, and all or most of humanity passes beyond it, this proves not the inhumanity of human beings, but the abstraction and insufficiency of the limit” (63). The fact that society is capable of establishing limits for human existence, such as the ability to exercise free will and to maintain certain appearances and behaviors, and the notion that those limits are insufficient is one of the lessons that must be taken from the concentration camps. As Agamben puts it, “simply to deny the *Muselmann*’s humanity would be to accept the verdict of the SS and to repeat their gesture” (63-64). Despite our culture’s general acknowledgment of the weight and significance of the Holocaust, Agamben warns that modern society risks becoming complicit with the perpetration of atrocity in turning away from a confrontation with the difficult realities it reveals.

Scholars such as Arendt and Agamben reveal the implications of the realities of the Holocaust for an understanding of how Western society constructs notions of humanness – and how easily that society can eject individuals from the status of rights-bearing citizens. However, the public, from the postwar moment to more contemporary times, has not always displayed an eagerness to perceive the Holocaust as an open wound that threatens the integrity of the social fabric of Western society. Scholars have argued that various prejudices and ideological leanings largely prevented those who had been removed from the worst experiences of the war from fully processing the realities and the scale of the Holocaust. In *The Holocaust and the Liberal Imagination*, Tony Kushner reflects on the curious fact that the realities of the Holocaust were largely ignored during and after the war. Kushner rejects the premise that the world’s failure to respond to the atrocities committed against large groups of people, especially Jewish people, was due primarily to ignorance. He writes that “the destruction of European Jewry . . . was not a secret history . . . it was reported *and* discussed” (12). Kushner argues instead that the liberal worldviews of Western nations, which particularly emphasized rationality and progress, prevented the Western world from confronting the full truth of the Holocaust. He notes that a “search for rationality in Nazi antisemitism was to occupy the thoughts of many in the liberal democracies in the first year of Nazi rule. One solution was, despite the virulence of the Nazi assault, to cling to the liberal formula and see Nazi actions as exaggerated, unjust, but understandable reactions to a real Jewish irritant” (37). Kushner also notes that many countries, in the aftermath of the war, simply wanted to put the past behind them and were not eager to dwell on what had happened during the Holocaust, and especially their own complicity. Though the diary of Anne Frank would later become an extremely well known Holocaust memoir, in the late 1940s, it had difficulty finding a publisher: “As the historians of the Anne Frank House

Museum put it: ‘There was little interest . . . during the first post-war years in reminders of that black period. It was time to look forward, not backward . . .’ (5-6). David Cesarani also argues that the British response to the realities of the Holocaust was shaped by the limits of a liberal and trusting worldview: “It is now generally accepted that the information about the Jews in Nazi Europe that reached Britain during the war was plentiful and accurate. However . . . a chasm between knowing and believing characterized responses to the data” (606). The Western resistance to accepting the realities of the Holocaust went further than a skepticism towards accounts of genocide. Cesarani notes that photographs and newsreels taken from the death camp Majdanek were censored in newspaper publications: “The *Times* . . . questioned whether it was tasteful to display the horror of Majdanek. The *Illustrated London News* added to its photographs of the camp a commentary on the dangers of ‘atrocious propaganda’” (609).<sup>5</sup>

Despite the actual patchiness and inadequacy of the reckoning with the Holocaust that occurred in the immediate aftermath of the war, the discourse of human rights that emerged in the mid-century is often credited with responding forcefully to the horrors of the war, guaranteeing that human existence would never again be threatened by a power such as fascism. However, there is reason to believe that the arbiters of human rights in the latter half of the twentieth century did not engage in the kind of confrontation with the darkest realities of the Holocaust that scholars like Arendt and Agamben stage. Samuel Moyn, whose study of human rights is based on the rejection of the idea that the Western world redoubled its efforts to protect

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<sup>5</sup> The reluctance of the British public to take news reports at face value could be traced back to the First World War and the over-active British propaganda machine. As Mark Wollaeger notes in *Modernism, Media, and Propaganda: British Narrative from 1900 to 1945*, “Truth has died many deaths over the twentieth century, but the role played by the British propaganda campaign in World War I is fundamental to understanding the new media ecology faced by modernist writers and its effects on attitudes toward truth, factuality, and rhetoric” (13).

human rights as a response to the events of the war, notes in *The Last Utopia: Human Rights in History* that “in a euphoric mood, many people believed that secure moral guidance, born out of shock about the Holocaust and nearly incontestable in its premises, was on the verge of displacing interest and power as the foundation of international society” and that “many high-profile observers . . . see human rights as an old ideal that finally came into its own as a response to the Holocaust.” Moyn argues, however, that these ideas about the lineage and motivation behind Western human rights “might be the most universally repeated myths about their origin” (21). Moyn disagrees that the international community refigures its relation to human rights after the Holocaust forces a reimagining of human identity and vulnerability in the modern world. In fact, the language of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights suggests that while the drafters of this document had perhaps been influenced by the Holocaust they had not allowed the horrors of the war to completely uproot their thinking about what it means to be human in the society from which fascism and genocide had emerged. The preamble of the UDHR begins with the premise that “recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice, and peace in the world.” As its name suggests, the UDHR embraces a commitment to a global community, a belief in the possibility of universally shared values, and a vision of the human person as liberated from categories of national citizenship. However, Moyn argues that “the Universal Declaration retains, rather than supersedes, the sanctity of nationhood . . . it more retained a memory of the rights of man and citizen than it pointed ahead to supranational governance through law” (*The Last Utopia* 171). In the thinking about rights and justice that emerges postwar, there is therefore a continuation of traditional liberal thinking, including a belief in the power of the nation and a yoking together of the categories of “human” and “citizen,” as well as a push towards an

idealistic but aspirational universalist narrative of human rights. I will argue that “Greenhouse with Cyclamens” and *The Wall* reflect both of these ideological impulses and help to explain how their dominance and the tension between them reflect the collision between an awareness of the Holocaust and the continued pull of liberal idealism.

### Representing the Holocaust

Kushner and Cesarani focus on how the existing prejudices and the liberal worldviews of Westerners drove them to avoid a confrontation with the true nature of the Nazi genocide, disbelieving reports, turning a blind eye to violence, seeking justifications, or downplaying the significance of the atrocities. While denial and trivialization of the Holocaust faded away as the twentieth century progressed, questions and uncertainties about how the Holocaust should be remembered, interpreted, and represented remained. Despite the visibility of the Holocaust in the historical consciousness of the West, its difficult realities and truths have often struggled to find their way into the discourse. In their influential study *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History*, Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub note that the Holocaust is “an event without a witness,” due to the destruction of evidence and the fact that the victims of the camp were deprived of a perspective that would have allowed them to understand their situation. This idea resonates with the arguments of Arendt and Agamben that the dystopia of the camps was made possible by society’s power to propagate delusion and to subvert normal ideas of right and wrong. Felman and Laub furthermore argue that “testimony has become a crucial mode of our relation to events of our times – our relation to the traumas of contemporary history: the Second World War, the Holocaust, the nuclear bomb, and other war atrocities” (21). We rely on testimony to understand the realities of recent history, but that is in itself problematic, since

“testimony seems to be composed of bits and pieces of a memory that has been overwhelmed by occurrences that have not settled into understanding or remembrance, acts that cannot be constructed as knowledge . . . events in excess of our frames of reference” (21-22). Felman and Laub reflect on how speaking the experience of twentieth century atrocities cannot always ensure that these experiences translate into recognized truths, because we rely on models and frames of reference that are insufficient to hold such experiences.

Those who take up the subject matter of Holocaust literature largely agree that writing about this singular event can present an opportunity to call for social change in the future, but there is still little consensus about what Holocaust literature should do or look like, or about which groups and individuals can claim a right to it. In *A Double Dying: Reflections on Holocaust Literature*, Holocaust scholar Alvin Rosenfeld references the extreme hesitance with which some of the earliest commentators on the Holocaust approached any representation of the subject matter at all: “In one of the earliest and by now famous formulations, that of the eminent critic T.W. Adorno, this position states that it is not only impossible but perhaps even immoral to attempt to write about the Holocaust” (13). Rosenfeld also notes well-known Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel’s proclamation that “There is no such thing as a literature of the Holocaust . . . Auschwitz negates any form of literature, as it defies all systems, all doctrines . . . A novel about Auschwitz is not a novel, or else it is not about Auschwitz” (Wiesel qtd. in Rosenfeld 14). Rosenfeld notes that such a perspective, coming from a survivor, is “understandable and respectable” but argues that “to let silence prevail would be tantamount to granting Hitler one more posthumous victory” (14). While Rosenfeld believes in the necessity of writing about the Holocaust, he insists that Holocaust literature should “force us to contemplate what may be fundamental changes in our modes of perception and expression, our altered way of being-in-the-

world” (12). Rosenfeld notes that “the bodies – that is to say, the people – are gone and cannot be rescued back to life; neither can meaning in the old sense, nor absolute faith, nor old-fashioned humanism” (13). Rosenfeld shares with thinkers like Arendt and Agamben a conviction that the Holocaust represents a deep rupture in human history and argues that Holocaust literature must help to push this historical discontinuity into consciousness.

Others, however, have taken a less radical approach to theories about the representation of the Holocaust. In *The Americanization of the Holocaust*, Hilene Flanzbaum addresses the reality that the later twentieth century saw the development of a range of cultural productions about the Holocaust produced by and for groups of people who had no first-hand experience of the event. Flanzbaum notes that some, such as Alvin Rosenfeld, have serious objections to the proliferation of representations of the Holocaust in American culture, especially those that attempt to make the Holocaust accessible to non-Jewish populations. Flanzbaum, however, argues that “if the Holocaust is to be remembered at all, American historians, artists, writers, directors and producers, sculptors, teachers, lawyers, and politicians must re-see and re-say it. It follows that they can only do this as they see fit” (15). Flanzbaum notes some of the criticism levelled against American attempts to represent the Holocaust – Spielberg’s Gentile hero in *Schindler’s List*, attempts by the curators of the American Holocaust Museum to appeal to a variety of American audiences – but argues that “such censures are unreasonable. . . What they create must bear the imprint of a multicultural but predominantly Gentile America. To expect otherwise is to expect the impossible” (13). Though Flanzbaum does not advocate for the uncritical acceptance of any and all work about the Holocaust, she does embrace the necessity that the Holocaust will be woven into the fabric of the society that succeeds it and that its meaning and memory will be tailored, to some degree, to fit the needs and beliefs of that society.

Dominick LaCapra also concedes that the experiences of the Holocaust must be given over to historical examination and artistic representation and concerns himself with how this can be accomplished productively. LaCapra takes a predominantly psychoanalytical approach, making reference to the Freudian terms “acting out” and “working through.” Broadly speaking, “acting out” refers to the mental repetition or re-experiencing of a traumatic event, and “working through” refers to reaching a resolution to the trauma in a way that allows for a reconciliation with the past and living fully in the present. In LaCapra’s analysis, these responses apply both to individuals who have experienced trauma and more generally to historians who turn their attention to a traumatic historical event. In *History and Memory after Auschwitz*, LaCapra argues that “one should not remain at the level of acting-out . . . in the form of an attempt actually to relive or appropriate others’ traumas” (40). It will not be enough simply to rehearse the events of the Holocaust in all their traumatic horror, but rather, “even if trauma cannot be fully overcome, as it may not be for victims of limit-cases or even for attentive secondary witnesses, it may be counteracted by the attempt to work through problems, mourn the victims of the past, and reengage life in the interest of bringing about a qualitatively better state of affairs” (40). LaCapra, though cautious and critical of all representations of the Holocaust, believes, like Flanzbaum, in the necessity of bringing the Holocaust into discourse with the intention of striving towards resolution, even if a perfect resolution is forever evasive. In a 1998 interview for Yad Vashem, Israel’s Holocaust memorial center, LaCapra acknowledges that the Holocaust poses a serious challenge to the Western Enlightenment legacy, but he insists that “I would tend to conclude that there is an argument to be made for enlightenment, not as an assumption but as something you strive for . . . substantive rationality also has to be reaffirmed, not simply as an assumption but as a goal that is never achieved or won once and for all” (“Acting Out” 178).

Though LaCapra is entirely mindful of the horrific implications of the Holocaust, he does not see it as a reason to abandon or rewrite all liberal principles, but rather more as an incident in which the liberal narrative lost its way. Although some thinkers chafe at the notion that there can be anything resembling a resolution in the wake of the Holocaust, LaCapra argues that some sort of resolution must be sought in order to ensure the survival of “anything like a viable democratic politics” (152).

These studies of the Holocaust in history and culture speak to the immense challenges in trying to deal productively with such an event and to negotiate a balance between a full and awful reckoning with the horrors of the Holocaust, which might threaten to bring society to a grinding halt, or a somewhat compromised negotiation with this almost incomprehensible event that answers the need to continue on and to rebuild. My purpose here is not to resolve the issue of how to represent the Holocaust but to suggest the ways in which two postwar texts reflect the consequences for human rights thinking of grappling with these problems of representation and interpretation.

Both *The Wall* and “Greenhouse with Cyclamens” are intricately detailed, intellectually penetrating reflections on different aspects of the Holocaust, deeply concerned with understanding the meaning of the event. Instead of sidestepping the history of the Holocaust, these texts confront it. However, this confrontation is shaped by the interplay between the desire to seek justice and empathy for the victims of the Holocaust and the need to interweave this moment into the history of the West in a way that allows for the preservation of the bonds between past, present, and future. West and Hersey integrate the reality of the Holocaust into different teleological narratives that make different meaning out of this historical moment, with different focal points and blind spots. West, whose focus is on the Nuremberg trials, creates a

narrative that, while troubled by the limitations of the trials and the traces of the war that still mar Germany, ultimately expresses the inevitability of the triumph of justice and the return of order. West shares the Nuremberg judges' much remarked-upon inattention to the victims of the Nazi genocide. West, like Hersey, desires not only to see the wound of the Holocaust heal but also to mold it into a productive trauma, a chapter in history into which liberal progress narratives can be refined and re-inscribed. To this end, the narrative of recovery and restoration she writes, based on a fractured and incomplete understanding of the Holocaust, lays the groundwork for a human rights ideology exalting nationalism but haunted by the supra-national realities of the postwar world.

Hersey writes an epic novel about a small group of Jews who band together in the Warsaw ghetto. Like West, he creates a text that is calculated to deliver moral meaning – in his case, a patient and reassuring narrative of the endurance of human society and the inevitable return of peace. Whereas West is interested in the return of justice and crafts a response to the Nazi war crimes that turns away from the experiences of their victims, Hersey focuses on the (fictionalized) experiences of the Jewish victims, and his novel contains a complementary inattention to the crimes themselves. As conspicuously absent as the Jewish survivors from the Nuremberg trials are the Nazi perpetrators from Hersey's account. This oversight, once again, is necessary to a narrative that subdues the horrors of the Holocaust into a normalizing chronicle of mortality, memory, and survival. As with West's determination to read the aftermath of the Holocaust as a return to order and justice, Hersey's soothing narrative of historical well-being serves the larger purpose of establishing a palatable post-Holocaust worldview. Hersey takes up a universalist perspective, emphasizing shared human values and experiences. However, as with "Greenhouse with Cyclamens," *The Wall* does not represent what LaCapra would consider a

totalizing “working through” of the Holocaust. The lengthy novel’s occasionally domineering universalist thesis is riddled with lacunae and interruptions and sometimes bends under the weight of the unique and isolated experience of the Jews in the Holocaust.

### Survivor Accounts of the Holocaust

Before turning to West and Hersey, it is useful to consider two influential firsthand accounts of the Holocaust. *If This Is a Man* and *This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen* are characterized by their unflinching descriptions of the realities of the concentration camp, their refusal to extrapolate a moral meaning from their experiences, and their emphasis on the Nazis’ capacity to deprive their victims of humanity. Their writing does not lend itself to any narrative of reconciliation and continuity and often stands in direct opposition to the notion that European society is capable of responding to these events with justice or that victims could have weathered these atrocities by simply remaining loyal to some core of humanity.

*If This Is a Man* is Primo Levi’s memoir of his time in Auschwitz, after being deported to the camp from his home in Italy in 1944. An introverted and thoughtful text, *If This Is a Man* forces readers to confront the way that the concentration camps deprived human beings of their humanity. At one point, Levi recounts his encounters with a man named Steinlauf, who has developed his own theory about moral survival in Auschwitz. Although cleaning is difficult in the poorly equipped washroom and not prioritized by most of the prisoners, Steinlauf insists on the vital importance of doing one’s best to follow the hygiene habits usual in the outside world. His philosophy holds that “because the Lager was a great machine to reduce us to beasts, we must not become beasts . . . we must force ourselves to save at least the skeleton, the scaffolding, the form of civilization . . . So we must certainly wash our faces without soap in dirty water and

dry ourselves on our jackets” (47). Levi admits to the reader, “I must confess it: after only one week of prison, the instinct for cleanliness disappeared in me” (46). However, he refuses to portray this fact as a point of shame. He will not use his energy to pursue “a dismal repetition of an extinct rite.” Rather, if given a free moment in the camp, where death hangs over everyone as an imminent possibility, he would rather spend the time “to draw into myself, to weigh up things, or merely to look at the sky and think that I am looking at it perhaps for the last time . . .” (46). Levi feels a sense of admiration for Steinlauf but ultimately cannot agree with his viewpoint: “No, the wisdom and virtue of Steinlauf . . . is not enough for me. In the face of this complicated world, my ideas of damnation are confused; is it really necessary to elaborate a system . . . or would it be better to acknowledge one’s lack of system?” (47) Here Levi acknowledges again the way that the camp exerts its power on the ability of the prisoners to retain a sense of their humanity. The prisoners are largely unable to remain clean, which according to Steinlauf, is a means of being “reduced to beasts.” However, Levi rejects this way of thinking. The acknowledgment of a lack of system may seem at first glance to be a gesture of hopelessness, a surrender of the effort to find any meaning in the desolation of the camps. However, for Levi it is a revolutionary act to discard a system which details how to remain human. For Steinlauf, overcoming the degradation of the camp means doing one’s best to adhere to such a system in the most inhospitable circumstances. For Levi, it means embracing the difficult truth that a person can be human even outside any such system. This anecdote is characteristic of the way Levi’s memoir exposes Auschwitz’s radical challenge to conventional beliefs both about what it means to be a human being and about how society respects and protects the human person. Whereas West, Hersey, and the writers in previous chapters are deeply obsessed with the re-

institution of social systems to protect the sanctity of the human person, Levi sees the concentration camp as a site that reveals the ultimate hollowness and dishonesty of such systems.

