



creaturely POETICS

ANIMALITY AND VULNERABILITY IN
LITERATURE AND FILM

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To my parents

I would like to make it, not less painful, only clearer.
—Simone Weil, *Letter to a Priest*

*If the sadness of life makes you tired
And the failures of man make you sigh
You can look to the time soon arriving
When this noble experiment winds down and calls it a day
Time has come now to stop being human
Time to find a new creature to be
Be a fish or a weed or a sparrow
For the earth has grown tired and all of your time has expired
All the gardens are sprouting with flowers
All the treecrogs are bursting with birds
And the people all know that it's over
They lay down all their airs and they hang up their tiresome words
—Thinking Fellers Union Local 282, "Noble Experiment"*

1 Humanity Unraveled, Humanity Regained

The Holocaust and the Discourse of Species

And the wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid; and the calf and the young lion and the fatling together; and a little child shall lead them.

—Isaiah 11:6

We are in the midst of a humanistic revival or at least a neohumanist burst of energy. . . . Issues of how humans live and what they live for become central because they are what concern us as readers and teachers—some- times in spite of ourselves. —Daniel R. Schwarz, *Mapping the Ethical Turn*

Liberation

Primo Levi's *The Truce* recalls the first days of the liberation of Auschwitz with an anecdote. A cow delivered by the Russian army to feed the camp's survivors is swiftly set upon, torn apart, and eaten:

About midday a frightened child appeared, dragging a cow by the halter; he made us understand that it was for us, that the Russians had sent it, then he abandoned the beast and fled like a bolt. I don't know how, but within minutes the poor animal was slaughtered, gutted and quartered and its remains distributed to all the corners of the camp where survivors nestled.

(*Truce* 191)

The scene is a sort of freakish reworking of the prophecy of Isaiah, a book whose theme is salvation at a time (the late eighth century BC) of Jewish dejection and exile. In Isaiah, too, a child—symbol of a heavenly truce—leads the animal. Was Levi thinking of Isaiah when he noted the “poor

animal" whose violent death is oddly concurrent, perhaps even synonymous with, the liberation of Auschwitz? The passage from *The True* and the prophecy of Isaiah are mirror images of emancipation: the liberation of Auschwitz marked the *Häftlinge's* return into history and humanity, while the biblical vision glimpses a final escape from history and from the dictates of species. If presenting this passage from *The True* and the prophecy of Isaiah as twin tales seems gratuitous, the irony with respect to liberation is, I would argue, implicit in Levi's text.

Cultural anxiety over species identity determines the ways the Holocaust is and is not represented. Holocaust discourse is uncannily doubled: on the one hand, animals permeate the Holocaust. We find them in the perpetrators' denial of the humanity of the Jews and in the reverse commonplace that the Nazis "behaved like animals," in the image of Jews as "lambs for the slaughter," clichés about Nazi animal lovers (and Hitler's supposed vegetarianism), and most potently, perhaps, in the resounding question of Holocaust literature of how to retain one's humanity in the face of Auschwitz. But if the Jews died like cattle, cattle do not die like Jews. Comparing the fate of animals to that of Jews is considered ethically repugnant (Cavell calls it "inducorous"). Sifting legitimate from illegitimate Holocaust imagery is part and parcel of the work of memory, and it discloses a profound insecurity specifically around the notion of species.

Daniel Schwarz, for example, "want[s] to show how [Holocaust] narratives are about humans, by humans, and for humans" (*Imagining the Holocaust* 4). The human in discussions of the Holocaust acts as a persistent but ultimately floating signifier: "if ever a past needed a human shape," says Schwarz, "it is the Holocaust; yet as we shall see, putting a human shape on inhuman behavior challenges our ability to imagine evil and to represent it linguistically" (6). Does it? If we must "keep the Holocaust human," this is precisely because the event ~~radically~~ erodes human legibility. To simply reject as iniquitous the analogy between Jews and animals is also to refuse to engage fully with the Holocaust itself.

Much Holocaust writing is devoted to the moral salvaging of humanity from the wreckage of the Second World War. Restoring humanity (defined through the familiar tropes of free will, rationality, morality,

restoring humanity (a goal of T.P. ...)

and language) from what in *Remnants of Auschwitz* Agamben called the "shipwreck of dignity" (62) is the reparative principle behind a large portion of Holocaust commentaries. In *The Holocaust in American Life*, Peter Novick says that in the United States suffering has become "the path to wisdom—the cult of the survivor as secular saint" (11). To be sure, this humanist project is by now so habitual as to have become intuitive and unquestionable. It is also seductive, since its goal is to assert human dignity in the face of atrocity. But such a project is, I would argue, a vacant one. Even for Levi, "by temperament, education, and class, the quasi embodiment of the Enlightenment humanist subject" (Druker 11), human identity after Auschwitz is not simply recoverable.

