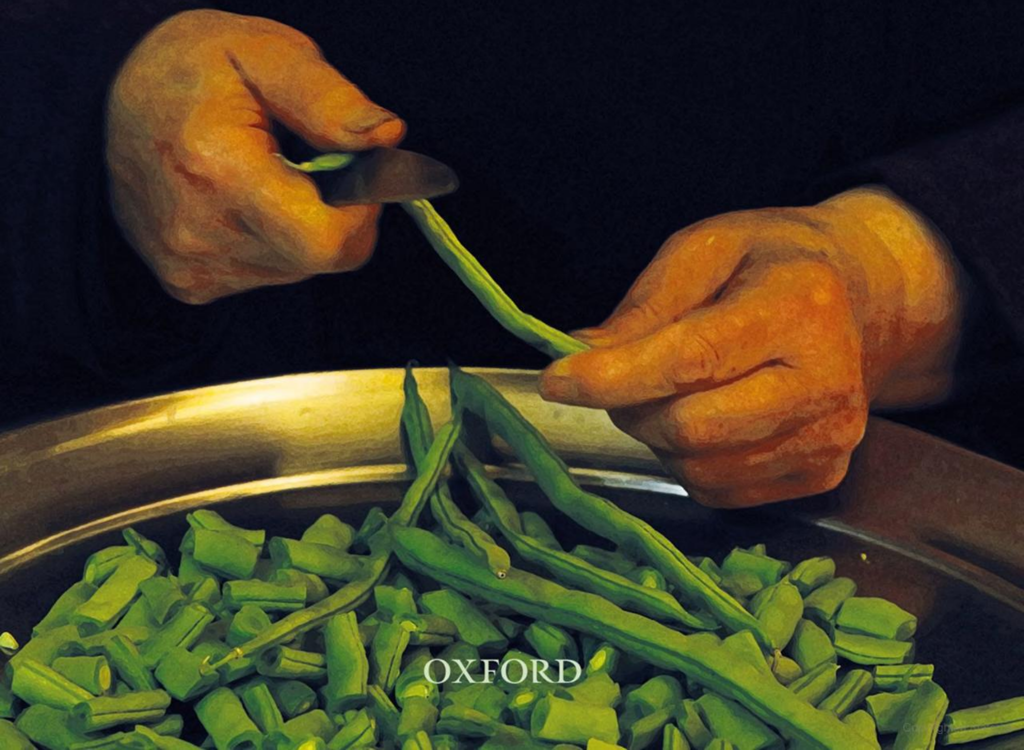
Lyndsey STONEBRIDGE

Writing & Righting

Literature in the Age of Human Rights



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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION—LITERATURE IN THE ENDTIMES (?) OF HUMAN RIGHTS

There was a time, not too long ago, when it did not seem necessary to describe the relationship between literature and human rights. The connections between the self-evident humanity of books and the bigger project of securing humanity seemed obvious. In many ways, they still are. We read books because they give us blueprints for the ways in which it might be possible to live with others in the world. We write declarations and protocols, endow international courts with power, train legislators and advocates because we also believe it is possible to create legal fictions strong enough to make living with others morally tolerable, if not just.

For much of the post-war period, the activities of discerning humanity through literature and scripting it for a better world were tacitly assumed to be part of a literary education. The new and practical critics of the mid-twentieth century disinterestedly analysed the complexities of the human condition because they valued it. Later, theorists challenged that supposed disinterestedness by arguing that marginalized and more contradictory ways

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of being were also valuable. And if the knowledge that the writers of every document of humanity had dipped their ink in barbarism always hovered uncomfortably in the background, few in either generation would have dreamt they were doing anything other than supporting the development of human rights with their reading, if only vaguely and non-committedly.

If that assumption has changed, this is because not much about either human rights or the humanizing benefits of a literary education seems self-evident right now.

Modern human rights emerged from three interrelated histories: the total war and genocides of the Second World War; the political and creative struggles of decolonization; and the ideological battles of the Cold War. Each of these intertwined histories has several literary histories too. From anti-colonial poetics to the postcolonial novel; from eye-watering levels of state investment in literature during the Cold War to the marketing of World Literature in the global glory days of neoliberalism; from Holocaust testimony to the *samizdat* underground literary networks, writing has always given expression to the many and often contradictory freedoms of human rights. Up until fairly recently, just as books, by and large, are considered all-round good things, human rights were viewed as a capacious umbrella under which progressives, liberals, pacifists, anti-racists, feminists, anti-colonialists, democratic socialists, internationalists and anti-communists could huddle, albeit in not exactly comfortable proximity.