Along with expressing the deep blow Auschwitz deals to conventional ideas about the integration of the human person in society, Levi also predicts the difficulty survivors will face in being believed and understood in the outside world. He concentrates on dreaming as a common and significant activity of the camp inmates, in which they are provided with a thin, ephemeral connection back to the outside world. Levi describes one dream in which he is sitting with his sister and some friends: “They are listening to me . . . I speak diffusely of our hunger and of the lice-control, and of the Kapo who hit me on the nose . . . It is an intense pleasure . . . to be at home among friendly people . . . but I cannot help but notice that my listeners do not follow me. In fact, they are completely indifferent” (66). Because of the indifference of the listeners in Levi’s dream, “A desolating grief is now born in me, like certain barely remembered pains of one’s infancy . . .” (66). In this case, it is not the fear that he will not be able to relate the events that he has endured that plagues Levi, but the suspicion that his story will be met with this mixture of incomprehension and indifference. People who have not been in a concentration camp perhaps will not be able to understand, and perhaps will not want to, preferring to “speak . . . of other things among themselves, as if I was not there,” because ignoring his presence and his story is more convenient than having to go through the difficult work of reckoning with it (66).

Levi reflects on the possibility of communicating his existence in Auschwitz to someone who has not experienced it, such as Frau Meyer, one of the civilian women working in a lab to which he, as a chemist, is assigned. However, he fears “she would certainly not understand, or if she was so good and intelligent to understand, she would be unable to bear my proximity, and would flee from me as one flees from contact with an incurable invalid, or from a man

condemned to death. Or perhaps she would give me a coupon for a pint of civilian soup” (150). Here Levi seems not only to express an acute difficulty of his time in Auschwitz but also to forecast an anxiety about how outsiders will understand what has happened to the victims of the Holocaust. Even if it were possible for them to listen and understand, Levi fears that members of the outside world will not want to embrace the realities of what it means to be human in the concentration camp. Levi notes earlier that the civilians feel a disgust for him due to his dehumanized outward appearance, but it is not this degraded state that he fears might make Frau Meyer “unable to bear my proximity,” but rather an understanding of his situation, a true comprehension of the actual humanness concealed within the less than human figure of the camp prisoner. Her response would be to flee from such a figure, or to buy him a pint of soup, a charitable action that nevertheless dodges a true reckoning with the enormity and the nature of the injustice that has occurred and distances the bystander from the victim. People will not, Levi fears, want to confront the realities that human beings have been and still can be reduced to such a state.

Tadeusz Borowski was a writer and intellectual who was arrested and eventually deported to Auschwitz for his communist leanings and his participation in underground publications in occupied Poland. *This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen* is a collection of short stories about life in Auschwitz. To an even greater extent than Levi, Borowski refuses to sentimentalize the experience of life in Auschwitz or to gloss over the extent to which its victims were dehumanized. Stories like “This Way for the Gas” and “A Day at Harmenz” are told from the blunt, unemotional perspective of someone who has become acclimated to the inhuman conditions of the camp, daring readers to confront the unpalatable reality of what the perpetrators of the camps have done to their victims. “This Way for the Gas” begins with a forthright

description of the extent to which the residents of the camp have been dehumanized: “All of us walk around naked. The delousing is finally over, and our striped suits are back from the tanks of Cyclone B solution, an efficient killer of lice in clothing and of men in gas chambers” (29).

Borowski often compares the inmates of the camp to animals, noting at one point a group of men who sit eating, “their jaws working greedily, like huge human insects” (35). Like Levi, Borowski often dwells on the way the camp does not allow the prisoners to meet the standards of humanness to which people in normal circumstances easily adhere. They are not able to dress normally, and they are not able to add a veneer of refinement to their pursuit of basic needs such as food, resembling huge insects as they consume what they can get. Borowski uses the detached tone of his stories to present these facts to the reader as a bare reality, and not a cause for shame – a point that Levi also emphasizes.

While Borowski echoes many of Levi’s observations about the degraded circumstances of the camp prisoners, he, as a non-Jewish inmate who enjoyed a marginally more privileged position in the camp, also confronts the reader with the ways in which the realities of Auschwitz did not always allow its victims to hold onto the standards of sentiment and morality that society often considers central to human identity. Borowski’s character Tadeusz and others like him obediently go about the hellish work of assisting with the exterminations that take place at Auschwitz. Tadeusz notes that after the trains are emptied, “we proceed to load the loot. We lift huge trunks, heave them on to the trucks . . . Occasionally somebody slashes one open with a knife, for pleasure or in search of vodka and perfume . . .” (42). After their daily work is done, Tadeusz reflects that “I see the camp as a haven of peace. It is true, others may be dying, but one is somehow still alive, one has enough food, enough strength to work . . .” (48). He is direct and uncompromising in his depiction of what a concentration camp victim turns into, having suffered

a crime the magnitude of which has pushed him beyond the boundaries of what is conventionally imagined as human.

Like Levi, Borowski also relates an anxiety about the extent to which the dehumanization of the victims of the war will make it difficult for outsiders to recognize the true nature of what has been done to them. In one of the last stories, “The January Offensive,” Borowski reflects on the interaction among American soldiers, German citizens, and refugees and concentration camp survivors. The Americans are well-meaning, but Borowski observes that their sympathy is naturally turned towards those who have been able to maintain circumstances of dignity and stability. He notes of the Americans that:

. . . these strong, athletic, cheerful men, full of the joy of living . . . these sincere, direct men with minds as clean and fresh as their uniforms, as rational as their lives, as honest as their uncomplicated world, felt an instinctive contempt for the people who had failed to hold onto their wealth, who had lost their businesses and their jobs and dropped to the very bottom of society. But their attitude towards the courteous German bourgeoisie who had managed to preserve their culture and fortunes . . . was one of understanding and friendly admiration. (165)

Even though it should be clear that the refugees and survivors are the victims of a massive crime and the bourgeois Germans have benefitted from a grossly unjust system, causes become confused and empathy becomes difficult where people have been made unable to adhere to the normal conditions of respectability and human relatability.

In later stories, Borowski will observe how prisoners who are no longer ignorant about the possible fates that await victims at Auschwitz still cling to an optimistic worldview and a desire to make a productive meaning out of what has happened to them: “Despite the madness of

war, we lived for a world that would be different . . . Do you really think that, without the hope that such a world is possible, that the rights of man will be restored again, we could stand the concentration camp for even one day?” (121) However, Borowski does not represent this hope for a better world as merely a coping strategy for the victims of the camp nor entirely as a beneficial tool for imagining the future, but as a factor that partly enables their persecution. Borowski argues that, “We were never taught how to give up hope, and this is why today we perish in gas chambers” (122). In “Auschwitz, Our Home,” Borowski’s narrator recounts a conversation with a friend named Toleczka, who knows that he will soon be sent to the gas chamber. Toleczka asks Borowski to visit his mother after the end of the war: “You will go to my mother and tell her I died. Died so that there would be no more borders. Or wars. Or concentration camps” (129). Toleczka, like others in the camp, needs to see his murder at the hands of the Nazis as fulfilling a purpose. However, both Borowski and Levi argue that fitting the atrocities into any narrative that advances social progress risks erasing their full horrors, which were motivated by social breakdown, irrationality, and mindless cruelty. In *If This Is a Man*, Levi reflects that “I used to like Plato,” but his experience in Auschwitz has caused him to develop an antipathy towards the philosophers and historians. He argues that, “We were filthy and died real deaths. They were ‘aesthetic’ and carried on subtle debates . . . And we shall be forgotten, drowned out by the voices of the poets, the jurists, the philosophers . . . They will produce their beauty, virtue, and truth. They will produce religion” (132). Borowski understands that the need to make meaning out of historical events such as the Holocaust is dangerous, threatening to obscure the suffering of human victims and to obscure the nature of what was done to them.

Borowski questions whether justice, like history, will deal with the Holocaust on its own terms, taking the approach that is easier, more convenient, and that best serves the needs of the future. In “The People Who Walked On,” the narrator has a conversation with a female Block Elder. The young woman asks him, ““But if a man does evil, he’ll be punished, won’t he?”” To this, the narrator responds, ““I suppose so, unless there are some criteria of justice other than the man-made criteria. You know . . . the kind that explain causes and motivations, and erase guilt by making it appear insignificant in the light of the overall harmony of the universe.”” The young woman’s response to this exchange is to conclude that ““you’re a pretty smart fellow! But you wouldn’t have the slightest idea how to divide bread justly, without giving more to your own mistress!”” (90-91). The woman wants a simple, comprehensible justice to respond to the real and visceral injustice she and the other victims of the camp have suffered. The narrator’s abstract and academic response, which here stands apart from Borowski’s own authorial voice, seems to echo the voices of “the poets, the jurists, the philosophers,” who will make a religion that suits them out of the events of history, erasing the monstrous guilt of the Nazis if that will serve the “overall harmony of the universe.”

The concerns of the survivors seem almost eerily prescient when considering the secondhand accounts of the Holocaust that would follow. While survivors like Levi and Borowski are concerned with forcing readers to confront the cruelty and excess of the Nazi crime, without trying to account for, heal, or redeem the society from which it arose, thinkers and writers who inherit the legacy of the Holocaust will, as Borowski feared, attempt to fit the Holocaust into a narrative that serves the “overall harmony of the universe.”

John Hersey’s Fictional History of the Warsaw Ghetto

Written by American journalist John Hersey, *The Wall* is a richly detailed novel that takes the form of an historical record kept by archivist and *Judenrat* official Noah Levinson, unearthed from the rubble of the Warsaw ghetto. The novel begins with a (fictional) editor's prologue, in which the reader is told how the record was discovered ("buried in seventeen iron boxes and a number of small parcels . . . under the sites of what had been, before the razing of the entire Warsaw ghetto, Nowolipki Street 68 and Swientojerska Street 34"), the methodology of how it was produced and compiled ("it is not so formidable as history; it is more than notes for a history; it is not fiction – Levinson was too scrupulous to imagine *anything*; it is not merely a diary. . ."), and its historical legacy ("The Levinson Archive is famous in Poland and in Palestine") (3,6,5). The entirety of *The Wall* consists of entries from Levinson's journal, which meticulously records both Levinson's own experiences and the experiences, including the thoughts and feelings, of those around him. The form of the novel emphasizes Hersey's commitment, not just to responding to the Holocaust, but to rewriting its history to make it align with a narrative that both humanizes the Jewish victims of the Holocaust and puts their story into harmony with a notion of the endurance and continuity of Western society. Hersey wants to reckon with the horror of the Holocaust but also to hold it back from being an event that causes a rupture in the foundations of society. To some degree, the novel transmutes the construction of the ghetto and the deportation of the Jews to death camps from a crime perpetrated against the Jews by the Nazis into a symbol of the normal forces of loss and mortality. The novel then transforms the story of survival within the ghetto into almost a parable of human responses to the common challenges of life. This narrative not only provides a way of reconciling with the horrors of the Holocaust but also of turning (a palatable version of) the event into the foundation of a universalist ideology that promises soothingly that history will continue and even improve.

However, Hersey, while committed to an optimistic view of this bleak historical chapter, is a thorough and conscientious writer, and his novel contains moments of uncertainty about its central premise, acknowledging at times the limits of a hopeful universalist worldview when applied to the Holocaust.

*The Wall* does not avoid an engagement with the horrors of the Holocaust. Hersey writes from a position of great awareness that something terrible has taken place and speaks from a desire to address what has occurred. The story follows the increasingly difficult struggle for survival of a “family” of Jewish residents who draw together to overcome their circumstances. The novel includes descriptions of the horrible conditions of the ghetto and lets the reader feel the horror of the deportations through which large numbers of residents are disappeared daily. Even before the deportations begin, the residents of the ghetto gather intelligence about their situation. A member of the “family,” a young woman, Rutka Mazur, is sent beyond the ghetto and brings back a report detailing “the nature of the mass killings in Bialystok and Wilno, the thoroughness, the technique employed – these leave no doubt as to our future” (202). The residents of the ghetto then live through the order for deportation, followed by the beginning of a deadly lottery and Levinson’s recording that “we understand that a number of the obviously infirm have been taken over . . . shot, and buried in the mass graves in our own cemetery” (279). There are gruesome descriptions of the corpses of those who have died of disease and overcrowding. Levinson, along with several other men, are employed to transport the corpses and he records images of “a pile of naked bodies . . . Men, women, children . . . Limbs, mops of hair, an isolated hand emerging in a seeming gesture of entreaty . . .” (256). As the deportations continue, another of the book’s characters – a man named Slonim – is sent beyond the walls to discover the destination of the trains that depart each day from the *Umschlagplatz*. When he

returns, it is confirmed that the deportees are being taken to the death camp at Treblinka. After this, the selections for deportation take on an even more horrible significance. Standing in line once himself waiting to discover his fate, Levinson watches those ahead of him being sorted and records: “Left . . . left . . . death . . . death . . .” He observes how “Some of the Jews tried to argue, some to beg; many were crying, men as well as women. I suppose everyone knew about Treblinka by this time” (339).

Hersey allows the reader to feel the weight of the tragedies faced by his characters across the length of the six-hundred-page novel. However, he is committed to enfolding the trauma of the Holocaust into a narrative of recovery and return to peace and normalcy – and engaging with the events of the Holocaust only to such an extent that they conceivably can be enfolded into such a narrative. In his study of English-language Holocaust literature, *Sounds of Defiance: The Holocaust, Multilingualism, and the Problem of English*, Alan Rosen quotes Hersey as he muses about his decision to write a novel about the Warsaw Ghetto: “For a long time, I thought I would write about one of the great concentration camps. Early in 1947, I had extended, intensive conversations . . . with an alumnus of Auschwitz . . . A few weeks after those talks, I concluded that the people in the concentration camps had been degraded by their experience to a subhuman, animal level.” Hersey is willing to delve into the trauma of the Holocaust, but not to the level of trauma that survivors such as Levi and Borowski experience. Instead, he decides to focus on the ghetto, where “people had lived on as families to the very end, and had maintained at least vestiges and symbols of those things we consider civilization” (47). Though his is a good-faith effort to reckon with the legacy of the Holocaust, Hersey includes in his novel only those aspects of the event that can fit into a view of the Holocaust as a moment of adversity that can be overcome, returning humanity to a state of peace and harmony, rather than an overwhelming

historical rupture. Hersey does not include the experience of the concentration camp in his novel, and to the extent that he details the horrors of the ghetto, he portrays them as something experienced and endured rather than as crimes perpetrated by one group of people against another. By focusing on the victims instead of the perpetrators, Hersey can avoid confronting the horrors of the Holocaust as atrocities created by society. Although all the evidence of a fatally corrupt society and a massive crime are present, the novel performs a sleight of hand that causes a sort of blindness to the glaring realities of the deportations and the violence and redirects attention to the story of a community of people who confront life in the ghetto as though the loss, death, and grave adversity it entails are produced by the mysterious forces of the cosmos instead of inflicted by a rights-abusing regime. This way of representing the Holocaust allows it to fit into a narrative about the capacity for human communities to endure and transcend death and catastrophe as long as they adhere to certain core values, such as selflessness and courage in the face of danger and the preservation of memory and tradition.

Although there are of course mentions of the Nazis and glimpses of German soldiers in *The Wall*, the Nazis are in large part conspicuously absent from the novel and there are few scenes of Nazi brutality. In one scene early in the novel, Levinson describes being interrupted while walking down the street by the sight of “a young German soldier hurrying down the middle of the street: he paused . . . raised an automatic pistol and fired a single shot into the group of seven or eight huddled into one rather large shop entranceway . . . The soldier . . . he was a very young boy . . . placed the pistol he had been using in a holster, took another one out from another holster, and ran on” (252). Levinson witnesses the young soldier shoot several more people at random. This description of the shooting spree is one of the only incidences of German violence in the novel, and while its portrayal of indiscriminate murder is effectively

appalling, it is also characterized strongly by randomness. The German soldier is young and alone and appears almost more as a manifestation of the deteriorating conditions of the ghetto than as part of a systematic assault.

In the service of removing the Holocaust from a narrative about Nazi crime and deep social imperfections, the novel shifts the blame for the genocide away from the Nazis and focuses on the inaction of Jewish authority and the cravenness of various members of the Jewish community. While others, most notably Hannah Arendt in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, have drawn criticism for their unflinching appraisal of the response of Jewish leaders during the Holocaust, Hersey's evasion of Nazi guilt and focus on the actions of the Jewish community is perhaps driven by different motives. Hersey is arguably not interested solely in taking a difficult look at the causes of the Holocaust, but in veering away from such an analysis. In *The Wall* the origins and historical implications of the crimes against the Jewish people are almost beside the point. What matters is how individuals and communities choose to handle catastrophe. Levinson's account furthermore also occasionally gently ridicules certain individuals among the Jews for the lack of wisdom in their response to the threats they face. When the deportations have reduced the population of the ghetto to a tenth of its original size, Levinson notes that "this leads our more religious optimists to say with assurance that the deportations are at last at an end" (405). Gently mocking these religious optimists, Levinson demonstrates how they have traced the prediction of the deportations back to the prophet Isaiah: "For, behold, the Lord, the Lord of hosts, doth take away [from the Warsaw ghetto] the stay and the staff . . ." (405). Levinson adds that, "Personally I think the prophet was talking about something more important than the Warsaw ghetto" (405). This incident both scorns the "religious optimists" for not taking a more proactive approach to their circumstances and downplays the historical significance of those circumstances.

This way of looking at the Holocaust allows Hersey to avoid facing the true horrors committed against the Jewish people, which are potentially impossible to incorporate into the kind of restorative narrative he wants to write. The Warsaw ghetto is a temporary squall that will blow over, not a world-changing event. The importance, not so much of the threats the residents of the ghetto faces, but of how they will choose to respond comes to the forefront increasingly as the novel reaches its climax in the uprising. Levinson resigns himself to the fact that the Germans intend to liquidate the ghetto and records that “Now, there is but one question. In what manner will we go? Proudly or cravenly?” (330) Slightly later, Levinson records the address of one of the novel’s heroes, Dolek Berson, to the Z.O.B, the Jewish resistance group.: “Berson, with earnest expression: - ‘Soon we must choose: either die fighting or die like sheep in a shambles’”(367). At one point, a rabbi named Goldflamm delivers a speech that Levinson records, in which he states that, “if I must go to Treblinka, I intend to die as decently and quietly as I would hope to die of typhus. It is nonsense to feel humiliated by the Nazis, because we all know that our faith will survive their persecution” (369). Here as elsewhere, the novel commandeers the story of the Warsaw ghetto into a narrative of continuity, endurance, and the preservation of the good. This emphasis on facing the inevitable courageously both sidesteps a direct confrontation with the outrageous wrongness of the Nazis’ actions and stands in contrast to the records of the firsthand accounts. Writers like Levi and Borowski emphasize the deportation to the death camps, not as a crucible of human strength and integrity, but rather as an overwhelming attack upon the ability of people to retain their humanity.