The significance of the Holocaust's uncanny animality is, as Agamben has already shown, profound. The mania for racial purity, the ghettos, deportations, and camps claimed the human itself as an embattled zone, an identity whose instability fueled the urge for demolition and reinvention. The battle over the human being did not, however, end with the defeat of the Third Reich. It survives as dutifully and as passively in the post-Holocaust task of remembrance. The result is that in post-Holocaust rhetoric, too, human and animal, humanity and inhumanity continue to circle one another in contagious proximity. Schwarz's affirmation of a "neohumanist burst of energy" somewhat wishfully indicates that Holocaust memory today shoulders the great weight of species identity as its ethico-political epicenter.

This chapter begins with Primo Levi, who bore witness to the Holocaust's unraveling of human identity, and continues with Simone Weil's important notion of "affliction" (*malheur*), a striking elaboration of which I find in Levi's memoirs *If This Is a Man* and *The True*. Affliction both illuminates and presents a challenge to the standard understanding of the Holocaust's radical transgressiveness. My discussion then turns to a comparison between Weil and Alain Finkielkraut's formulations of radical injustice. Finkielkraut's call for a clearly defined category of "crimes against humanity" to address the "boundless crime" of genocide bears some resemblance to Weil's understanding of ultimate injustice as a violation of the sacred. In Weil's formulation, however, the particularity of the human gives way to a less anthropocentric

ethics of creaturely life. The chapter closes with a look at fiction by I. B. Singer, who reinstates the animality of the Holocaust by linking the abject figure of the survivor to the downtrodden animal. My aim in this chapter is to follow a less predictable train of thought, beyond the binaries of humanity/inhumanity, historiography/testimony, representable/inexpressible. In so doing, I also consider Weil's original contribution to the thinking of atrocity.

The Bathers

On three occasions in "The Main Camp" chapter of *The Truce*, Primo Levi and his fellow prisoners are made to bathe by the military authorities under whose control they come. The first of these "christenings" takes place on arrival to Auschwitz. The second is on liberation by the Red Army and the third in American custody. "I am not questioning that a bath was opportune for us in our condition," Levi remarks, but "at each of those three memorable christenings, it was easy to perceive behind the concrete and literal aspect a great symbolic shadow, the unconscious desire of the new authorities, who absorbed us in turn within their own sphere, to strip us of the vestiges of our former life, to make of us new men consistent with their new models, to impose their brand upon us" (194).

The three christenings—unseemly inversions of the painted bathers of Renoir, Courbet, or Cézanne—produce "new men" whose identity each time reflects the peculiarities of an ideology. In the tenebrous world of the Lager, the baths conflate mythic ritual with the practices of modern hygiene. While the Germans imposed a "bath of humiliation," a "grotesque-devilish-sacral bath," and a "Black mass bath," the Russian bath was "extemporaneous and crude" (194). The Americans, dressed in chemical suits, sprayed the naked survivors with DDT, "a functional, antiseptic, highly automatized bath" (194). Each baptism is a rebirth: scrubbing away the residues of an improper humanity and producing it anew.

Much of *If This Is a Man* and *The Truce* illustrates the conscious efforts required to produce, retain, or retrieve one's humanity in the face of its

unraveling. In its doing and undoing, the human is shown to be a tenuous, fragile construct. In chapters like "Chemical Examination" (*If This Is a Man* 107–114), humanity is pragmatically conferred on Levi by the German authorities as a function of his scientific expertise—a classically rationalist, ability-based definition of humanity, though certainly not a universal one (Levi knows that failing the chemistry exam means certain death). Earlier, in "On the Bottom" (28–43), Levi charts the "demolition of a man" (32) on entering the foreign universe of the Lager. In the Dantesque "The Canto of Ulysses" (115–121), Levi clings to recitations of Dante's "Inferno" as precious shreds of his civilized existence. Yet Levi also believes what Agamben will later develop into a systematic study of the legacies of Auschwitz, that "the Lager was pre-eminently a gigantic biological and social experiment" (93).