The one freedom everybody seemed to agree on was freedom of conscience, which is why the symbol of human rights has so often been the pen. The first strategy launched by Amnesty when it was founded in 1961 was a letter writing campaign. It was well-chosen. Writing letters to prisoners of conscience was a way of

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showing your solidarity by exercising your own conscience: you wrote your own letter, because you were also defending the rights of other people to author their own lives. It was an ethos that was to characterize the development of human rights through the 1970s and 1980s.

But in the years following the end of the Cold War disenchantment began to set in, at least in the West—elsewhere, the enchantment had always been more qualified. What Susan Marks has described as the 'myth of no politics' had made human rights manipulable.[1] Struggles against oppression continued, but, as it became more difficult to disentangle political morality from *realpolitik,* the language of human rights filtered across from local politics, activists, NGOs, writers, and intellectuals and into foreign policy and increasingly centralized humanitarian initiatives. By the late 1990s and early 2000s, it seemed to many that the once capacious umbrella of human rights had snapped shut and was being reemployed as a weapon with which the United States and its allies might re-script the moral and political ordering of the world. Not only did the West appear to think it owned human rights, it was also, on more than a few occasions, proving to be spectacularly bad at them.

Bodged humanitarian operations and an excess of administrative reason appeared to produce nearly as much suffering as it eased. Human rights and humanitarian agencies kept on hearing the words 'development' and 'sustainability', even as many explained that what they also wanted was equality, liberty and justice. The bitter lesson that force always arrived too late to prevent genocide had to be learned twice, first in Bosnia and then in Rwanda. Once learned, however, in practice it proved difficult to keep intervention humanitarian. Actively and responsibly

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aiming to protect human life by whatever means possible was one thing, but sending over a drone to show how much you cared was another. Or was it? By the time evidence of torture and 'legal black holes' emerged from the second Gulf War, it was becoming difficult to tell what was a blurred line and what a political lie.

At this point, Western writers and scholars from the humanities started looking more critically at their relation to human rights. They did so, in part, to reclaim human rights from the bad history that was building up around them. Historian Lynn Hunt's influential book *Inventing Human Rights* (2007), for example, showed how the revolutionary idea of a shared humanity grew to the extent that torture became more repugnant in the eighteenth century than it seemed to be to many Americans in the early twenty-first.[2] Other historians, such as Samuel Moyn in *The Last Utopia* (2010), subjected the mythologies of the more recent history of human rights to less flattering critique.[3] In literary studies, scholars tracked genealogies of human rights narratives, be they the self-justifications and rhetorical moral hazing of perpetrators and beneficiaries, the Quixotic passions of the humanitarian helper, or the testimonies of victims who, deprived of rights, have more reason than most to create new languages for justice.[4] Deconstructive critics had previously emphasized how the traumatized testimonies of victims shattered systems of moral, political, and legal representation. By the time Baghdad was razed in 2003, the mood was more critically self-reflective: the shattering of international law and the traumatizing of politics had become grotesquely real.[5]

Literature has always been a strong co-creator of ideas about humanity and justice.[6] Eighteenth-century moral philosophers preached the values of sympathetic reason, but as Hunt argued

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in her book, it was through the novel that the intimate lives of strangers found a place in the hearts of the new middle-classes. The development of the lyric voice in poetry similarly revealed a unique individual, by turns vulnerable and voluble, unafraid to climb above the treeline of the mountains in search of freedom. Historical leaps in the bid for human equality invariably come with innovations in form, genre, and literary expression. Had Jefferson simply repeated 'Let's Get Independence Done' *ad nauseum* (the slogan for the United Kingdom's 2019 election was 'Get Brexit Done') or 'Make America Great', rather than crafting a story about a bad father-king and a different future for his justly rebellious children, things might have worked out differently. Had Frederick Douglass not forged a new genre that defined modern freedom in opposition to colonial slavery in his 1845 memoir *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, American Slave,* the testimonial form might have ended up merely being supplicatory rather than emancipatory. Had George Orwell not imagined a man restless enough to steal a pen and begin to write down his own thoughts in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), the totalitarian mind might have remained a theoretical abstraction. And so on. The problem with this progressive view of what literature can do is, of course, that in the round we don't seem to have progressed nearly far enough.