As well as seeing the Jews of the ghetto as having a great amount of control over their situation, Hersey represents the death and destruction they have endured as inherently capable of bearing moral meaning, but not by sending a message about the problems of society. Survivor

accounts such as *If This Is a Man* and *This Way for the Gas* resist assigning meaning to death or survival in the concentration camp. Individuals survive selection by accident, or by being strong enough to work, or by not being Jewish. While *The Wall* acknowledges to some degree the indiscriminate nature of the Nazi killing machine, the novel, in its drive to create meaning, derives moral meaning from the fates of some of its characters. One member of the “family” is Rachel’s brother-in-law Stefan, a young man who joins the Jewish police and loses himself in the lure of power and the drive for individual survival. Stefan becomes a moral fatality after being told that he must find someone to present for deportation to avoid losing his wife to the trains. After trying to persuade his father to go to the *Umschlagplatz*, he forcefully removes the sickly Symka from her apartment and takes her to be deported. This brutal action, however, merely delays the inevitable, and shortly after, he and his wife Halinka are sorted into a group bound for Treblinka. Luckily, a fortuitous round of bombing intervenes and Halinka manages to slip away. As she is running, however, “Stefan’s hand jerked out from Halinka’s. She looked around. Stefan was standing dumbly, being shaken by the runners who bumped into him.” Levinson records that “this was two days ago. Stefan has still not showed up. There can be but one assumption” (397). Here, the position of having to choose between the lives of family members is figured as a trial which Stefan fails and his certain death or deportation as a kind of cosmic punishment. However, this is not the only meaning that the deportations can take in the novel. Another young couple in the novel, Mordecai Apt and Rutka Mazur, face a similar dilemma. Mordecai must deliver either his pregnant wife or his mother-in-law to be deported. Before he and Rutka have made a decision, Rutka’s mother graciously volunteers. Levinson records that “Froi Mazur reported at about noon to Niemann’s office, and she was taken soon afterward to the *Umschlagplatz*. She carried with her nothing but a pair of slippers, symbolizing readiness for death, and a pair of

candles, to make her prayers go straight to God” (483). Here again, though the description of Froi Mazur’s deportation is filled with pathos, the focus is shifted away from the crime committed against her to a parable about how people approach death and moral decisions. Froi Mazur is represented as noble in her sacrifice, and Mordecai, by not asking anyone to go to the *Umschlagplatz*, is spared his wife. By figuring the deportations as a means by which the residents of the ghetto negotiate their own morality (and mortality), Hersey to some degree erases the true nature of the atrocity being perpetrated against them.

Hersey’s harmonizing narrative tends toward a universalist perspective, seeing the events experienced by the residents of the Warsaw Ghetto as almost symbolic of human trials and tribulations in general and expanding outwards to advance a vision of humanity joined together by common experiences and values. While on a superficial level *The Wall* is very invested in preserving the contours of a specific time and place, on a deeper level, the novel takes the story of the ghetto out of its particular historical context, to some degree, and posits it as a universally accessible account. Rosen notes that Hersey was concerned about the use of English to describe the experience of the ghetto: “So much part and parcel of American life, English threatens to mislead . . . to take the experience that it knows best and universalize it, not revealing but obscuring what actually happened” (38). To minimize this effect, Rosen explains, Hersey avoided dialogue as much as possible. However, others have noted that universalization is the primary consequence of the novel. In *Imagining the Holocaust*, Daniel Schwarz examines the significance of *The Wall* in a postwar American context. He makes extensive references to scholar Sidra Dekoven Ezrahi, who finds the novel extremely objectionable for its lack of attention to the specificity of Jewish experience. Ezrahi, Schwarz explains, feels that *The Wall* amounts to “redefining the Holocaust in terms of Western humanism” which “corrupts the

Holocaust by the wrong kinds of telling and eviscerates the mystical Jewish culture by which much of Eastern European Jews lived” (144-145). Schwarz, however, finds Ezrahi’s judgment “unduly dismissive and harsh,” arguing instead that “it is more profitable to inquire why such a book fulfilled the needs and desires of its audience” (143). However, Schwarz does share Ezrahi’s assessment that the novel universalizes the experiences of the Jews: “It is noteworthy that Hersey’s concept of the Jew is of an ideal universal man . . . He is very conscious of writing for both the American Jewish community and for a liberal democratic postwar audience of Americans who have participated in the war effort and want to find meaning in historical events” (149). Schwarz connects Hersey’s universalizing to the desire to make the Holocaust broadly meaningful to a public desperate to recover from the war.

There are moments when the novel explicitly endeavors to drive home the idea that the experience of the Warsaw ghetto is merely an allegory of the war experience in particular, and the human experience in general. At one point, Levinson notes that “I tried to point out to Berson that our ghetto differs from normal society only in that all the normal pressures are increased a hundredfold” (162). Hersey’s impulse to normalize the conditions of the ghetto in order to palliate the trauma they entail segues into a larger narrative about the universal nature of human life in general and the basic sameness of experience, flattening out the particularities of different time periods, spaces, and communities. During a philosophical moment in his journal writing, Levinson lays out the novel’s driving thesis, explaining how he has come to the conclusion that “man’s real quiddity is that he is a human being, not that he is a Zionist, a Communist, a Socialist, a Jew, a Pole, or for that matter, a Nazi” (426). Whereas the first-hand accounts see the Holocaust as dismantling cherished notions of the inherent value and equality of human beings, the Holocaust is for Hersey’s character a setting for stitching this social fiction back together.

Levinson goes on to contemplate his predicament: “Perhaps I am merely living out my Jewish fate . . . I think not. I think this is not so specific and negligible a case. I think we are indeed involved in the struggle of Humanity against Anti-Humanity . . . We may all die. But we will win” (427). On the one hand, this formulation attempts to pull the Jews of Warsaw out of isolation, figuring them as engaged in an epic and almost metaphysical battle that, it is almost implied, is waged by all people at all times. However, this universalizing portrayal of Levinson’s situation threatens to trivialize the specific dangers faced by the residents of the ghetto (which are cast as “negligible” if they affect only the Jews) and also once again negates the human actors that are behind the crimes against the Jews. The battle that Hersey here describes is not waged by the Nazi state against the entire Jewish population but rather is fought between Humanity and Anti-Humanity, which is figured as an amorphous force never explicitly equated with the Nazis.

The novel as a whole lends itself to a worldview that downplays the significance and uniqueness of particular historical moments and specific communities of people. This perspective results from the effort to reach a resolution to the upheaval caused by the Holocaust. However, in Hersey’s exhaustive and detailed account, this viewpoint cannot always maintain its integrity, conceding at times the actual difficulty of reaching a reconciliation with the Holocaust and the lack of harmony binding together disparate groups of people. As much as Hersey wants the ghetto to stand in for human experience in general, the novel cannot ignore the reality that its core characters have been cut off from the rest of society. While Nazi aggression does not have much of a presence in the novel, there are depictions of the discrimination, persecution, and indifference the ghetto residents face from the non-Jewish population. Moving outside the wall, Dolek Berson has a run-in with a gang of Polish *Schmalzovniks*, thugs who intimidate and extort

Jews in hiding. In an initially more positive interaction, he finds shelter at the home of a Polish woman named Pani Szilepska, who seems solicitous but soon reveals herself to be overly fond of dwelling on the misfortunes that have befallen Jews who have stayed with her. Berson realizes that “Pani Szilepska gave sanctuary to Jews not out of conviction, not out of real understanding and altruism, but as a self-indulgence. It gave her excitement and a sense of power” (486).

Rather than a common human bond, this woman’s aid to the Jews is based on the knowledge of a distinction and a power imbalance between her group and theirs. Going along with the general unhelpfulness of the non-Jews is an emphasis on the need to draw together for survival with those who are united by a similarity of both heritage and situation. The novel primarily centers on a small group of ghetto residents who overcome their differences to stick together during difficult times. Daniel Schwarz notes that, “within these conditions, the concept of ‘family’ expands to become almost tribal” (149).

In fact, for all that the novel frequently endeavors to override the specifically Jewish nature of the ghetto experience, the characters continually discover that salvation, both practical and spiritual, is primarily to be found within the Jewish community. The residents of the ghetto make frequent, longing references to Palestine as a utopia to which to escape. The novel’s central female character, Rachel Apt, is offered a choice of two possible escape routes for her young brother, David. A Catholic convent has offered to take him in, a position that would be relatively safe. The other option is “a very roundabout one, I’m afraid – to Palestine. From Warsaw to Palestine – *on foot*. A very difficult trip” (365). Rachel decides to send her brother on the extremely perilous journey to Palestine, believing that only a Jewish community can offer a true rescue. In the final pages of the novel, as Levinson interviews the surviving members of the ghetto who wait for deliverance in the sewers, he comes across Zilberzweig, a previously

prominent member of Jewish Warsaw society. Levinson puts to him the question, “You said you decided to search for the emotions of the universal man. Did you find them?” To this Zilberzweig replies, “No . . . Not yet. It is rather hard to find universality within a ghetto wall . . . but I can say that I am trying” (616). This conversation seems to signal a partial concession on Hersey’s part, concerning the aims and the limitations of his project. The novel is caught in a paradox, unable to either concede or fully embrace its effort to universalize the Holocaust. Hersey’s attempt to describe the Holocaust in universalist terms, as part of the general suffering of the war experienced by the whole world, is motivated by his desire to heal the wound that it opens up in twentieth century history. However, a full embrace of this universalist approach would constitute both an outright denial of historical reality and a threat to the very purpose such an approach is meant to serve. Hersey cannot fully acknowledge the horrors and degradations inflicted by the Nazis and claim the experience of these horrors as a part of universal human experience. To do so would be to undermine the narrative of the continuity and adequacy of liberal values to which he is committed. Hersey still acknowledges, in partial and evasive terms, that the genocide was experienced particularly by the Jewish community. The novel’s uneasiness concerning the specificity of the experience of Jewish people during the war is to some extent indicative of a tendency on the part of Western historians of the Holocaust to pull their punches when it came to acknowledging the full implications of the genocide. Just as Hersey avoided a confrontation with the realities of the concentration camp, he cannot entirely face the social evil suggested by the true racial motivations of the Nazis or the indignities that they inflicted on a human population.

Rebecca West – Nuremberg and the Promise of Justice

Rebecca West's trilogy "Greenhouse with Cyclamens I, II, and III," consists of essays covering her experiences in postwar Germany under the shadow of the Nuremberg trials, the Potsdam Conference, and the Berlin Blockade. The "Greenhouse" trilogy was published in West's 1955 collection *A Train of Powder: Six Reports on the Problem of Guilt and Punishment in Our Time*. Like Hersey, West is deeply invested both in taking a full account of the realities of the Holocaust and in creating meaning out of the event. Whereas Hersey, who focuses on the Holocaust as an adversity to be overcome, is interested in minimizing the trauma that the Holocaust represents so as not to allow it to overwhelm the process of historical healing, West turns her attention to addressing the problem of massive social disorder that threatens to disrupt the continued smooth functioning of Western society. As Hersey delves into the suffering caused by the Holocaust without considering the human originators of that suffering, so West focuses on the actions and wrongdoing of the perpetrators of the Holocaust and largely turns a blind eye to the experiences of their victims. Although "Greenhouse with Cyclamens" is more fragmented and conflicted than *The Wall*, West also commits herself to the task of weaving a narrative thread through the chaotic experiences of the Nuremberg trials and the occupation of Germany. She bends the Nazi crimes into a story of society's temporary inability to suppress evil and the ultimate triumph of justice. As with Hersey, the narrative logic West applies to the problem of the Holocaust, as well as providing an incomplete and problematic historicization, also underwrites a worldview that represents a compromise between the poles of universalist and nationalist principles. Whereas Hersey aspires to a certain universalism, West's focus on crimes, which were committed and tried by representatives of nation-states, leads her to uphold an ideology that is more international than truly universal. "Greenhouse with Cyclamens," like *The*

*Wall*, is a self-consciously imperfect resolution to the Holocaust and to the demands of the post-Holocaust world. While West remains adamant that salvation is to be found within the nation-state, she must yield at times to the appeal – or even necessity – of a more international worldview.

Rebecca West does not have a desire to see the Holocaust as a breaking point in the history of Western society, calling for a radical reconsideration of the basic tenets of that society. She approaches her study of Nuremberg with an attitude of faith in liberal processes and social progress and a mistrust of radical attitudes. In the introduction to *Rebecca West Today: Contemporary Critical Approaches*, Bernard Schweitzer argues that West “cuts across traditional ideological categories, being neither wholly a conservative nor entirely a progressive thinker, but offering a syncretic blend of political ideals emphasizing stability, tradition, loyalty, and nationalism, as well as anti-imperialism, gender equality, social justice, and personal liberty” (30). West’s biographer Carl Rollyson notes that, in the postwar period, “West had become a disciple of Edmund Burke, who believed in reform not revolution, and argued that tearing down time-honored institutions did more harm than good, because it destroyed the partial regard for human rights painfully gained over the ages” (193). West’s temperate beliefs in the value of tradition and the guidance of liberal thought lead her to write the Holocaust into a narrative of reform and continuity, rather than revolution. Despite acknowledging the imperfections of the trials, West’s account in “Greenhouse with Cyclamens I” emphasizes how naturally society begins to reshape, correct, and reform itself in the wake of the war. For instance, the Allies are not vindictive: “They did not want to kill and be grimly immanent over conquered territory” (23). The trials are undertaken only with the dutiful purpose of restoring justice. She insists that, “the accusations that were made against the leaders in the Palace of Justice at Nuremberg were

true. They were proved true because the accusers did not want to make them. They would much rather have gone home” (41-42). However, according to West’s observations, “there in Germany, there was a call for punishment” (32). In this analysis, the victorious Allies respond to the horrors of the Nazi state with entirely bloodless devotion to the restoration of law and order, and the Germans furthermore desire to be held accountable, corrected, and reformed.

“Greenhouse with Cyclamens” furthermore emphasizes the essential competence of those in charge to provide justice. As in *The Meaning of Treason*, West praises the lawyers and judges who respond to the disruption in social order and work to restore society to a state of stability. She notes that, “the Nuremberg judges realized the difficulty of the situation and believed that the imperfection could be remedied by strict adherence to a code of law, which they must force themselves to apply as though they were not victors but representatives of a neutral power” (33). West writes glowingly of the speech of American prosecutor Robert Jackson. At the end of this speech, West notes, the Nazi defendants “were abashed, for the speech showed the civilized good sense against which they had conspired, and it was patently admirable, patently a pattern of the material necessary to the salvation of peoples” (37). The prosecutors and the judges – the representatives of the Allies – not only bring legal judgment to bear on the Nazis in the dock, but also promise the salvation of society in the face of the Nazi threat. By applying “civilized good sense” to the matter of the Nazis, it is possible to frame their outrageous crimes as a moment of moral insanity, which can be identified by those who have been able to remain sane, and ejected from civilized society. Even the Nazis, as abject as they are, are brought to an awareness of right and wrong and made to feel ashamed for how far they have strayed from the proper path.

One side of West’s narrative of salvation focuses on the actions of the Allies and their commitment to justice. However, another side focuses on the Germans themselves – both the

Nazi defendants and the population at large. West's analysis of Germany itself serves the purpose of at once containing the Nazi pathology within a particular space, one national culture that had gone wrong, as well as querying the past and present of the German people to ascertain whether or not there is the possibility of a rehabilitation. The first part of "Greenhouse I" is devoted to detailed descriptions of the appearances of the Nazis in the dock. Most of the defendants are described as physically unpleasant or manifesting some sign of sinfulness or interior wrongness: "Hess was noticeable because he was so plainly mad," and Schacht "might have been a corpse frozen by rigor mortis, a disagreeable corpse who had contrived to aggravate the process so that he should be specially difficult to fit into his coffin" (12-13). Furthermore, West sees their crimes, their defeat, and their eventual fate written on their bodies. She notes that, "not the slightest trace of their power and their glory remained; none of them looked as if he could ever have exercised any valid authority." Under the shadow of the death penalty, "these people were also surrendering physical characteristics which might have been thought inalienable during life, such as the colour and texture of their skin, and the moulding of their features" (11). West's descriptions of the defendants' appearances seem almost excessive. As Lyndsey Stonebridge notes, "the very lavishness of her writing puts pressure on the surface of things to yield a meaning" (29). The meaning that West draws from – or imposes onto – the bodies of the Nazis is the comforting notion that they are all sufferers of a common sickness and that the disease of the Nazi state is fading away just as they seem to be where they sit in the courtroom.

Of course, those on trial at Nuremberg are not the only ones culpable in the making of Nazi Germany, and West expands her analysis beyond these individuals to take in the nation of Germany itself. As Phyllis Lassner argues, "instead of interrogating the complex relationships

between victors, villains, and victims, between the British and Americans, officers of the Third Reich, and survivors' testimony, she is entranced, even obsessed, with the character of Germany itself as a willfully self-deceived perpetrator" ("Rebecca West's Shadowy Other" 56). West comes across the central image of national character in "Greenhouse with Cyclamens" in the nineteenth century Schloss where she is staying. While an assembly of judges, prosecutors, and international observers gathers elsewhere in Nuremberg to address some of the most monstrous crimes in history and pick up the pieces in the aftermath of a just-finished war, in a greenhouse attached to the Schloss, a one-legged gardener works diligently at growing flowers. West is amazed by the fruit of his labor, but disturbed by the single-mindedness with which he works. She notes that "this grower of potted plants saw himself simply as a grower of potted plants, and was more than satisfied with this limitation" (54). To West, this gardener symbolizes the German fanaticism for work that is not allied to a philosophical purpose or tempered by a broader appreciation of life. West makes the argument that the Holocaust ultimately grew out of peculiarities like this of the German people.