At the second bathing, the hefty Russian women encounter a "serious obstacle":

a shadow, a bald little figure, twisted like a root, skeleton-like . . . like an inanimate block . . . Charles and I, naked and streaming, watched the scene with compassion and horror. When one of his arms was stretched out, we saw the tattooed number for a moment: he was a 200,000, one of the Vosges: "Bon dieu, c'est un *frankais*!" exclaimed Charles, and turned in silence towards the wall. (Truce 195)

This is one of Levi's "submerged" or "drowned" figures, a *Muschmann*: Auschwitz slang for the ruined human of whom little remains but the final flickering of biological life.² The episode is followed by the often-quoted passage on Hurbinek:

Hurbinek was a nobody, a child of death, a child of Auschwitz. He looked about three years old, no one knew anything of him, he could not speak and he had no name; that curious name, Hurbinek, had been given to him by us, perhaps by one of the women who had interpreted with those syllables one of the inarticulate sounds that the baby let out now and again. He was paralyzed

from the waist down, with atrophied legs, as thin as sticks, but his eyes, lost in his triangular and wasted face, flashed terribly alive, full of demand, assertion, of the will to break loose, to shatter the tomb of his dumbness. The speech he lacked, which no one had bothered to teach him, the need of speech charged his stare with explosive urgency; it was a stare both savage and human, even mature, a judgment, which none of us could support, so heavy it was with force and anguish. (Truce 197)

From When to the impossible
When Hurbinek dies, Levi writes that "nothing remains of him, he bears witness through these words of mine" (198). This testimony signals "the disjunction between two impossibilities of bearing witness" (Remnants 39). Levi's impossible rendering of Hurbinek's impossible speech. The *Muselman*, claims Agamben, embodies Auschwitz's "radical refutation of every principle of obligatory communication" (Remnants 65).

Though Agamben may be the most arresting of them, several commentators take up Levi's wrestling with liberal humanism as key to a post-Holocaust ethics. Jonathan Druker recently argued that "while Levi scholars have usually noted the memoir's humanist agenda, in which reason and culture are only redemptive, they have seldom taken into account the counternarrative embedded in the text, which corroborates that after Auschwitz, the Enlightenment conception of man, and the ethical guarantees the word implies, have been irreparably damaged" (Druker 72).³ The erosion of man is underway even before the book begins, in the title's maimed grammaticality: *If This Is a Man*.⁴

What is exemplary about Levi is not just the quality of his writing (we know that he saw himself as chemist first and writer second). His work embodies the lacuna by which "the witness, must in some way submit his every word to the test of an impossibility of speaking" (Remnants 157). This idea of witnessing is, I would argue, central to inter- and postwar literature whose modernity resides in the attempt to draw nearer to the slaughtered millions. "Perhaps every word, every writing is born in this sense, as testimony" (Remnants 38).

In the use of an episodic structure, naturalism and modernism, and the theme of the epic, picaresque sojourner through worlds, Levi

witness testimony

is surprisingly close to another work of witnessing, Louis Ferdinand Celine's *Journey to the End of the Night* (1932). Celine's semiautobiographical narrator is witness to a world that would soon descend to the horrors of Auschwitz:

We had reached the end of the world, that was becoming obvious. We couldn't go any further, because further on there were only dead people.

The dead began on the Place du Terre, two steps away. From where we were it was easy to see them . . . you've got to know how to find them—namely, from inside you with your eyes almost closed, because the electric signs with their great copes of light make it very hard to see the dead, even through the clouds. . . . There were old patients of mine here and there, male and female, that I'd long stopped thinking about, and still others, the black man in a white cloud, all alone, the one they had given one lash too many down there in Topo. (322–323)

Levi the chemist, Celine the physician; their professions enter their books. Chemistry does not just save Levi from the gas chambers, but lends an elemental dimension to his prose (full-blown in *The Periodic Table*). Celine's accounts of the degradations of existence, of bodies marred by poverty, war, and disease are filtered through the physician's gaze of Bar-damu, *Journey's* first-person narrator and medicine man of the *banlieues*.