A more sceptical view embraces the idea that literature was—and is—a strong co-creator in ideas about rights and justice, but argues for a bumpier, and possibly in the end more creative, understanding of how human rights get to be imagined and re-imagined in response to different historical and political pressure points. This was an argument first suggested by the philosopher Richard McKeon, who sat on a special Philosophers' Committee

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convened by UNESCO in 1947 to inquire into the Theoretical Bases of Human Rights. McKeon argued that human rights would never get going at all if we waited for philosophers and legislators to agree about those theoretical foundations. What was required, rather, was simply a universal acknowledgement that human rights existed, albeit in various and relative forms, and to note that this contingency is their historical condition—and, indeed, that contingency might well be their strength. 'The history of human rights must be rewritten, at every stage of its progress, from the point of view of ideas and values, the philosophy, of that period,' he later wrote.[7]

Philosophers and historians have long argued about the origins of human rights. Theories of rights, law, morality, sympathy, dignity, love, and friendship have always been entangled with the messes of political power, sovereignty, capitalism, occupation, and colonialism. Literature occupies the mid-line between the desire to know about how the world might or should be of philosophers, and the realities about what actually happens that concern historians.

Writers have no problem with the idea of rewriting the history of human rights from the point of view of ideas and values that matter to them in their own time. From Leo Tolstoy to Toni Morrison, George Eliot to Primo Levi, Gabriel Garcia Marquez to Mahmoud Darwish, Virginia Woolf to Behrouz Boochani, the most creative political-moralists of their times were never doing anything less.

The legal theorist Martti Koskenniemi has suggested that, given the difficulties of grounding human rights in faith or philosophy, we should instead think about them as 'part of the normative organization' of a period.[8] Writers, we could add, have often been

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in the vanguard of setting out how political communities wish to judge themselves—and others. Novels invite us into worlds that are enough like the ones we live in to reveal what is beautiful and what is ugly about our lives together. Drama teaches us about the caprice of political fate, the comedy of moral error, and how it is that one person's tragedy can affect everyone. Poetry shares with us the intimacy, weirdness, and dignity of the human mind. There are plenty of super-creative civilizations that never had anything like human rights; what is less clear is whether modern human rights would have been invented without the arts.

This all sounds cute until you remember that there are periods in which it is quite possible for societies to re-organize their norms in opposition to human rights, such as, for instance, now. When I was appointed as a professor of humanities and human rights at the University of Birmingham in 2018, my new colleague, the migration and citizenship expert Nando Sigona, joked (seriously) that the 'human rights' part of my job was redundant before I had even started. He meant this in two senses. On the one hand, the euphoric attacks on human rights from the new right-wing nationalist international (Bolsonaro, Orbán, Erdogan, Trump, Netanyahu, Modi, Putin, Duterte *et al.*) are a clear and direct existential threat to both the idea of human rights and, even more seriously, to the institutions that make them possible, such as courts, treaties, universities, NGOs, and international bodies. But he also meant that human rights had weakened themselves.

In 2013, Stephen Hopgood published an important book entitled *The Endtimes of Human Rights* in which he argued that the West's owning of human rights as a moral project, with its frequently disastrous and unaccountable overreach, was fast approaching its last days.[9] Human rights might survive but only if

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their so-called moral guardians in the West withdrew, and allowed for their re-writing to continue in other contexts. Any hope of a new times for human rights, Hopgood concluded, rested with local activism and the transnational solidarities—and humanisms—that emerge in response to human suffering and disaster.

At the beginning of the 2020s, humanitarians working in the Mediterranean, Europe, Syria, Iran, China and elsewhere are routinely criminalized. Regimes have re-discovered the populist pleasures to be gained by publicly stripping people of their citizenship (last seen in the late 1930s). Mass bombing, chemical warfare, and genocide have been enabled by bumbling and conveniently supine political elites, whilst, on the borders of Europe and the United States, children lose their minds in refugee and migrant detention camps. And this is all before we can even begin to take stock of the damage done to human life and liberty by responses to COVID 19 (which emerged just as this book went to press). We know we are witnessing major and repeated 'human rights crises' because the media tell us so. But if the word 'crises' obscures the political causes of this suffering, neither are we quite sure that the words 'human rights' any longer carry enough moral, political, cultural, social, or even semantic weight to adequately convey what it is that so many are currently determinedly, urgently, and sometimes desperately working to protect across the globe just now.

Writers are used to words failing. Literary history is good at tracking the mixed moral and political fortunes of language, the moments when, for instance, words such as 'exile' lost their 'tone of sacred awe' and started to 'provoke the idea of something simultaneously suspicious and unfortunate'—the example is Hannah Arendt's from 1944.[10] In better times, other words, such as equality, freedom, and dignity, become part of a culture's normative

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