However, while tracing an almost genetic connection between the Holocaust and the German disposition helps West to create meaning by denying that the horrors of the Nazi state might have erupted from causes more endemic to Western society, she is also interested in interrogating the possibility that, even within Germany, there could be the possibility of rehabilitation and the return to social health and order. In "Greenhouse with Cyclamens II," West turns her attention to the rebuilding of West Germany in the wake of the Potsdam Conference. In the aftermath of the war, Germany continues to experience a flood of refugees who are forced into inhumane conditions. In an interesting move, West argues that "we had better note what the Germans have done to lift a burden of moral guilt off the shoulders of the rest of us" (211). The

occupying nations have been ineffective in dealing with the problem of refugees and displaced persons. However, what salvages the situation is the German commitment to industry: “Because Germany did not go bankrupt but broke out into a passion of productivity,” many of the refugees “found a place in German factories and workshops” (223). West goes on to note that “there was enough employment to keep the community solvent and stable” and even that the refugees “voted neither for the extreme Right nor for the extreme Left, but for the same parties that were supported by the native community” (224). Carl Rollyson notes that for West “the self-dedication and dynamism of German culture” can be regarded as “a great force for both good and evil” (188). In the reoccurring image of the overgrown greenhouse, this dynamism is an energy to be feared, but in “Greenhouse II,” West entertains the idea that German productivity could allow the nation to redeem itself, solving the moral crisis of the refugees and molding a society of balance, moderation, and tolerance. Furthermore, she notes of the Allies that “never has an occupying force had a higher regard for the people of the territory it occupied” (251). This admiration is due to the fact that “they were sitting on the ballot boxes, which, at the last election, Berliners had stuffed with votes against communism and for social democracy” despite the risks of having taken an anti-communist stance in the event that all of Berlin would fall into the hands of the Russians (252). West quotes “a Jew, one of the ablest who fled from Hitler, one of the first to settle down in Germany after the defeat,” and this man claims that “now any German in the Russian Sector, whatever his race or politics or degree of distinction, may hear a knock on his door at night and know that he is to be taken away and may never come back . . . So now the Berliners have learned, all of them, what totalitarianism is” (258). West acknowledges that “it was impossible not to say coldly, ‘They ought to have learned that long ago. There was a stinking pile of evidence that should have taught the deaf and the blind.’ But the truth lay

thereabouts. It manifested itself most clearly if one followed the clue given by the analysis of the Berlin polls” (258). West is intent on discovering the roots of Nazism within the German social structure, but it is as if the notion that an entire European nation could be so fatally diseased is too overwhelming. Although she is not as optimistic for West Germany, West endeavors to put the Berliners at least into a narrative of reform and salvation, in which they learn the error of their ways and recommit to democratic ideals and processes. West’s attention especially focuses on the war widows of Berlin, who tirelessly go about the work of rebuilding their communities. After suffering through the twin assaults of first the Nazi state and then the Soviets, “these women had learned with their whole being that justice gives a better climate than hate. Aching they saw a vision of a state that should think each citizen so precious that it would give him full liberty to be himself . . . This is the democratic faith, and it was to this they had learned allegiance” (266). West first locates within the nature of Germany the seeds of the Nazi evil and then pulls the German people back into a narrative of liberal progress, justice, and continuity.

The narrative West constructs around the Holocaust and its aftermath emphasizes the return to a state of justice and social order and lends itself to a worldview that centers on the primacy of the nation-state while also having to make concessions to the need for a concept of international justice. In West’s study of Nuremberg and its consequences, both good and evil are perpetrated at the level of the nation. The Germans fell into the corruption of Nazism as a people and face the possibility of redemption together. The Americans, the French, and the British bring their national virtues and value systems to Nuremberg to reestablish order. While the Berliners might have been admirably learning their belated lesson about totalitarianism during the occupation, the Allies were the true heroes during the Berlin Airlift. West argues that “it is our duty to fight as eagerly for the rights of others, to admit the unique and sacred character of their

souls and their wills, and here in Germany that duty was often faithfully observed.” Referring to prominent figures in the Allied presence in Germany, she argues that “no parachutist dropped on the Ruhr could have guessed that Harry Collins was not wrestling for his own people; and Sir Cecil Weir might have been managing factories that belonged not only to his own nation but to his own firm” (240) West at all points stresses the nobility of the Western democracies. In her analysis of the Allied occupation, she reiterates the point that “when Britain and American were obliged to occupy Germany they very creditably renounced all idea of revenging themselves on their defeated enemy and planned an occupation which would be a great and enlightening experience for the German people” (231). West repeats the idea that moral systems are to be found within the sanctuary of the nation-state, a notion that is intimately connected to the narrative of redemption that she builds around the Nazi crimes and the Nuremberg trials. The continuing virtue of Britain, France, and the United States is her greatest hope in the aftermath of the war, but West also clings to the possibility that, at least in East Germany and throughout Berlin, there is a chance for rebuilding a democratic society from within the ruins of the Nazi state.

West’s narrative about the aftermath of the Holocaust focuses heavily on salvific qualities of national virtues. However, despite clinging to a strong belief in the power of the nation to harbor democratic values, West, in her study of Germany, must submit this view to a compromise with a more internationalist vision. On the one hand, West must reckon with the capacity of the nation-state to harbor and nurture evil as well as virtue. Even as she makes rhetorical attempts to rescue the Germans from a state of corruption, West allows the image of the gardener in the greenhouse to be an echo of doubt that sounds throughout the trilogy. She admits in “Greenhouse II” that “the truth was that Western Germany was a frightening place.

British and Americans were not injecting the Germans with their philosophy . . . and the Germans showed no signs of holding a faith of their own. The one-legged man who grew enormous cyclamens in the greenhouse at Nuremberg was becoming a nightmare figure” (232). The British and the Americans might have national value systems worthy of being learned, but the West Germans seem unwilling to adopt them. West faces the prospect that perhaps the center of a nation can harbor a dark void in place of a democratic, peace-loving heart. In “Greenhouse III,” the gardener makes a final appearance, and West notes that “he terrified because his absorption in industry left a vacuum in his mind which sooner or later would be filled. If no religion or philosophy or art came to bind this man’s imagination to reality, then the empty space would be flooded with fantasy which would set him at odds with life” (328). The gardener first appears as a symbol of what drove Germany to Nazism and enabled West to perceive Nazism as a disease that had grown in Germany but could potentially be cured. However, this figure continues to haunt West’s observations of Germany for years after the war, suggesting an anxiety that national maladies may be more persistent than she had hoped. Lyndsey Stonebridge notes that “a loving nation-state with an established tradition: such is the necessity West finally takes from Nuremberg . . . But what, we might ask, about the citizens of that putative state who do not grow up with its call to democracy in their blood?” (40) The more uncertain moments of “Greenhouse” seem to acknowledge that a love of democracy is not something necessarily inherited with national citizenship.

Just as West allows doubts about the unimpeachable virtue of the nation to invade her narrative of Nuremberg and occupied Germany, she also gives concessions to the need for heavy interactions and interdependencies of various nations in the postwar period. In the dismay she expresses towards the Germans and the Soviets, West concedes the notion that, while individual

nations may develop and nurture their own value systems, these systems become impotent on the global stage of the twentieth century if they are not shared. West notes that the Allies, operating according to their own moral standards, have sometimes been blindsided by the unwillingness of other nations to meet those standards. West argues that “the Nazi rape of Czechoslovakia horrified Neville Chamberlain, not because he felt any tenderness towards the Czechs . . . but because he found that the world had changed around him, and he had been doing business with people who did not keep their word because they did not mind whether they were thought honourable or not” (201). On the other side of the war, General Howley, the commandant of the American sector of Berlin, faces a similar problem. Having thought that he had successfully negotiated with a Soviet colonel, Howley is shocked to find that the man is unfaithful to his word. West notes that “it also was breaking on him, as it had broken on Neville Chamberlain, that the ground was not solid beneath his feet, that it is impossible for society to survive if the mass of men cannot be trusted to abide by their word” (201-202). West does not give up the nationalist position she adopts in *The Meaning of Treason* for a universalist viewpoint. She remains convinced of the preeminence of the nation-state and skeptical of the possibility of something like a truly universal world order. In “Greenhouse III,” West leaves off on a note of deep doubt over West Germany, but she has more hope for the East, specifically because it does not have the luxury of sinking into itself and falling back onto the traditions of its history. In Berlin and East Germany, “there is more sacred territory. There the Germans and the Russian peoples were enlaced in the darkness cast by an absurd political relationship . . . But they were not sleeping . . . Dumbly they were discussing what government should be, which is to say that they were discussing what life is” (330). In one of the last pages of the trilogy, West articulates a

new compromise, an internationalist view that still cherishes the primacy of the nation-state but imagines also the possibilities opened up by international exchange.

## CHAPTER FOUR: THE PERILS OF REVOLUTION: HUMAN RIGHTS AND SOVIET TOTALITARIANISM

George Orwell and Arthur Koestler have often been seen as political writers who occupied positions as outsiders in the literary and sociopolitical spheres of their time. However, they can be better understood as thinkers whose work, rather than merely promoting a political position, addressed the complicated human rights issues of their time. Though both have been criticized for a lack of sophisticated knowledge of Marxist theory or class economics, their work carries above all a deep interest in promoting the welfare and equality of all people. Emerging from their writing about socialism, communism, and the threat of totalitarianism is a portrait of the troubled relationship between human rights and politics which gives their work enduring relevance beyond an anti-Soviet mid-century context. Koestler's fictionalized account of the Moscow Trials, *Darkness at Noon*, and Orwell's classic dystopia *Nineteen Eighty-Four* trace the thread that connects the socialist promise – which is, for these writers, broadly a promise of social equality and material well-being – to the nightmare of the twentieth century totalitarian state. The analyses these texts provide of the fate of socialism and the rise of totalitarianism in Europe explore how the project to realize human rights through political action becomes entangled and confused with the struggle for and love of power.

Koestler's *Darkness at Noon* outlines broad accusations of the Soviet state's failure to uphold human rights, to serve as a bulwark against fascism, or to develop into an egalitarian utopia, at a time when many of Koestler's European contemporaries still believed in the potential

of communism. The novel is not only an exposition of the failure of the communist revolution to bring about the social conditions promised by Marxism but also a lamentation on the futility of political revolution in general. Koestler turned originally to communism out of a belief that twentieth century Western society was flawed and could not provide adequately for the needs of the people. However, in his portrait of the Soviet state in *Darkness at Noon*, Koestler expresses his disillusionment with the idea that political action can bring about real social change or establish a human rights regime. *Darkness at Noon* is the portrait of a movement in which the power that was meant to be the instrument of revolution becomes its only object and the power that was supposed to protect the human person completely overwhelms the individual. Ultimately, Koestler retreats from a faith in politics and turns to a vaguely mystical belief system that decenters human will and decisive action.

Orwell also represents totalitarianism as a phenomenon that results when the fight for human rights becomes confused with the struggle for power. *Nineteen Eighty-Four* expresses not so much the fear of a particular group's seizure of control but the specter of a society in which all ideals are transmuted into nothing more than a devotion to structures of power. However, unlike Koestler, Orwell does not believe that the endeavor to transform society through political commitment is fundamentally untenable. In Orwell's vision, the allure of power is a trap into which the struggle for social justice can fall but is not necessarily an inherent part of that struggle. Whereas Koestler withdraws from political engagement, Orwell sustains a belief that the human rights promises of his own brand of socialism can be fulfilled through a more humble and grounded form of social reformation. Whereas Koestler comes to look for truth and guidance from what he calls the "oceanic sense," a spiritual realm not fully accessible to consciousness, Orwell believes that the national community can serve as a source of unchanging principles and

a model of empathy that can translate into an engagement with a more universal framework of human rights.

### The Legacy of Communism: Human Rights, Revolution, and Power

Orwell, Koestler, and many of their contemporaries turned to leftist politics as a means of combatting the threat of fascism and an alternative to the inadequacies of liberal nationalism. While the history of the Cold War in the West has meant that communism has often been discarded as a viable belief system, the underlying ideology of the USSR can be seen as a form of universalist human rights doctrine, such as that envisioned in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and the Communist Revolution as one among many attempts to bring about a more just society through political revolution. In “The Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 in the History of Cosmopolitanism,” Samuel Moyn makes the argument that the UDHR does not represent a breakthrough moment in which universalism, understood as the global acceptance of a singular vision of human rights, triumphed in western society and paved a new path for contemporary human rights thinking. Instead, he argues that other forms of cosmopolitanism have existed throughout history and that there have been “various claims to transcend moral parochialism [including] Christianity’s over Judaism . . . or communism’s over capitalism” (367). These systems, Moyn argues, have often failed to become enduring structures of human rights because they ultimately are made up of other values than the preciousness of the human person and pursue other ends than the accomplishment of a perfectly virtuous human society. Particularly, these systems have a tendency to pursue political power as an end and not just a means. Moyn notes that the Cold War “was a battle to the death of rival cosmopolitanisms” – specifically the capitalist mission of the United States versus the Soviet Union’s project to

spread communism – in which “‘humanity’ was crucial but only in different articulations aiming to supplement or to displace each other.” Moyn sees the West as representing one cosmopolitan system—capitalism—and the Soviet Union another, each with its own ideals of liberty and equality. Capitalism prioritized individualistic political and civil freedoms, while the communist state championed more collective social and economic freedoms. However, the value systems of both societies were attached to a bid for power that was more about establishing world governance than protecting the human person. Moyn furthermore argues that universalist (or cosmopolitan) systems exist as pure ideals heavily freighted with political baggage: “cosmopolitanism is not just a cheat or a smokescreen but what makes the specific program it harbors ideologically appealing (something that Karl Marx, in opposing bourgeois universalism with another kind of universalism, well understood)” (225). Moyn’s words chime with Marx’s own writing. In *The Communist Manifesto*, Marx establishes the age of industrialization and the rise of the bourgeoisie as taking the form of an unappealing universalizing system, in which “the need of a constantly expanding market for its products chases the bourgeoisie over the whole surface of the globe. It must nestle everywhere, settle everywhere, establish connections everywhere” (226). This globalization is exploitative. Destroying the unique character and self-sufficiency of local industries, “the bourgeoisie has through its exploitation of the world market given a cosmopolitan character to production and consumption in every country” (226). Later, in “On the Possibility of a Non-violent Revolution,” he incites his readers to “bear in mind this fundamental principle of the International: solidarity! It is by establishing this life-giving principle on a reliable base among all the workers in all countries that we shall achieve the great aim that we pursue” (233). Marxist ideas are here sold to the people through appeal to a universal realization of rights that is not new in the history of the world (as it replaces the economic

globalization of the bourgeoisie), but represents the appealing packaging of a set of politics that will have more bearing on the social organization and material realities of the lives of its followers than will the universalist ideal it supposedly serves.

Universalism may be part of the promise of communism, but a bedrock idea of human nature, human rights, and human equality did not guide its historical progress in the first half of the twentieth century, as the communist movement moved into the realm of *Realpolitik*. Pushing aside the temptation towards idealism, Moyn asserts that throughout history “appeal to transcendent rights may well have stimulated the project of revolutionary founding or refounding . . . but when different sides of local politics appealed to them . . . what mattered more was not the prepolitical appeal each contending side could make to nature . . . but rather who won the political struggle and the mandate to pass laws” (370). As Moyn argues is true of all political bodies that purportedly stand for rights, the communist movement is, from its foundational writings to its historical realization, molded more by power struggles, practical necessities, and political expediency than by an unwavering loyalty to immutable human rights. In *The Anti-Dühring*, Friedrich Engels demonstrates how the movement’s own historical materialism potentially undermines its ability to stand for a deeply rooted vision of human rights. Engels argues that morality is not absolute but develops for individuals “from the practical relations on which their class position is based” (199). This is true of the morality and the program of rights on which Marxist doctrine is based, which springs from the class struggle between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. Engels argues that, at the current moment of this struggle, “the real content of the proletarian demand for equality is the demand for the *abolition of the classes*. Any demand for equality which goes beyond that, of necessity passes into absurdity” (202). This early theory establishes a relativism at the heart of the communist movement, a requirement to

draw limits on which rights can be claimed on the basis of historical necessity and to locate the struggle for rights with the masses and not at the level of the individual.

### Human Rights and State Power

If the potential for a political revolution to become more invested in pursuing power than in promoting human rights is a problem with communism, it is also a concern with human rights and politics more broadly. Many contemporary human rights thinkers contemplate the issue of how easily the pursuit of human rights can become confused with the establishment of power hierarchies and the securing of state power. In his contribution to the 2001 Oxford Amnesty Lectures, “Human Rights, Sovereignty, and Intervention,” politician and human rights scholar Michael Ignatieff notes that, throughout the twentieth century, state sovereignty has been at the heart of human rights discussion but has usually fallen short of being a true framework for human rights. In the period immediately following the Second World War, the protection of state sovereignty was prioritized over the protection of human rights. Ignatieff explains that, for the drafters of the UN Charter, the “sense that aggressive war across national frontiers was the more salient risk than the extermination of peoples within national frontiers helped frame the priority given to sovereignty over human rights” (53). The later twentieth century was the setting for an attempted reconciliation of state sovereignty and human rights in which “people began to talk seriously of reconceiving sovereignty itself in terms of compliance with human rights norms.” There emerged “the idea of sovereignty as responsibility” which “implies that the legitimacy of a state depends on the extent to which it protects the basic rights of its citizens” (57). Ignatieff emphasizes several problems involved with the notion that states acquire their legitimacy through their adherence to human rights principles. Firstly, it simply does not apply to many

states that nevertheless must be recognized politically as states with legitimate power. Secondly, “not even democratic states want international law to construe the legitimacy of states in terms of their accountability to basic human rights norms” (59). The truth, Ignatieff argues, is that, in practice, “states accept that legitimacy continues to be defined by whether a particular regime has effective control over a given territory” and “legitimacy remains a matter of power not of ethics” since “other states within the international system place a higher priority on order than they do on justice” (60). In this summation of the reality of the nature of the state throughout the twentieth century and into the present, the state is above all defined by the possession of power and a stable social order. Ignatieff’s understanding of the state resonates with George Orwell’s depiction of his imagined superstates, which prop each other up in mutual recognition of their own sovereignty. Ignatieff traces the complicated and confusing ideological and practical relationship between the sanction of state sovereignty and the protection of human rights.