If we can speak of realism in Levi and Celine, it is not as a literary convention but as an attitude. Both keep their eyes fastened on the condition of creaturely exposure amplified by the two world wars that frame their work. It is no accident that *Journey to the End of the Night* includes several extraordinary passages on cruelty to animals (250–251, 259): Celine's later collaborationism and the seething antisemitism of his pamphlets (*Bagatelles pour un massacre* [1937], *L'école des cadavres* [1938], and *Les Beaux Draps* [1941]) should not deter us from comparisons with Levi. On the contrary, to a postwar readership in the shadow of totalitarianism and declining the apologist path, Levi and Celine share a common historical tragedy.⁵

Affliction

W. H. Auden

W. H.

The connection Levi makes between the Holocaust and inarticulacy does not spring from the insufficiencies of language. Experience in all its varieties—appalling, joyous, or prosaic, is difficult to put into words. Not finding the words is an expression of the kind of creature we are. It is also an expression (and an experience) of our loneliness. In what sense, then, is the Holocaust uniquely positioned outside language? Why confer on extermination the prestige of the mystical? (*Remnants* 32). Unparaphrasability for Agamben is the paradox of witnessing, the site where language meets nonlanguage. Speaking about the Holocaust is not therefore a matter of making language express a special content that categorically defies language—for there is no such content—but of making language open to the excessive reality of the event.

*Mystical
withers*

The Hurbinek episode epitomizes what for Weil is a general problem of communicating injustice: that “those who most often have occasion to feel that evil is being done to them are those who are least trained in the art of speech” (“Human Personality” 73). Both the *Muselmann* and the lacuna of testimony are uncannily prefigured in the condition Weil called “affliction.” Affliction is by its nature inarticulate. The afflicted silently beseech to be given the words to express themselves. There are times when they are given none; but there are also times when they are given words, but ill-chosen ones, because those who choose them know nothing of the affliction they would interpret (“Human Personality” 85). Affliction is by far Weil’s most suggestive contribution to the field of Holocaust studies, and it has yet to be worked through and reckoned with systematically.⁸

Weil’s most important thoughts on affliction are found in the essay “The Love of God and Affliction,” written in 1942, the year of Levi’s deportation to Auschwitz. It begins by distinguishing between suffering and affliction: “affliction is something apart, specific, and irreducible. It is quite a different thing from simple suffering. It takes possession of the soul and marks it through and through with its own particular mark, the mark of slavery” (67). This recalls Levi’s description of arriving to Auschwitz: “Imagine now a man who is deprived of everyone he loves, and

1/ Butcher

at the same time of his house, his habits, his clothes, in short, of everything he possesses: he will be a hollow man, reduced to suffering and needs, forgetful of dignity and restraint, for he who loses all often easily loses himself” (*If This Is a Man* 33). Affliction is sorrow stripped of all its “possessions” (the people we lost, our house, our habits, our clothes) and reduced to its nakedness. Sharon Cameron explains that “affliction cannot be mitigated in that its source—distance from God—is irreducible” (121). The afflicted, “a being struggling on the ground like a half-crushed worm” (“Love of God” 69), like Levi’s *Muselmann* and Agamben’s *homo sacer*, is bare life abandoned and forsaken. In Weil and Agamben, it is important to stress, these figures do not function as “limit cases” but serve to illuminate a general situation (*Remnants* 48–50). Unlike Agamben, however, affliction in Weil is not part of the anatomy of sovereignty but a “divine technique” (“Love of God” 81), a sort of theological gateway. For once the particular features of suffering have been cleared and suffering stripped bare, affliction “converts the person’s separation from God to his inseparability from God” (*Impersonality* 122).

“Those who are persecuted for their faith and are aware of the fact are not afflicted, although they have to suffer” (“Love of God” 73). To become affliction, suffering must cease to make sense (“affliction is ridiculous” [“Love of God” 73]). An illogical and random persecution commutes the sufferer’s identity, since their suffering is comprehensible neither as martyrdom nor as heroism. The afflicted is no longer strictly a person (he “will keep only half his soul” [“Love of God” 69]), but an anonymous focal point of pain.

This has bearing for that common question of post-Holocaust theology (How could God let Auschwitz happen?). “It is not surprising,” writes Weil, “that the innocent are killed, tortured, driven from their country, made destitute, or reduced to slavery, imprisoned in camps or cells, since there are criminals to perform such actions. . . . But it is surprising that God should have given affliction the power to seize the very souls of the innocent and to take possession of them as their sovereign lord” (“Love of God” 69). The atheist is right: God is absent from the world. But this absence for Weil does not signify a failed or malevolent Creator. The existence of the world is synonymous with

love as a direct

the possibility of affliction: a "blind mechanism, heedless of degrees of spiritual perfection, continually tosses men about and throws some of them at the very foot of the Cross. It rests with them to keep or not to keep their eyes turned toward God through all the jolting" ("Love of God" 73; my emphasis). This is not, Cameron insists, the masochistic reinscription of pain as love. Love, understood as "a direction and not a state of the soul" ("Love of God" 81) is rather "generated in spite of the pain and by what the pain can't touch—the greatest suffering being insufficient to disturb the acquiescent part of the soul, consenting to a right direction" (*Impersonality* 122). I take this to be at stake in the "October 1944" chapter of *If This Is a Man*, in which a religious man called Kuhn thanks God for sparing him during selection. This is a rare occasion on which Levi foregoes his usual decorum:

I see and hear old Kuhn praying aloud, with his beret on his head, swaying backwards and forwards violently; Kuhn is thanking God because he has not been chosen.