In “Right to Intervene or Duty to Assist,” as part of his argument that contemporary western nations abuse their power to interfere with the operations of other states on moral and ideological grounds, Tzvetan Todorov reinforces the idea that what is done in the name of rights may actually have more to do with securing political power. Todorov argues that the impulse to spread universal values, while perhaps noble on the surface, hides totalitarian qualities. Todorov notes that “the imperialist policy of Soviet Russia always paraded the noblest intentions” and that “conquests made in the name of communist ideology were also presented as the triumph of the right” (31). Todorov argues pointedly that “to seek to establish a new world order from which war and violence have been banished, these are projects that resemble the totalitarian utopias in their efforts to protect mankind and establish a paradise on earth” (39). Totalitarian states may be

efficient at enforcing uniformity of opinion but this is also the foundation on which totalitarianism flourishes in the first place.

Furthermore, In *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity*, Wendy Brown argues that people do not always clearly perceive the relationship between human rights and state power – the degree to which they are aligned and the degree to which they are incompatible. She writes that there is a “contemporary disorientation about freedom” stemming from a variety of twentieth century causes, from the right-wing figuration of freedom as license and selfishness to the false promises of communism to bring liberation to the masses. Brown argues that contemporary society has, with varying degrees of consciousness and under different guises, given up its pursuit in favor of protection, giving ever more power to the state. She stresses the importance to democracy of “a desire for political freedom, a longing to share in power rather than be protected from its excesses, to generate futures together rather than navigate or survive them” (4). Brown questions, though, “have we, at the close of the twentieth century, lost our way in pursuing this desire?” (4) Her concerns for the relationship between individual liberty and the state decades after the publication of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* contain Orwellian echoes rippling through time.

### Modernist Writers and the Appeal of Communism

In the time before the war, with the concept of a just society seeming especially in question and imperiled, a core of British and American writers turned hopefully to the Left. While the communist movement initially held widespread appeal among Western writers and thinkers, the 1930s saw a gradual disillusionment with the movement, as it became apparent that communism as practiced had a tendency to change its shape to suit the whims of its leaders and

to become corrupted due to its own totalizing tendencies. The 1949 collection of essays *The God that Failed* includes testimonials from a number of writers who joined the Communist Party and then later became disenchanted with communism. In his introduction, Richard Crossman explains that “the numberless men of letters, both in Europe and America” who were attracted to communism saw in the movement “a vision of the Kingdom of God on Earth” (3). According to Crossman, this mass conversion “was rooted in . . . despair of Western values” (4). Crossman uses religious terms to describe communism, indicating that for its followers communism offered the same kind of transcendental platform for human rights. In his contribution to *The God that Failed*, Arthur Koestler uses similarly religious language to describe his seduction into communism: “A faith is not acquired by reasoning. One does not fall in love with a woman, or enter the womb of a church, as a result of logical persuasion” (15). He argues that he, therefore, “became converted because I was ripe for it and lived in a disintegrating society thirsting for faith” (17). Koestler and the others included in the volume experience a loss of faith when the Party turns out not to be able to deliver on its promise of a God-like foundation for the development of human community. Koestler notes that “its motto might have been: Love your comrade, but don’t trust him an inch” (29). Instead of the fulfillment of human potential, the Party requires the surrender of individual judgment to what the Party defines as the truth to serve its political agendas. Koestler argues that “gradually I learned to distrust my mechanistic preoccupation with facts and to regard the world around me in the light of dialectic interpretation” (35). For Koestler, the final blow to a belief in the ideals of communism is the movement’s subjugation of morality and human compassion to its historical goals, a theme that will resonate in *Darkness at Noon*. After being arrested and imprisoned under the threat of execution in Spain and witnessing the torture and death of his fellow inmates, Koestler comes to

the realization that “ethics is not a function of social utility, and charity not a petty bourgeois sentiment but the gravitational force which keeps civilization in its orbit” (68).

Other writers who contribute to *The God that Failed* echo the appeal of communism on a deep ideological level. Richard Wright reflects that, when first introduced to communism, he was excited “to find that there did exist in this world an organized search for the truth of the lives of the oppressed and the isolated” (118). Wright is drawn to the universalist promise of communism and for its quasi-religious potential to transcend local prejudices of classism and racism.

However, he finds also that the movement does not live up to its ideals. Much like Koestler, Wright realizes that the Party is not interested in a pursuit of truth that is not aligned with its own political aims. Wright suffers at the hands of the same anti-intellectualism with which the Party confronts many other writers. When the other Party members learn of his intelligence and facility with language, “I was shocked to hear that I, who had been only to grammar school, had been classified as an *intellectual*” (127). More problematic, though, is the way that Wright experiences the Party’s indifference to the social well-being of its actual members. Attending a Party conference in New York City, Wright finds himself abandoned by the other members and unable to find accommodation. He remembers, “I stood on the sidewalks of New York with a black skin and practically no money, absorbed, not with the burning questions of the Left-Wing literary movement in the United States, but with the problem of how to get a bath” (138).

Writers like Koestler and Wright record being drawn to the Communist Party out of intertwined personal and social needs and desires. It offered them a faith where one was lacking, even if it later proved unworthy of their belief. However, modernist writers who did not come from parts of the world where communism had firmly taken root or from severely marginalized social positions tended to have a different encounter with communism. The history of modernist

writing in England during the thirties and forties traces a twisting and often ambivalent relationship with the political left. In his thoroughgoing study *British Writers of the Thirties*, Valentine Cunningham notes that this period has often been labelled “the Marxist decade” but warns that the notion of an overwhelming majority of writers and intellectuals joining the Communist Party or even siding with the left was exaggerated, both then and now: “by no means all writers were chiming in with the prevailing orthodoxy or by any means all joining the Communist Party” (30). Nevertheless, the decade leading up to the outbreak of the Second World War was famously characterized by the opposition between forces of the far right and far left, with the rise of fascism and communism and the weakening of traditional liberalism. In “‘Doing Business with Totalitaria’: British Late Modernism and Politics of Reputation,” Marina MacKay furthermore argues that writers of the prewar and wartime period were often pressured to take sides, because “transgressing the implicit binary had become an exercise in futility, tantamount . . . to transparent false consciousness, or just poorly disguised rightwingery” (732).

To the extent that British writers of this period did engage with left-leaning politics, they often had different motivations for participation and different reasons for withdrawing than writers like Koestler and Wright. Communism had a more difficult task truly penetrating the intellectual spheres of British society, and most British intellectuals did not engage with the movement to the extent that Koestler and Wright did. Cunningham suggests that writers who were drawn to the left were motivated in part by a call to social action as well as a frustration with capitalistic society. Cunningham presents some of George Orwell’s writing as representative of British writers’ social concerns with the inequalities and the plight of the working class. He quotes a segment of *The Road to Wigan Pier* in which Orwell recounts the pitiful sight of “a slum girl who is twenty-five and looks forty.” In describing the scene, Orwell

realizes that “we are mistaken when we say that ‘It isn’t the same for them as it would be for us’ and that people born in the slums can imagine nothing but the slums . . . She knew well enough what was happening to her – understood as well as I did how dreadful a destiny it was to be kneeling there in the bitter cold” (225).

Among most British writers, however, enthusiasm for leftist politics gradually waned. This disillusionment was in part a reaction to the actions of the Soviet government that indicated they might be unprepared to live up to their ideals, including the Moscow Trials of the late thirties, the Molotov-Ribbentrop non-aggression pact between the USSR and Germany in 1939, and the Soviets’ tendency to war with dissenting factions of other communists as much as with the Fascists during the Spanish Civil War. However, Cunningham seems to suggest that commitment to the left in part naturally burnt itself out among British social circles that were ill suited for its adoption in the first place. Bourgeois British writers ultimately decided that immersing themselves in the working classes was, in one way or another, impossible or disingenuous to their own identities. Class lines remained all but impenetrable in the prewar years, and even for someone like Orwell, “[g]oing over . . . was a tricky undertaking. For almost as rigidly as in the nineteenth century, Britain was still divided into what Disraeli had labelled the Two Nations, the rich and the poor. And they lived apart” (224). Members of the bourgeoisie who attempted to infiltrate the working classes remained outsiders or began to see themselves as exploitative. Cunningham notes that “most literary goers-over . . . failed to find the land of personal integration they’d been promised. Ironically the disguises they felt driven to assume in order successfully to manage the transition only confirmed them as split men” (262). Others, like Stephen Spender, could not abide the communist necessity of sacrificing individual thought and any intellectual insight that did not further the cause of the Party. He writes in his entry of *The*

*God that Failed* that a grave flaw in communist doctrine is that all art is reduced to simply “an expression of social needs” and that someone who held the right “political theory of society” could “reject the insights of genius, unless these proved to be . . . applications of a political theory to aesthetic material” (267). Like others of his generation, Spender turned away from communism and retreated to a more individualistic approach to being an artist, in which “individual experience” does not have to “submit to the generalization of official information and observation” (270). While Spender took a different journey into and out of communism from someone like Arthur Koestler, in the end, the encounter with communism caused them both – like many others – to develop deep doubts about the possibilities of the communist state to drive human progress forward or to nurture the well-being of the individual. In the remainder of this chapter, I will argue that Koestler and Orwell offer particularly lucid explorations of why the communist movement proved so unsatisfactory and ties this particular historical moment into a larger discussion of the complicated connections between human rights and politics.

### Arthur Koestler, the Soviet State, and the Perils of Revolution

Arthur Koestler was born in Hungary in 1905 and came of age during a time of political turmoil and unrest in central Europe. As a young adult, Koestler drifted towards a left-leaning politics and eventually joined the Communist Party in Germany. His biographer David Cesarani notes that Koestler was drawn to communism in part because “it was the most active anti-Nazi political force” and it “offered community, comradeship, and cause” (63). Koestler eventually became disillusioned with communism and much of his fictional and non-fictional writing elaborates on both the appeal of communism and its ultimate failures. His 1940 novel *Darkness at Noon* tells the story of former Communist Party leader Nicolas Salmanovitch Rubashov – a

fictional stand-in for Nicolai Bukharin and other Bolshevik leaders – as he is imprisoned and falsely accused of treason by the regime he once served faithfully. The novel’s purpose is to demystify the workings of the Soviet state and provide an explanation for why so many people would have confessed to crimes of which they were innocent. Cesarani argues that *Darkness at Noon* is Koestler’s “attempt to understand how he had been suborned by the logic of the revolution and how he had betrayed men for the sake of mankind” (174). The novel explores the dilemma of revolutions in general and builds upon a thesis that revolutionary political movements are bound to fail at their goal of transforming society into a more just version of itself.

Cesarani notes that “Koestler never engaged with Marxism-Leninism at a very high theoretical level” – a charge that is also often brought against Orwell (72). However, for Koestler, Marxist thought serves as the framework for a broad conceptualization of a human rights movement. Koestler is deeply interested in the fate of the individual, the individual’s incorporation into a nurturing social context, the social progress of the masses, and the protection of human welfare against the onslaught of fascism. However, in Koestler’s writing, the difficulty with a political revolution is its tendency to segue into a struggle for power. The use of power is a necessary component of a political movement, but then power has too great a tendency to form the entire structure of the new society that is created, rather than just being a tool that is used in its construction. Koestler furthermore outlines the argument that power structures are ultimately incompatible with a human rights regime both because the retention of power must take precedence over the practice of compassion and mercy and the nurturing of interpersonal bonds and because the employment of power finally transcends the limits of human wisdom and the capacity for social unity. Furthermore, Koestler argues that a necessary condition of a

revolutionary movement is that individual rights (and identity) become too closely identified with state power, creating a paradox in which the individual is both oppressed by the state and cannot have any existence outside of it. Koestler ultimately withdraws from theories of political action into a more spiritual, apolitical belief system which is an attempt to imagine a system of justice that does not rely on human will or judgment.

Koestler's writing asserts a deep interest in questions of human rights, and this concern for the rights of the individual and the masses forms the foundation of, but is not coterminous with, his interest in communism. In his autobiographical text, *The Invisible Writing*, Koestler describes how human rights concerns drew him to the communist movement. In explaining why he remained within the Communist Party despite an awareness of its flaws, Koestler maintains that his faith in communism rested on a "longing for Utopia and rejection of the existing social order" (88) He explains that "in moments of disgust with Russia or the Party . . . every Communist is tempted . . . to turn back." However, "on every occasion, it was some repellent aspect of capitalist society which put him back again on the road" (88). During his tour of the Soviet empire, Koestler uses his visit to Armenia as an occasion to reflect on the Armenian genocide and the horrors of imperialism. Elsewhere, he notes the threat of fascism and its assault on human rights as a justification for sticking to the communist creed. Speaking of his contemporaries, he says: "They don't believe in concentration camps, they don't believe in the starved children of Greece, in the shot hostages of France, in the mass-graves of Poland; they have never heard of Lidice, Treblinka or Belsen" (192) Koestler argues that "against this nightmare background, my doubts and misgivings about Russia paled to insignificance" (193).

Koestler hopes, initially, that communism can be a way forward for human rights, but his interest in the fate of the individual and the cause of social justice transcends his political

commitments. Koestler's work expresses a concern for the humanity of individuals in his autobiography and in *Darkness at Noon*. In his novel about the failures of the communist state, Koestler focuses heavily on an individual character – Rubashov. The novel concerns itself both with the Soviet state generally and historically and with the conditions of life and selfhood for an individual within that state. Rubashov is a fictional character, but he is an amalgam of real people, about whom Koestler is concerned, as historical figures but also simply as people. In *The Invisible Writing*, Koestler notes that he felt compelled to write *Darkness at Noon* to pay tribute to “the unsung end of my friends in Russia,” “the men of goodwill” who had “fought clearsightedly and devotedly against one type of totalitarian threat . . . and were blind or indifferent to the other” (365). As he is being swallowed up by the totalitarian state, Rubashov comes to a gradual awakening of his own selfhood. In his prison cell, he notes that he became “conscious of his own body with unusual intensity, felt the lukewarm touch of the blanket on his legs and the pressure of his hand under his neck” (136). In opposition to the communist state that denies the existence of the individual and asserts that “I” is only a convenience of language, Rubashov starts to become familiar with “the realm of the ‘grammatical fiction,’” which is deep, organic, and non-rational and which has a tendency “to remain out of the reach of logical thought, and then to take one unawares . . . and attack one with day-dreams and toothache” (111). Rubashov also awakens to a concern for the lives of the other victims of the state, as humans rather than statistical units. He is forced to witness a former friend of his, Bogrov, being paraded down the corridor in front of his cell on his way to execution. Bogrov calls out Rubashov's name as he passes by, and “that last cry was branded ineffaceably in his acoustic memory” as he thinks about what Bogrov has had to endure and is left to wonder “What had they done to this sturdy sailor, to draw this childish whimpering from his throat?” (142). Both in and

outside of his involvement with communism, Koestler speaks in the language of human rights, desiring to outline the shape of the ideal community for enshrining the rights of the people and drawing a focus onto the realities of the human body and the concrete nature of human experience.

However, Koestler is interested in parsing the collision between the cause of human rights and the realities of politics. His work largely draws the conclusion that political revolution is ill-equipped to bring about a golden age of human rights, due to the fact that the seizure and maintenance of power is a necessary part of revolution and is inimical to the aims of human rights. *Darkness at Noon* is primarily structured around its protagonist's philosophical debate with himself about what went wrong with the communist revolution and what he as an individual owes to the social structure he helped to build that has now turned on him. Rubashov wrestles with the problem of power, acknowledging that surrendering all authority to the state was a necessary means of protecting the revolution. However, Rubashov also comes to realize that power is no longer just a means of revolution but an end in itself. He reflects that, "all our principles were right, but our results were wrong . . . We diagnosed the disease and its causes . . . We brought you truth . . . We brought you freedom" (58). The revolution started off with good intentions and pure motives. Originally it stood for something other than the substitution of one power system with another. Rubashov continues to puzzle out the problem: "Our will was hard and pure, we should be loved by the people. But they hate us. Why are we so odious and detested?" (58). Already, in Rubashov's accounting of the movement, the truth and freedom that the revolution stood for have been converted into a matter of power; in the process of revolution, a hard and pure will has become a virtue unto itself. Rubashov later elaborates on the central role of an unyielding power in the revolutionary movement: "Politics can be relatively fair in the

breathing spaces of history; at its critical turning points there is no other rule possible than the old one, that the end justifies the means . . . We were neo-Machiavellians in the name of universal reason . . .” (98) Power, for Koestler, is not just a pitfall of revolution but a crucial ingredient. While Rubashov’s generation of revolutionaries intended to stand for truth and goodness, he comes face to face with the results of their revolutionary methods in the rising generation of Stalinists, as represented by his brutish interrogator, Gletkin. Regarding Gletkin during an interrogation, Rubashov reflects that “this figure of misery represented the consequence of his logic made flesh” (207). Gletkin participates in the ruthless purges with a clear conscience, having no ideals other than loyalty to the Party. He is the citizen of the new world that the revolution has created. He tells Rubashov it is his duty to sacrifice himself for the good of the Party regardless of right or wrong: “Your task . . . is to make the opposition contemptible; to make the masses understand that opposition is a crime . . . If you begin to talk of your complicated motives, you will only create confusion . . . Your task is to avoid awakening sympathy and pity. Sympathy and pity for the opposition are a danger to the country” (237-238). The end point of the revolution meant to establish a world in which truth, freedom, and justice prevailed is a state in which these very virtues are subjugated to the mere survival of the state itself.

The concern that revolutions are flawed by the power struggles inherent in them extends beyond *Darkness at Noon*. In her study of Koestler, *Chronicles of Conscience*, Jenni Calder draws attention to the way in which this theme plays out in Koestler’s 1939 novel *The Gladiators*, a fictionalized account of the Spartacus revolt which mirrors the doomed revolution dissected in *Darkness at Noon*. In the novel, Spartacus “must demand absolute authority so that he can keep the revolution moving towards its goal, for he is the only man who has a clear vision

of the goal. But this authority corrupts the revolution, for it inevitably leads to violence and murder in the revolution's name" (131). The problem of the use of a political revolution to achieve a more just society is therefore a concern of Koestler's beyond the one in which he participated. In the context of the communist revolution, Koestler believes that the warping of the humanitarian aims of the movement was inherent in its very ideological origins. He writes in *The Invisible Writing* that "the seeds of corruption had already been present in the work of Marx: in the vitriolic tone of his polemics, the abuse heaped on his opponents, the denunciation of rivals and dissenters as traitors to the working class and agents of the bourgeoisie" (27). Even at its conception, Koestler sees the communist revolution as built around the need to establish itself as a power structure, intolerant of dissenting opinions and indifferent to objective truths. Speaking later of the organization of the Communist Party, Koestler explains that "cells exist in every country" and "the term 'cell' is not purely metaphorical; for these are living, pulsating units within a huge, sprawling organism" (21). Koestler describes the Party as a living thing, both subsuming individuals into itself and existing for the sake of nourishing itself and sustaining its own survival. Koestler speaks of Berthold Brecht's play *Die Massnahme* as "the most revealing work of art in the entire Communist literature," and describes it as "the perfect apotheosis of inhumanity" (41). In the play, three Comintern agents defend their decision to kill one of their own because he showed sympathy for an opponent of the Party in a moment of weakness. Koestler quotes Herbert Lüthy's assertion that Brecht "was attracted 'not by the workers' movement . . . but by a deep urge for a total authority, a total submission to a total power'" (43). Again, Koestler dwells on the idea that the construction of an all-consuming power structure is part and parcel of the revolution.

For Koestler, the preoccupation with maintaining and exercising power is not just a necessary evil of radical social change but an element that is fundamentally at odds with the safeguarding of human rights. Koestler outlines how devotion to power, however necessary to the success of a political movement, is antithetical to the principles on which human rights must be founded – compassion, mercy, and a concern for individuals as individuals. From his prison cell, Rubashov remembers how he abandoned individuals in the name of the Party. In one incident, he had traveled to the West to visit with a group of dock workers, led by faithful Party member Little Loewy, who were dutifully observing a boycott of cargo boats bound for one of the newly risen fascist states. Rubashov convinces the initially confused dock workers that they must instead help to smuggle through the goods, since the communists are working in agreement with the fascist country and this will benefit them economically. Rubashov tells the startled dock workers that this move is “both politically and geographically advisable,” but makes no mention of moral or ideological integrity (72). The dock workers obey Rubashov’s orders but when their smuggling is found out, “the leaders of the dockers’ section were expelled from the Party and Little Loewy was denounced in the official Party organ as an *agent provocateur*. Another three days later Little Loewy had hanged himself” (74). The Party, in order to sustain itself, can place no value on the lives of any of its members and sees them only as pawns in a larger game. Individuals cannot appeal to a system of justice or mercy in such a society because it has become so totalizing that it recognizes no higher ideological authority. The leaders of the Party are in a position to abandon the ideology which supposedly structured the formation of their society and operate in a way designed along to conserve their own power. Rubashov begins to think also for the first time of his former employee and lover Arlova, whom he denounced and sentenced to death: “Up till now, he had never imagined Arlova’s death in such detail. It had always been for

him an abstract occurrence . . . Now . . . his past mode of thought seemed lunacy” (143). In *The Invisible Writing*, Koestler reveals that Arlova is based on Nadeshda, a woman Koestler himself met on his tour of Russia and for whom he developed strong feelings. In a tragic account, Koestler narrates how he became suspicious that Nadeshda had eavesdropped on his private correspondence and mentions her name to the G.P.U., the Soviet secret police. Later, Koestler comes to the conclusion that Nadeshda had been merely curious about his relationship status. He dwells at some length on her, reflecting that, in his time in the Party, “the only person whom I denounced or betrayed was Nadeshda, and she was the person dearer to me than anybody” (103). A commitment to the Party means the dissolution of any commitment of humans to each other. However, it also entails the devaluing of the individual. Koestler speaks about the extent to which his time in the Party wore away at his sense of personhood. As with other writers, Koestler laments the way that communism imposes limits on individual expression and creativity. After writing a novel about his experience working with the children of German communist refugees, Koestler complains that “in spite of its documentary realism and Socialist uplift, the novel was condemned by the Party as a reflection of bourgeois, individualistic tendencies” (231). Koestler explains that what was valued in the participation of Party politics was the ability to be a blank vessel for the Party: “Principles and ideals, the gifts of public oratory and parliamentary repartee, grasp of reality and knowledge of history, originality, initiative, and personal integrity – all these were not assets, but liabilities to the Comintern politician” (253). What should be valuable – the unique attributes and positive qualities of the individual – are instead anathema to the citizen of the Soviet state.

The power politics of the revolutionary movement cannot support a system that also supports the valuing of the individual that is necessary to a system of human rights. Furthermore,

the co-opting of the path of history and human society by an iron will ultimately pushes past the limits of human wisdom and insight and demands the oversimplification and false unification of a complex and fragmented population. Koestler is occupied in part by the question of whether or not human society can be directed as one universal unit: is the whole human population driven by the same motives and desires, and does it have a singular destiny? Writing about his account of the Spartacus revolution, Jenni Calder argues that Koestler's Spartacus "understands hunger and oppression, but not what happens to the desire for freedom when it is multiplied by thousands" (123). Writing about the process of creating *The Gladiators* in *The Invisible Writing*, Koestler asks, "Why did the Roman slaves fail 'to take their fate into their own hands' as the Communist Manifesto said? . . . Did the concept of 'class-consciousness' have any practical value in explaining history? Was not the psychology of the masses an infinitely more complex phenomenon?" (264) Koestler contemplates whether political revolution is simply not able to respond to the needs of the masses, in part because human thinkers and leaders are ill-equipped to understand the masses and to perceive the elusive movements of history.

Rubashov comes to the realization that "history was more of an oracle than a science" and politics "bloody dilettantism, mere superstition and black magic" (17). Starting to doubt the philosophy that the ends justify the means, Rubashov questions in his diary: "how can the present decide what will be judged truth in the future? We are doing the work of prophets without their gift . . . Proof disproved proof, and finally we had to recur to faith – to axiomatic faith in the rightness of one's own reasoning" (100). He reflects that "for forty years he had fought against economic fatality" (258). Later, on the way to his own execution, he wonders "what happens to these masses, to this people? For forty years it had been driven through the desert . . . But where was the Promised Land? . . . Moses had not been allowed to enter the land

of promise either. But he had been allowed to see it . . . He, Nicolas Salmanovitch Rubashov, had not been taken to the top of a mountain; and wherever his eye looked, he saw nothing but desert and the darkness of night” (266). As he concedes in his diary, the communist leaders have been doing the work of prophets without their gifts. He has been trying to lead a whole people around a desert, but without a vision of the promised land.

Koestler’s disillusionment with the communist movement that promised to bring about the perfection of human society is doubly shadowed throughout the novel: by the longing for some phenomenon that could bring about the salvation of humanity without having to decouple itself from humanitarian values, and by the knowledge that he and the other leaders of the movement have overreached their bounds by trying to act as the saviors of the human race. The novel is haunted with religious imagery, both of the Old Testament prophets and of the Crucifixion of Christ. In his prison cell, Rubashov reminisces about going to meet with a young member of the Party in an art museum outside of Russia earlier in his career. The man, Richard, who is young and afraid, is an earnest believer but must be expelled from the Party for political reasons. During the meeting in which he talks to the young man in a cold and distant manner, Rubashov distractedly notices a drawing of a *pietà*: “Rubashov could only see a part of it – the rest was hidden by the plush back of the sofa and by Richard’s head: the Madonna’s thin hands, curved upwards, hollowed to the shape of a bowl . . . More was not to be seen as . . . Richard’s head persisted immovably in the same position on his slightly bowed, reddish neck” (35). Rubashov does not pay much attention to the painting at the time, only noticing that Richard’s figure prevents him from seeing all of it and not the symmetry between the young man’s bowed head and the Madonna’s upstretched arms. However, the theme of the *pietà* reoccurs throughout the novel. Catching sight of a prisoner’s arms dangling out of the window of his cell, “Rubashov

knew of what experience this gesture had reminded him – the imploring gesture of the meagre, stretched-out hands. *Pietà* . . .” (31) While being interrogated in prison, Rubashov’s eyes catch “the light patch on the wall” where the portrait of former leaders already liquidated had once hung and “suddenly the scene in the picture gallery occurred to Rubashov, when Richard’s head had come between him and the folded hands of the *Pietà*” (82). Again, while awaiting his own now inevitable execution, Rubashov tries to untangle the flaws in the communist view of humanity: “There was an error somewhere in the equation . . . He had had an inkling of it for a long time already, since the story of Richard the *Pietà*” (259).

The figure of the *pietà* symbolizes not only the antagonism between revolutionary aims and the principles of compassion and mercy, but also the way in which the revolutionary project places too much power into the hands of fallible humans. In the figure of the crucified Christ, pity is reconciled with radical, salvific change to the human condition. However, this is a capacity that eludes the human leaders of revolution. Rubashov is represented as a would-be Christ figure; he too will be sacrificed, but through his sacrifice he cannot achieve the salvation of humanity. Hearing the transcript of Rubashov’s trial read out of the newspaper, his old porter Wassilij, who is still secretly Christian and hides a Bible under his bed, remembers Rubashov had been celebrated and decorated after being rescued from the foreigners, and recalls a scene from the Bible: “And the soldiers led him away, into the hall called Praetorium . . . And they clothed him with purple and they smote him on the head with a reed and did spit upon him; and bowing their knees worshipped him” (246). After Rubashov’s death sentence is pronounced, “Wassilij stared at the rusty hook above his head” where Rubashov’s portrait had once hung: “He murmured: ‘Thy will be done. Amen’” (252) However, Rubashov is not Christ. He cannot save Wassilij, whose daughter-in-law is already planning to denounce him to get him out of her

apartment, or any of the other victims of communism. Rubashov finally seems to realize that he cannot achieve this divine mission. During his final grueling interrogations with the brutish Gletkin, Rubashov drifts towards a capitulation: “An inscription came into his mind which he had read on the gateway of the cemetery at Errancis where Saint-Just, Robespierre, and their sixteen beheaded comrades lay buried. It consisted of one word: *Dormir*: to sleep” (210). Rubashov, like the revolutionaries who came before him, will be sacrificed but will stay asleep, not to be resurrected.

The final condemnation Koestler makes of the politics of revolution is the way that the power structure of the revolutionary state disables even the intellectual capacity of the individual to resist it. One historical question the novel attempts to answer is why the victims of the Moscow Trials went along with the unjust prosecution against them. Although the Soviet state affords him no rights and is indifferent to his humanity, Rubashov’s identity and his sense of the fate of all humanity are entirely dependent on the state. Though he has been imprisoned without reason and faces probable execution at the hands of the Communist Party, Rubashov struggles throughout the novel with giving up his faith in communism. Rubashov takes his initial arrest in stride; regarding one of the ubiquitous portraits of No.1 (Stalin), Rubashov “thought of the dead, and of the humiliation which had preceded their deaths. Nevertheless, he could not bring himself to hate No.1 as he ought to” (14). In *The Invisible Writing*, Koestler speaks repeatedly of the Communist Party as a kind of religion, holding all of the meaning for its members of a religious belief system. Members of the Party, Koestler argues, suffered from “the true believer’s insurmountable horror of excommunication” (244). Koestler’s writing about the self and the Party reflects Giorgio Agamben’s warnings about the rights of the citizen within the modern state. In *Homo Sacer*, Agamben argues that every person in a modern state is vulnerable to being

reduced to “bare life” – the condition in which an individual can be expelled from the rights of citizenship within the state and yet still subjected to the power of the state. Because of this “inclusive exclusion,” every individual is caught within the “sovereign sphere,” “in which it is permitted to kill without committing homicide and without celebrating a sacrifice” (83).

Agamben references the the Nazi concentration camps as an example of the sovereign sphere taken to the extreme. Victims of the camps are expelled from the realm of citizenship but can still be imprisoned and executed by the state. However, the camp inmates can at least perhaps better recognize the contours of the oppressive state and use their voices to speak out against what it has done to them. Koestler suggests that part of the tragedy of the Moscow Trials is that its victims are too committed to the state to recognize fully the way that it strips them of their personhood. Part of Rubashov’s confusion stems from the fact that, in the Party, the only path to selfhood is through integration into the state, but belonging to the state requires the willingness to surrender all rights and submit to self-immolation. Rubashov reflects that “as a boy, he had believed that in working for the Party he would find an answer to all questions” and held it in faith that “the sole object of revolution was the abolition of senseless suffering” but in the end “the Party had taken all he had to give and never supplied him with the answer” (255). The Party demands everything from the individual but does not deliver on its debt. It does not provide a state in which all humans are valued and provided space to live meaningful lives free of suffering.

Koestler ultimately turns away from any assertion of political purpose. He begins his autobiography with the note that it will be “the account of a journey from specious clarity to obscure groping” (15) As elsewhere, Koestler speaks of communism as a kind of religious belief system. Through the course of his life, he will abandon this politically rooted belief for a

different, far more amorphous one: “The quality of that faith I cannot define beyond saying that in my youth I regarded the universe as an open book, printed in the language of physical equations and social determinants, whereas now it appears to me as a text written in invisible ink, of which, in our rare moments of grace, we are able to decipher a small fragment” (15) During his time with the Communist Party, Koestler goes as a spy to Spain during the Spanish Civil War, during which he is eventually captured by the fascists. In his autobiography, he relates how his view of the world changed as he awaited his possible execution alone in a prison cell, as he enters into a “war against the concise, rational, materialistic way of thinking which . . . had become a habit and a necessity” (353). Soothing himself by sketching equations on the wall, Koestler narrates that he came to the epiphany that “finite statements about the infinite were possible” and this realization leads him to “a direct certainty that a higher order of reality existed, and that it alone invested existence with meaning” (353). This reality is “a text written in invisible ink; and though one could not read it, the knowledge that it existed was sufficient to alter the texture of one’s existence, and make one’s actions conform to the text” (354). This new worldview is sharply opposed to Koestler’s old communist perspective insofar as it is distinctly apolitical and removes human will and consciousness from the journey to find truth and justice.

The protagonist of *Darkness at Noon* is in part a stand-in for the defendants of the Moscow Trials but is also an autobiographical representation of Koestler himself. Therefore, Rubashov, though he does not escape his prison cell or entirely free himself from the captivity of communist belief, also begins to sense that the nature of reality and the path to a truly liberating revolution are different from what he had believed. Rubashov’s one victory is a gradual awakening to an awareness of the self that the Party has suppressed, what he has learned to call the “grammatical fiction.” Alone in his prison cell, Rubashov “found out that those processes

wrongly known as ‘monologues’ are really dialogues of a special kind; dialogues in which one partner remains silent while the other, against all grammatical rules, addresses him as ‘I’ instead of ‘you’ . . . but the silent partner just remains silent . . . and even refuses to be localized in time and space” (108). In the isolation of prison, however, and in the beginning of his drift away from Party doctrine, “it seemed to Rubashov that the habitually silent partner spoke sometimes” and Rubashov “became convinced that there was a thoroughly tangible component in this first person singular . . .” (109). The expressions of this self do not fall in line with a political agenda: “its mental sphere seemed to be composed of such various and disconnected parts as the folded hands of the *Pietà* . . . the tune of the song with the refrain of ‘come to dust,’ or a particular sentence which Arlova had once spoken on a particular occasion” (110). The self Rubashov has discovered exists in the realm of emotion and conscience and stitches together its own narrative of life that cannot be reached by Party propaganda. Rubashov finds that, when sinking into the snippets of memories and sensations contained within the hidden self he has discovered, he can connect with a “state . . . which the mystics called ‘ecstasy’ and saints ‘contemplation.’” Referencing psychoanalytic theory of the time, Koestler refers to this state as “the ‘oceanic sense’” (256). In “the oceanic sense,” “one’s personality dissolved as a grain of salt in the sea; but at the same time the infinite sea seemed to be contained in the grain of salt. The grain could no longer be localized in time and space” and “it seemed that all thoughts and all sensations, even pain and joy itself, were only the spectrum lines of the same ray of light, disintegrating in the prisma of consciousness” (256). This sparsely articulated theory locates the fulfillment of the self outside of the realm of politics and of the social world altogether. In both Koestler’s autobiography and his novel, the awakening to the “true” nature of things occurs in solitude, from a position of profound social estrangement. It represents a wholesale repudiation of the

potential for political action to answer the questions about justice, happiness, and the alleviation of suffering that concern Koestler.

### George Orwell and the Relationship between Human Rights and Politics

George Orwell is a giant of the literary canon and twentieth century history, with an enduring if complex and contested legacy. Both the staying power and the controversy of Orwell as a man and a cultural institution stem largely from the difficulty of pinning him down to a specific political perspective. Orwell is often seen as an outsider of his contemporary literary and social scene. Alok Rai, in a study of Orwell's legacy, notes that Orwell "in his mythical dimension" is a symbol of the "'lonely traveler,' a tweed-jacketed Lone Ranger for politically conscious adults" (*Politics of Despair* 12). Raymond Williams, somewhat disparagingly, argues that Orwell took up for himself the position of "exile," who, "because of his own personal position, cannot finally believe in any social guarantee: to him . . . almost all association is suspect" (*Culture and Society* 291).

Orwell identified himself as a socialist, but as Rai notes, "Orwell's ideological allegiance to socialism is . . . significantly qualified" (1). In their introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to George Orwell*, John Rodden and John Rossi observe that Orwell developed "an identification with the poor and downtrodden" and eventually "would describe himself as a socialist. His brand of socialism, however, remained idiosyncratic . . . combining egalitarianism, idealization of working class culture, and an intense dislike of Marxist bickering" (4). Orwell's lack of loyalty to a narrowly defined and commonly shared set of political commitments has prompted criticism: John Rodden observes the complaint that Orwell "wrote extensively about class and class issues" but "never did so in explicitly Marxist terms, let alone with any sophisticated

conceptual vocabulary” (1). Orwell’s lack of firm ideological attachment has furthermore created an ambiguity in which warring cultural factions have attempted to claim him. In *The Social and Political Thought of George Orwell*, Stephen Ingle argues that *Nineteen Eighty-Four* was “hijacked by its own international success,” claimed by both the left and the right. Rodden notes that “the US presidential campaign of 2008 witnessed Democratic objections to their opponents’ ‘insidious Newspeak’ and ‘doublespeak’ (e.g., right-wing references to ‘Obama bin Laden’) and Republican charges of their adversaries’ ‘vacuous Orwellian rhetoric’” (3). He argues that “it is the mantle of ‘Orwell’ that polemically minded critics shamelessly snatch . . . his coffin that they surreptitiously shift to the Left or Right” (5).

However, it is perhaps Orwell’s relative resistance to groupthink (a term which he inspired) and independence of viewpoint that gives him particular insight into the inner workings of his society. Orwell scholars agree that part of what makes Orwell remarkable is the capacity of his work to retain a feeling of cultural relevance. I will argue that Orwell’s literary interests and his sociological thinking make it useful to consider him as a human rights author as well as a political thinker more broadly. Much of the frustration with Orwell the political writer seems to stem from the fact that he is unsatisfyingly ambivalent and unsophisticated in his approach to politics, whereas much of the consensus about Orwell’s virtues centers on his attention to what could be considered human rights concerns. Stephen Ingle attributes Orwell’s enduring legacy to the fact that his work carries a message that is “applicable to the modern world where individual rights and basic privacy are increasingly at risk from state vigilance” and the accepted belief that “Orwell’s writing and . . . his life . . . promoted a moral view of the world, based upon Trilling’s ‘freedom, bacon, and proper work’ for all – a morality based on common decency” (21-22). Even Williams, who was unimpressed with Orwell’s political engagements, acknowledges that

“Orwell was . . . deeply moved by what he saw of avoidable or remediable suffering and poverty, and he was convinced that the means of remedy are social, involving commitment . . . and, to the degree that he was serious, involving himself” (291). In 1984, the Council of Europe held a colloquium featuring political thinkers and academics from throughout the arts and sciences organized around the ideas in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. The resulting publication, *And He Loved Big Brother: Man, State, and Society in Question* is a testament to the novel’s continuing relevance to questions of human rights. In their introduction to the volume, Shlomo Giora Shoham and Francis Rosenstiel write that the Council of Europe, founded in 1949, has always been devoted to “the defence and promotion of human rights. Orwell’s *1984*, therefore, was the ideal starting point for a global meeting of minds on the various aspects of totalitarianism.” Orwell is particularly relevant, the authors emphasize, to their exploration of the postulate that totalitarianism does not arise from “the accumulation of scientific or technological knowledge” but rather that “the decisive element . . . remains the human factor and . . . the ethical dimension of the individual’s political responsibility” (1). Orwell is therefore seen as an important reference for understanding the connection between totalitarianism and the rights and responsibilities of the individual.

Like Koestler, Orwell’s writing largely concerns itself with the nature of social revolution and the possibilities of political action for improving human rights. Orwell furthermore shares a similar interest in dissecting the failures of the communist revolution. However, Orwell maintains an optimism towards the potential of wide-scale social progress whereas Koestler withdraws from sociopolitical engagement. Orwell argues that revolutions, especially the radical social movements of the mid-twentieth century, are always vulnerable to corruption, and that purportedly pro-human rights causes can turn into campaigns motivated by the love of power and

by unthinking adherence to a political group or unit. However, Orwell remains committed to the idea that social improvement is possible and that a continued devotion to promoting human rights is necessary. For Orwell, greater human rights are to be achieved through his own vision of socialism, in which the local, national community provides a model of fellow-feeling and a source of constant values that can extend outward to form the basis of an ideal of universal rights. *Nineteen Eighty-Four* presents the specter of a world in which the objective of human rights has become confused with that of political power, resulting in a totalitarian regime in which a connection to organic, local communities that foster feelings of empathy provides the only glimpses of hope. Therefore, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is the novelistic apotheosis of the argument concerning the relationship between politics and human rights that resonates throughout Orwell's nonfiction writing.

Much of Orwell's mid-century writing is concerned with addressing the problems of communism, and as critics have noted, Orwell is often evoked as a dissident of left-leaning political thought in general. However, more than attacking the Left, Orwell is interested in understanding why a movement supposedly devoted to improving the human condition degenerated into dysfunction and oppression. A central anxiety of Orwell's writing is that among the threats facing the struggle for human rights is the possibility that any human rights campaign might be transformed into nothing more than a game of power politics and that there is a slipperiness between loyalty to a system of values and mindless devotion to a political group or unit. In "*Nineteen Eighty-Four: Context and Controversy*," Bernard Crick notes that, through the novel, Orwell asks the questions, "Could there be such a thing as power devoid of ideology?" (156). The idea that politics could become about nothing more than power is a notion that haunts Orwell's thinking about the wartime moment. In his 1945 article "Notes on Nationalism," Orwell

outlines his theory about how a love of power can replace an ideology that is based on a perception of reality and an adherence to a constant system of morality and can distort an honest engagement with the most pressing issues of the twentieth century. In this essay, Orwell defines “nationalism,” not in its conventional sense of loyalty to a nation-state, but as a dogmatic faith in a particular group or belief system that ultimately influences one’s view of reality and ethics. It is “the habit of identifying oneself with a single nation or unit, placing it beyond good or evil and recognizing no other duty than that of advancing its interests” (411). Examples of Orwellian “nationalisms” include Neo-Toryism, communism, political Catholicism, and antisemitism. The nationalist “sees history, especially contemporary history, as the endless rise and decline of great power units, and every event that happens seems to him a demonstration that his own side is on the up-grade and some hated rival on the down-side” (412). Importantly, though some nationalist creeds of this kind might originally be based on some sort of actual ideal (valid or not), these belief systems, which are naturally attached to political systems, eventually take on lives of their own, becoming detached from reality and standing for nothing more than themselves and their own power. The more attached an individual becomes to a nationalist dogma, the more they drift from an awareness of reality or a moral code based in any kind of fairness. Within nationalism, morality becomes relative, and “there is almost no kind of outrage . . . which does not change its moral colour when committed by ‘our’ side” (419). Furthermore, “every nationalist is haunted by the belief that the past can be altered” and will alter the telling of the past, less out of even a conscious deception, and more because “they feel that their own version *was* what happened in the sight of God, and one is justified in rearranging the records accordingly” (421). According to Orwell, those most easily seduced by radical ideologies that warp into mere systems of power are the members of the middle class, including scientists, journalists, and bureaucrats. They make up

the dishonest members of the press who twist the events of the Spanish Civil War to suit their own agendas, and they are the models for the Party members who are Winston Smith's peers in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Stephen Ingle points out that Orwell believed that middle class people, more divorced from traditional values than members of the working class, were particularly "impressed with power" (115).

Orwell saw both the perils of what he terms "nationalism" and the corrupting influence of the desire for power in his experiences during the Spanish Civil War. In 1937, Orwell went to Spain as an observer of this conflict and ended up joining a militia unit of the P.O.U.M., a communist faction with Trotskyist ties opposed to the Stalinists and more closely aligned with the causes of the workers' revolution. His writing about the Spanish Civil War emphasizes the idea that the anti-fascist cause failed in Spain because of the political power struggles that got in the way. Orwell believes that the war began with an ideologically pure purpose and was thrown off track by bad faith actors. In "Looking Back," Orwell stresses that, despite the essential ugliness of warfare, there was a right side and a wrong side in Spain, and that "the hatred which the Spanish Republic excited in millionaires, dukes, [and] cardinals" speaks for itself. "In essence it was a class war. If it had been won, the cause of the common people everywhere would have been strengthened. It was lost, and the dividend drawers . . . rubbed their hands" (300). Partly to blame are those parties who could not necessarily be expected to align themselves with the cause of the workers' revolution or who stood explicitly opposed to this cause – the fascists in Spain and abroad and the wealthy foreigners Orwell suggests are more inclined to side with the fascists. However, Orwell also points the finger at the Communist Party. He argues that "except for the small revolutionary groups which exist in all countries, the whole world was determined upon preventing revolution in Spain. In particular the Communist Party,

with Soviet Russia behind it, had thrown its whole weight against the revolution” (51). Orwell argues that the Communists, while ostensibly supporting the Spanish Republic, were more interested in protecting their own power structures than in furthering the social ideals for which they supposedly stood. Orwell outlines how the Communist Party developed a position of animosity towards the P.O.U.M., blamed them for the war’s setbacks, and tried to portray them as traitors to communism. As well as the Soviets, Orwell condemns the foreign press for its highly biased and selective reporting. Exacerbating the workers’ war efforts was the left-leaning press’s version of events, heavily slanted toward the Communist Party. Orwell notes that “the reason why a one-sided version has been accepted is simply that the Spanish revolutionary parties have no footing in the foreign press. In the English press, in particular, you would have to search for a long time to find any favourable reference . . . to the Spanish Anarchists” (*Catalonia* 159). The members of the Press, perhaps without any explicit ill intent, blindly follow the faction in which they have decided to place faith and allow that loyalty to shape their perception and documentation of reality. However, Orwell sees these corrupting influences as potentially preventable and separate from the idealistic heart of the revolution.

The character of the totalitarian society in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is informed by Orwell’s fears about his concept of nationalism and his encounters with corrupted revolutionary action in his own time. The Party that has control in the totalitarian dystopia is an image of what would result if nationalistic thinking were to overtake political action completely. Inner Party member O’Brien, who tricks Winston and later tortures him, serves as a personification of the Party itself. O’Brien insists to Winston that “reality exists in the human mind, and nowhere else. Not in the individual mind . . . only in the mind of the Party, which is collective and immortal. Whatever the Party holds to be truth *is* truth” (249). Becoming almost parodically villainous, O’Brien goes

on to state explicitly Orwell's worst fears about the nature and the ultimate potential of the modern state. He confesses to Winston that "the Party seeks power entirely for its own sake. We are not interested in the good of others; we are interested solely in power. Not wealth or luxury or long life or happiness; only power, pure power" (263). The Party is therefore an extreme manifestation of the tendencies that Orwell sees already prevalent in his society to worship power, or something that represents power, and victory for its own sake. Furthermore, the strange Goldstein text which O'Brien plants for Winston contains an explanation of the workings of the power structures of this dystopian future: "The essence of oligarchical rule is not father-to-son inheritance, but the persistence of a certain world-view and a certain way of life imposed by the dead upon the living . . . The Party is not concerned with perpetuating its blood but with perpetuating itself" (210). Despite the inconsistencies and ambiguities of the Goldstein treatise, this description of the governance of Oceania aligns with Orwell's own fears about the potential for political structures to stand for nothing but their own power.

The problem of nationalistic belief even extends to the well-meaning Winston. One of the more troubling parts of Winston's effort at resistance is his visit with O'Brien, before it is revealed that O'Brien is simply an agent of the state. Supposedly enlisting Winston and Julia into the resistance, O'Brien asks them what they would be willing to do to bring down the Party. Winston and Julia agree, hypothetically, to a wide range of unsavory activities, responding "yes" to queries about whether they would be willing "to commit acts of sabotage which may cause the deaths of hundreds of innocent people," "to cheat, to forge, to blackmail, to corrupt the minds of children, to distribute habit-forming drugs, to encourage prostitution . . ." (172) Although this initiation ceremony is clearly meant to be satirical to some degree, the couple's eager willingness to agree to any excesses of violence or wrongdoing to fight the Party emphasizes the fact that,

even for these rebels, political action is a matter of loyalty to a group or cause rather than adherence to a stable moral code. Winston and Julia have simply developed what Orwell in “Notes on Nationalism” calls a “negative nationalism,” a strong ideology which develops in opposition to one thing rather than in favor of something else. Like all nationalists, the actions that register as atrocities when perpetrated by the “other” side seem perfectly justified when committed in the name of their own team.

Like Koestler, Orwell is disillusioned with the communist movement and dedicates many pages to outlining its flaws. However, Orwell does not yield to the belief that all revolutionary action is inherently flawed. Overall, throughout *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and in all his writing, he maintains the hope that the socialist revolution can prevail and that the corrupting love of power does not necessarily signal the futility of the political struggle for human rights. For Orwell, the Spanish working class, which fought on the side of the Republic, did not fail in their purpose because their revolution was corrupted at its root. Orwell maintains a love for the soldiers who fought for the communist cause. In *Homage to Catalonia*, he writes of his time fighting in Spain that “curiously enough the whole experience has left me with not less but more belief in the decency of human beings” (230). He writes glowingly of the Spanish, noting that “they have, there is no doubt, a generosity, a species of nobility” and expressing the hope that because of these qualities “in Spain even Fascism may take a comparatively loose and bearable form” (223). As roundly as he condemns certain malignant strains of social thought and action in his society, Orwell speaks out just as strongly against the temptation to become resigned to the inevitable senselessness of political involvement. In a 1944 review of several of Arthur Koestler’s works, Orwell criticizes Koestler’s abandonment of the possibility of fruitful revolution. Speaking of *The Gladiators* and *Darkness at Noon*, he writes “Revolutions always go wrong – that is the

main theme. It is on the question of *why* they go wrong that he falters” (274). Orwell takes issue with Koestler’s idea that the revolutions – whether ancient or modern – go awry because they were corrupt from the start. He notes Koestler’s disillusionment with the Russian Revolution and argues that Koestler has become resigned to the belief “this is what revolutions come to . . . There is nothing for it except . . . to keep out of politics, make a sort of oasis within which you and your friends can remain sane” (282). However, Orwell rejects this. He argues that “it is quite possible that man’s major problems will *never* be solved. But it is also unthinkable!” (281). The idea that it is necessary to persist in politics despite the setbacks and despite the fact that things may never be perfect is a refrain that echoes throughout Orwell’s writing. In “Looking Back on the Spanish War,” he writes that “there is always the temptation to say: ‘One side is as bad as the other. I am neutral.’ In practice, however, one cannot be neutral, and there is hardly such a thing as a war in which it makes no difference who wins” (300). Orwell insists that there is both a need for persistence and the possibility of distinguishing different orders of magnitude of good and evil in human society.

The same balance of the fear of corruption and the hope in the existence of ideological purity colors *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Of course, Orwell’s fears about nationalistic fervor and the distortions of the press are represented in extreme form by the Ministry of Truth, in which Winston labors at rewriting history to serve the needs of the Party. However, there is something in Winston himself that naturally pulls against this power structure that is at odds with reality. As he begins to document his dissident thoughts, Winston dedicates his secret diary: “*To the future or to the past, to a time when thought is free . . . to a time when truth exists and what is done cannot be undone . . . From the age of uniformity, from the age of solitude, from the age of Big Brother . . . greetings!*” (28). Winston asserts that “the solid world exists. Its laws do not change.

Stones are hard, water is wet, objects unsupported fall toward the earth's center." He writes in his diary that "*Freedom is the freedom to say that two plus make four. If that is granted, all else follows*" (81). There is truth in this observation and in the recognition of a solid, unalterable world against which the actions of a human state can be measured and understood. Winston's will is pure. He is motivated by a love of freedom and truth, and his rebellion does not fail because it was ideologically fated to do so. Winston is acted upon by the crushing power of the state, and, having no reference point outside of his totalitarian society, Winston himself is unwittingly susceptible to corruption. O'Brien is able to induce him and Julia to pledge to crimes against the innocent in the name of the resistance, but Winston, due to his helpless state, does not have the mental resources to be held entirely responsible for figuring out the morality of revolution. Winston's situation is largely hopeless because he is too much subsumed into the malevolent Party and cut off from any more positive social influences. However, Orwell's attitude is far from hopeless. He believes consistently in the possibility of radical social change.

One purpose of both Orwell's political writing and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is to diagnose the ills of his contemporary social movements. However, Orwell is also concerned with imagining a human rights politics that will not be corrupted by power-hungry radicalism. For Orwell, the path of progress takes the form of a socialist movement rooted more in reform than in revolution and primarily focused on a general egalitarianism and the promotion of the materialistic well-being of the masses. Orwell's concept of socialism is wrapped entirely around this question of the achievement of human rights for "the common man." In *The Lion and the Unicorn*, Orwell's 1941 pamphlet on how the socialist revolution might take root in England, he concedes that fascist and communist states share some of the same structure but emphasizes that "the idea underlying Fascism is irreconcilably different from that which underlies Socialism.

Socialism aims, ultimately, at a world-state of free and equal human beings. It takes the equality of human rights for granted. Nazism assumes just the opposite” (76). Here, Orwell explicitly connects socialism to a general human rights principle of equality. As critics have noted, Orwell constructs his own vision of socialism, adopting the aspects he finds workable and discarding those that are less useful. One important quality of socialism for Orwell is its international focus and its possibility for serving as the framework for a vision of universal rights. In his writing about Spain, Orwell connects the socialist movement to a general struggle for basic rights and equality and represents this struggle through an attention to universal experiences of corporeal existence. In “Looking Back,” Orwell asks “what are the workers struggling for? Simply for the decent life which they are more and more aware is now technically possible” (300). When recounting the memory of an Italian militiaman he met during the war, Orwell argues that the war boils down to a simple, crucial question: “[S]hall people like that Italian soldier be allowed to live the decent, fully human life which is now technically achievable, or shan’t they? Shall the common man be pushed back down into the mud, or shall he not?” (305).

Furthermore, Orwell’s descriptions of the war often implore readers to consider the bodily, lived experience of war, emphasizing the uniformity of this experience despite national differences and disparate purposes. In *Homage to Catalonia* (1938), Orwell devotes some space to describing the politics of the conflict but also dwells on the human experience of the fighting. He writes that, “all of use were lousy . . . Glory of war indeed! In war *all* soldiers are lousy, at least when it is warm enough. The men who fought at Verdun, at Waterloo, at Flodden, at Senlac, at Thermopylae – every one of them had lice” (76). In his 1942 essay “Looking Back at the Spanish War,” Orwell again emphasizes the physical realities of war, arguing that “the essential horror of army life . . . is barely affected by the nature of the war you happen to be

fighting in . . . Bullets hurt, corpses stink . . . A louse is a louse and a bomb is a bomb, even though the cause you are fighting for happens to be just” (287). Orwell’s purpose is to disabuse those far removed from the fighting of their romantic ideas of war but also to privilege a concern for the suffering of individual persons, despite their allegiances, over abstract political ideals.

*Nineteen Eighty-Four*, though so often evoked culturally in discussions about surveillance and the loss of privacy, is perhaps best understood as the culmination of Orwell’s thinking about the mid-century wars, socialism’s implications for human rights, and the hazards of hitching hopes for human rights to socialist politics. This is perhaps the reason that Orwell scholars are so exasperated by the suggestion that the novel represents Orwell’s disavowal of socialism.<sup>6</sup> Like Koestler in *Darkness at Noon*, Orwell in *Nineteen-Eighty-Four* often dwells on the human body and the realities of lived experience. Even before setting out on his path of resistance against his totalitarian state, Orwell’s hero Winston Smith thinks of “the treachery of the human body which always freezes into inertia at exactly the moment when a special effort is needed” and worries that “the issues you are fighting for are always forgotten, because the body swells up until it fills the universe” (102). The novel, though it explores expansive historical and political movements, focuses on an individual and locates at the center of the struggle for freedom and political resistance the physical experience of occupying a human body. This focus culminates in the extended scenes of torture that mark the terminus of Winston’s attempted rebellion. Faced with bodily punishment, Winston asserts that “nothing in the world was so bad as physical pain. In the face of pain there are no heroes . . .” (239) After being broken down by

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<sup>6</sup> For instance, Bernard Crick, in his introduction to *The Lion and the Unicorn*, emphasizes the continuity of Orwell’s thinking and the constancy of his commitment to (a modified version of) socialism: “The style of *The Lion and the Unicorn* is vintage Orwell and he never changed – contrary to legend – the values expressed in it, neither his belief in the innate decency of ordinary people nor his belief in the growth of socialist values” (8).

torture, Winston catches sight of his reflection in a scene of some pathos: “[H]is ruined body overcame him . . . He was aware of his ugliness, his gracelessness, a bundle of bones in filthy underclothes sitting weeping in the harsh light” (273). Ironically, it is a concern with material conditions that partly motivated Winston’s resistance in the first place. Winston notices the disparity between the utopian society promised by the state and the grimy conditions of Oceania. Surveying the grey canteen and the bad food, Winston observes that “always in your stomach and in your skin there was a sort of protest, a feeling that you had been cheated of something you had a right to.” Without having studied Marx, Winston asks “was it not a sign that this was *not* the natural order of things, if one’s heart sickened at the discomfort and dirt and scarcity?” (59) Orwell also dwells on the fact that, after Winston has been tortured, his oppressors return him to a state of physical comfort. He is given access to good food and sleep, and “all he cared for was to lie quiet and feel the strength gathering in his body” (275). Winston’s need for the basic material conditions necessary for happiness are both the impetus for rebellion and a tool of oppression against him. Orwell prioritizes the need for access to basic human rights as the central issue of even large-scale political conflict.

Although Orwell’s vision of social justice centers on what is essentially a theory of universal rights, both *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and Orwell’s nonfiction wartime writing place great value on the nation, seemingly subverting a more universalist framework. Orwell’s thinking about the significance of the nation, however, does not feed into a privileging of nation-state sovereignty and is not as incompatible with the advocacy of universal rights as it initially seems. Rather, the national community provides a local and more immediate model for the far-reaching and more abstract ideals of universalism. Importantly, Orwell’s view of the nation does not revolve around a commitment to group loyalty. Rather, he sees the national community as the

antithesis to the Orwellian nationalisms that lead to totalitarianism. In the Communist Party, for instance, the structure – the Party itself – remains constant and demands loyalty, while the substance – the values for which the Party supposedly stands – can be endlessly vacated and replaced. With the nation, Orwell suggests, the opposite is true. Its surfaces may shift and power may change hands, but national memory contains core values that persist. Orwell’s vision, in *The Lion and the Unicorn*, of how a socialist paradise could be realized within England relies on both a faith in the mutability of the structure of the nation and in the essential constancy of its substance.

Orwell describes the nation in terms that are remarkably similar to those of Rebecca West, who also sees the nation as a bulwark against the dangerous political currents of the twentieth century and the vagaries of human will. To Orwell, the nation takes the form of an organism in itself: “it stretches into the future and the past, there is something in it that persists, as in a living creature” (37). Part of Orwell’s point is that national character is something immutable that inevitably defines individuals and therefore is an influence that must be factored into political strategies. But Orwell is also gesturing to the nation as something older, more constant, more independent of human control, and – to the extent that it is anthropomorphized as a “living creature” – wiser than the power-obsessed political factions of the twentieth century and their proponents. The community of the nation – and especially its working class members, whom Orwell represents as the most English of the English – is a more fertile soil in which social change can grow. The figure of O’Brien offers up one of the most memorable images in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* when he tells Winston: “if you want a picture of the future, imagine a boot stamping on a human face – forever” (267). However, in *The Lion and the Unicorn*, Orwell suggests that this is a future unlikely to take hold in England if people embrace the traditions of

the nation as a framework for pursuing human rights. Speaking of the worship of military strength, Orwell notes that “a military parade . . . is simply an affirmation of naked power . . . contained in it, quite consciously and intentionally, is the vision of a boot crashing down on a face.” However, he poses the question, “Why is the goose-step not used in England?” and answers “it is not used because the people in the street would laugh” (43). The English nation, Orwell argues, has some built-in defenses against totalitarianism. One of these is the English disdain for military displays and respect for the law: “The totalitarian idea that there is no such thing as law, there is only power, has never taken root” in England (45). This resistance to shows of military strength is an example of an inherited value that provides protection against the lure of revolution. Orwell furthermore sees the national community as providing a model for empathy and communal care that is meaningfully different from the partisanship of ideological devotion. Like Rebecca West, Orwell describes the English nation as a family, if even “a rather stuffy Victorian family.” The nation “has its private language and its common memories, and at the approach of an enemy it closes its ranks” (54). As opposed to loyalty to a state, which is defined by the desire to be close to power, this national loyalty is more organic, compelled by a natural and unselfish impulse to empathize with and protect others. However, Orwell believes that the sense of community for the sake of community that is fostered within the nation can transcend national boundaries and interests. He hopes that a socialist state will take hold in England, but for the ultimate purpose of promoting the rise of a more global egalitarian state. Orwell stresses that his purposes is “to try and determine what England *is*” in order to determine “what part England *can play* in the huge events that are happening” (37).

This application of the values of the national community to the lofty ideals of universalism is present in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. In this regard, it is especially important to

remember that the novel is intended as a warning to a society Orwell saw as imperiled. As Bernard Crick says regarding *The Lion and the Unicorn* in his introduction, “the values in it are those that *Nineteen Eighty-Four* warns us we could lose” (8). One of these values is a connection to the nation itself, which is presented as an entity with color and vibrancy as opposed to the ideologically and culturally vacant current society of Oceania. Abandoning his Party apartment in favor of secretive quarters among the proles, Winston finds that “the room had awakened in him a sort of nostalgia, a sort of ancestral memory” (96). It is not the first time Winston has mentioned feeling a sense of ancestral memory, a concept that is akin to the thinking of Rebecca West and Rex Warner, who see the organic national community, constant through time, as a failsafe against the terrors of modern society and the wrongheadedness of individual human communities. Winston’s landlord, Mr. Charrington, teaches him a song about the churches of London that Winston vaguely remembers: “*Oranges and lemons, say the bells of St. Clement’s/ You owe me three farthings, say the bells of St. Martin’s* –” (98). This rhyme Winston carries around with him, as secretive as his hidden diary, and remarks that “when you said it to yourself you had the illusion of actually hearing bells, the bells of a lost London that still existed somewhere or other, disguised and forgotten” (99). However, the echoes of a lost national culture remain just that, unable to take more solid form amidst the pressure of the overwhelming power and deeply entrenched hierarchy of Oceania.

In addition to catching glimpses of lost cultural values and memories, Winston also dwells at times on scenes of care and compassion that echo Orwell’s writing about the nation’s tendency to nurture an instinct to care about others in a way that is detached from political alliance. Winston remembers a scene from his childhood before the Party assumed its present control, in which his mother continued to try and care for his infant sister despite the certainty of

their impending deaths. Even though his mother had been among the lower classes and lived in relative squalor, “yet she had possessed a kind of nobility, a kind of purity, simply because the standards she obeyed were private ones. Her feelings were her own, and could not be altered from outside” (164). Even as her child reached the point of starvation, “his mother had clasped the child in her arms . . . it changed nothing . . . it did not avert the child’s death or her own; but it seemed natural for her to do it” (164). The mother’s simple gesture of comfort and reaffirmation of the bond with her child is made strange by the totalizing society of Oceania, whose function is “to persuade you that mere impulses, mere feelings, were of no account . . . Whatever happened you vanished, and neither you nor your actions were ever heard of again” (165). To the reader, however, this interaction between mother and child seems strikingly more human than the strange behavior of the Party members, who live estranged from each other and fear being denounced by their own children. The image of the family unit turning in on itself and the simple decency of the working class recall Orwell’s writing about the nation.

However, the novel also connects the commitment to stable values and communal care that grow within the national community to more universalist notions of empathy and justice. In *The Lion and the Unicorn*, Orwell positions the working class as the most essentially connected with the nation’s character. In *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Winston famously records in his diary the belief that “If there is hope . . . it lies in the proles” (69). Later he expands upon this idea: “The proles had stayed human” because “they were not loyal to a party . . . they were loyal to each other” (165). The fear Orwell expresses in his “Notes on Nationalism” that people – especially politically affiliated intellectuals – were prone to decide matters of morality not objectively but based on nationalistic loyalty comes to fruition in the nightmare society of Oceania, where Party members participate in the Two Minutes Hate and learn to relish atrocities committed by their

own Party against the “enemy.” However, Winston records in his diary an instance in which a proletarian woman reacted humanely to a propaganda film showing the bombing of a group of Oceania’s supposed enemies. The film depicts the bombing of a lifeboat of refugees including children. Winston describes the “audience shouting with laughter” at images of a terrified child and a “woman putting her arms around him and comforting him although she was blue with fright herself, all the time covering him as much as possible as if she thought her arms could keep the bullets off him” moments before the whole group disappears in a bomb flash (9). The footage echoes the scene that Winston will later remember between his mother and his sister, and while most of the audience reacts with callousness, one woman among the proletarians objects: “a woman down in the proletarian part of the house suddenly started kicking up a fuss and shouting they didn’t oughter of showed it not in front of the kids they didn’t it aint right . . .” (9). This woman is not interested in the politics of the war footage. Her reaction to atrocity is not defined by its political origin or ends. Rather, she responds to the moral quality of this event in its own right and not according to its strategic purpose. Importantly, in this scene, Orwell seems to argue that both of the values this proletarian woman personifies – the capacity for moral objectivity and for empathy – grow within a national, local community and are then transferable to a more global worldview. The proletarian woman is associated with such a community through her class status and is set apart from the Party members by her ability to identify with and object to the suffering of individuals marked as political enemies. In the world of the novel, the middle classes have become hopelessly swept up into the totalitarian power structures of the world that might be, but the proletarians still model social structures built on bedrock values and above all on human empathy and compassion.

## CONCLUSION

The period around the Second World War is an important moment in the history, both real and imagined, of human rights. During this historical chapter, the rise of fascism and totalitarianism and the ease with which genocide took root in European society revealed the deep fractures in the structuring philosophies and institutions of that society. From this complex and deeply troubled moment arose the palliating narrative that the horrors of the war represented a foil against which an ideology of universal human rights could achieve greater visibility and forcefulness. In the postwar moment, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights emphasized the simplicity and clarity of human rights, the ease with which they might be realized, and the historical continuity and cohesiveness of human rights ideals across time. To this day, human rights are positioned as the core of global social justice, because the nature of the human person and the significance of human rights are envisioned as readily apparent truths, needing safeguarding but requiring no explanation. The ascendancy of human rights is therefore seen as a matter of simply choosing good over evil: atrocities and events recognized as human rights abuses result from moments when rights are suspended or ignored, rather than from the unsteadiness of human rights as a concept or a practice.

The theory of human rights that emerged in the mid-century both drew on the traditional liberal model of natural rights and aspired to transcend its limitations. The twentieth century rights discourse announced itself as something new, but also something old. The language of the Universal Declaration clearly and intentionally echoes the language of the eighteenth century

rights declarations.<sup>7</sup> This restatement of the ideals of the Enlightenment serves an important purpose. While, in reality, doctrines of human rights are reshaped and reimagined throughout time, these changes and shifts cannot take place consciously without threatening the principle that human rights are eternal and immutable. So, even in moments of obvious rupture and change, rights advocates must assert human rights as simply being rediscovered or seen with fresh eyes, rather than being rewritten to fit the challenges and desires of a particular historical moment.

However, it is productive to challenge the idea that human rights exist objectively as a truth that precedes human efforts to define them. It is to this end that I have turned my attention to a group of wartime authors who grapple with the most difficult and unsettling issues raised by the age of totalitarianism, writing stories about this time in an effort to understand what caused the atrocities and wide-scale social breakdown of the war, to decide on the proper way to respond to such devastation, and to propose solutions for how such horrors could be prevented in the future. They are, in other words, thinking about “freedom, justice, and peace in the world;” they are human rights thinkers who do not necessarily see themselves as human rights thinkers. Around the moment that the UDHR was asserting the great importance of human rights and assembling a list of those rights, these thinkers were essentially attempting to conjure human rights as a theory, questioning and trying to articulate the concepts taken for granted in official declarations. Wartime writers interrogate the relationship between national citizenship and individual identity, the implications and limitations of universalism, and the possibilities of

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<sup>7</sup> For instance, the Universal Declaration’s Preamble guarantees the “equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family,” while the American Declaration of Independence asserts that “all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights.”

revolutionary action to effect social change. The narratives about society and human existence they create alternately reflect and subvert the historical formation of human rights ideology. Mid-century authors sometimes unconsciously echo rights declarations in their intimation that their work merely uncovers self-evident truths. However, the “truth” that is revealed varies from writer to writer. For Rebecca West and Rex Warner, the proper backdrop for human life is naturally the nation-state; Martha Gellhorn and Phyllis Bottome present an anti-nationalist image of the universal human person as the fundamental unit of a theory of human rights.

The stories these writers tell repeat the sleight of hand that declarations of human rights perform to portray human rights as self-evident, monolithic, and unchanging. However, considering these texts both individually and alongside each other can provide insight into how the illusion is accomplished. Each of the authors in this study writes from a perspective very close to the experience of the war and is committed to a thorough and honest examination of the complicated wartime situation. They all weave the events of the war into a straightforward narrative delivering a crystallized message of what the war reveals about the virtues of political institutions like the nation-state and the natural social contexts of the human person. However, these writers’ conscientious attention to the details of their recent history results in stories about the war that nevertheless contain fractures and inconsistencies, revealing, as they take shape, how these stories result from narrative choices, each one a single path selected from many. Furthermore, taken together, these wartime texts suggest the variety of visions of human rights that is possible. Fascism can be seen as the result of rejecting the boundaries that citizenship within the nation puts on human life or the consequence of a system that privileges nationalism too greatly. The Holocaust can be seen as signaling the inadequacies of liberal thought or urgently necessitating a re-embrace of the liberal tradition. The wartime texts, despite their

insight and thoughtfulness, do not hold the answer to the human rights question, but they do reveal a lot about the strategies by which answers to this question are produced, and the desires that underlie them.

These texts that emerge at the same moment as the twentieth century discourse of human rights continue to be relevant today, because the matter of human rights continues to be unsettled. The same questions that shaped human rights thinking in the mid-century—questions of nationalism and universalism, atrocity and recovery—reverberate today. Our own time continues to see the emergence of human rights crises, from the persecution of the Rohingya in Myanmar and the Palestinians’ quest for self-determination in Gaza and the West Bank, to the abuse and detention of asylum seekers along the U.S.-Mexico border. Moreover, human rights thinking continues to perform its magic trick, deftly concealing its contradictions, inconsistencies, and historical constitution, often with serious social and political consequences. The contemporary moment is arguably witnessing a crisis caused by the illusion of the self-evident nature of the human person and human rights. Critics like Samuel Moyn and Robert Meister emphasize that many contemporary human rights thinkers and historians represent current human rights ideals as inherited smoothly from history, while in fact they are conceived recently and in reaction to the needs and circumstances of a particular historical moment. Human rights historians, Moyn argues, “approach their subject, despite its novelty, the way church historians once approached theirs. They regard the basic cause – much as the church historian treated the Christian religion – as a saving truth, discovered rather than made in history” (20-21). Like Moyn, Robert Meister suggests, in *After Evil: A Politics of Human Rights*, that the popular narrative of twentieth century human rights is largely illusory and that the discourse around rights has changed dramatically in recent times. Meister argues that contemporary thought about

human rights often adheres to “the mainstream story of ascendant human rights, based on the universal meaning of Auschwitz,” but that current thinking arises within the specific historical circumstances of the twenty-first century and is not simply received from an earlier moment (2). More troublingly, contemporary human rights ideology is largely negative, focused on the prevention of atrocity. Quoting journalist Paul Berman, Meister points out that this age of human rights thinking sees the emergence of the idea that “there are . . . bombs that rescue” (5). In the new rights thinking, Meister argues, “human rights *abuse* is essentially local” – a matter of one local community or power attacking another, whereas “human rights *enforcement* is essentially global – a duty of third parties to intervene (across borders when necessary)” (6). Furthermore, “the *means* used for human rights enforcement . . . are exempt from being considered to be human rights violations within themselves” (6).

Arguably, some of the human rights problems of the contemporary moment stem from the fact that the matter of human rights is too settled, too readily perceived as self-evident and unquestionable. The human rights discourse is hindered by its own need to establish for itself a “church history,” to see the image of the human person and the rights attached to that figure as akin to religious truths that reveal themselves and have always been the same throughout history. However, this denial of the constructedness of human rights leads to significant blind spots, in which some human rights violations are visible while others are not. It is therefore beneficial to return to the mid-century moment, to consider how writers and thinkers who did not have recourse to a settled human rights ideology contended with the same social problems that are interwoven into the human rights discourse of our time. The narratives they create to make sense of atrocity and injustice are reminders of how human rights ideologies do not simply exist as weapons to fight the battles of the twentieth century but are forged in response to history, and

especially to crisis, and are always being re-negotiated. To understand the nature of human rights in our world and how they affect contemporary social and political action, it is vital to remember and look critically at the ways in which the supposedly immutable truth of human rights is shaped by the currents of history and the diversity of human storytelling.

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## VITA

### EDUCATION

B.A., English, Belmont University, 2009

M.A., English, University of Mississippi, 2013  
Thesis Director: Kathryn McKee, Associate Professor

### AWARDS AND FELLOWSHIPS

College of Liberal Arts Summer Dissertation Fellowship, 2017

College of Liberal Arts Summer Dissertation Fellowship, 2018

Graduate School Spring Dissertation Fellowship, 2019

### PROFESSIONAL AFFILIATIONS

Modernist Studies Association

The Space Between Society

### CONFERENCE PRESENTATIONS

“The Construction of the Human in Dave Eggers’ *Zeitoun*,” New Voices Graduate Student Conference, Atlanta, GA (January 30-February 1, 2014).

“Writing a Social Utopia after Fascism: Reportage and the Legacy of the Bildungsroman in *The Meaning of Treason*,” Annual Conference of the Space Between Society, Oxford, MS (May 25-27, 2017).

“National Loyalty and Anti-Fascism in Rebecca West’s Wartime Writing,” Seminar on “Modernism and Liberalism,” Annual Conference of the Modernist Studies Association, Columbus, OH (November 8-11, 2018).