Kuhn is out of his senses. Does he not see Beppo the Greek in the bunk next to him, Beppo who is twenty years old and is going to the gas chamber the day after tomorrow and knows it and lies there looking fixedly at the light without saying anything and without even thinking anymore? Can Kuhn fail to realize that next time it will be his turn? Does Kuhn not understand that what has happened today is an abomination, which no propitiatory prayer, no pardon, no expiation by the guilty, which nothing at all in the power of man can ever clean again?

If I was God, I would spit at Kuhn's prayer. (135-136)

Kuhn's prayer expiates suffering by feyning the reality of affliction. His gratitude is thus a perversion of prayer, which far from "consenting to a right direction" and keeping his "eyes turned toward God through all the jolting" attributes to God personal preference and caprice in the meting out of suffering. What sort of a God is Kuhn thanking in this way? Levi the atheist recognizes in Kuhn's prayer a scourge on both God and man.

God's presence can only take form of absence

There is a second way in which affliction alters how we might wish to think about the Holocaust. It concerns the problem of evil. Affliction, we have seen, is the "mark of slavery." The afflicted are deprived of personality and made into things ("Love of God" 73). A loss of autonomy, indeed of humanity, also befalls the perpetrators of affliction. But there is a structural difference between the evildoer and the victim in the possibility, however small, of the afflicted turning their gaze toward and not away from God. The criminal for Weil is not a "monster"; he has simply looked away. "Human crime, which is the cause of most affliction, is part of blind necessity, because criminals do not know what they are doing" ("Love of God" 73-74). It is vital to add that Weil's notion of evil does not remove responsibility from the evildoer. Like Hannah Arendt after her, Weil is concerned with understanding evil beyond the mystifications of monstrosity.

Levi's encounter with the cold-eyed German Dr Pannwitz, for whom Levi no more and no less "belongs to a species which it is obviously opportune to suppress" (*If This Is a Man* 112), illustrates Weil's contention that "evil dwells in the heart of the criminal without being felt there. It is felt in the heart of the man who is afflicted and innocent" ("Love of God" 70). No one is further from God than the afflicted, since in Weil's economy the greater the distance, the more intense is God's absence, the only form his presence can take in the world. As presence, God could only be imaginary or false (idolatrous); his absence is his only reality. It follows that the criminal is not distant from God: "sin is not a distance, it is a turning of our gaze in the wrong direction" ("Love of God" 73).

Freedom for Weil operates in the tiny radius of a gesture: the look turned toward God while still consenting to necessity. Though the question of agency is admittedly difficult to tease out of the workings of affliction, Weil maintains that "where everything else is equal, a man does not perform the same actions if he gives his consent to obedience as if he does not; just as a plant, where everything else is equal, does not grow in the same way in the light as in the dark" ("Love of God" 77). In typical fashion, Weil affirms human agency (granting consent) by paradoxically appealing to the vegetative state of the plant; we are speaking

Finkelkraut saw a tendency of postcolonial, multicultural discourse to refuse confrontation with the Holocaust not through silence or denial but, on the contrary, through the Holocaust's vociferous invocation. By a sort of Orwellian newspaper, the Holocaust as a distinct invocation disappears amongst a "competition of memories" (19) between different groups, each vying for a place in the pantheon of human suffering. Vergès's team did not defend Barbie so much as challenge France's legitimacy to try him. France's colonial violations in Algeria and Indochina, and its continued support of Zionist oppression in Palestine, Vergès argued, exposed French hypocrisy and double standards. The Jewish Holocaust as the be-all and end-all of calamities is enshrined by those who refuse to see it for what it is: a crime committed by Europeans against Europeans. Atrocities Europeans (and their descendants) commit against nonwhites and non-Europeans go unpunished and unremembered. How anomalous, Finkelkraut proclaimed, that Barbie's defenders—nonwhite, leftist lawyers—are the very people Nazi doctrine deemed "subhuman." What cultural malaise and collective forgetting make possible such an anomaly?¹⁰

For Finkelkraut the error lies in a senseless extension of "crimes against humanity" that conflates all acts of oppression in a single compassionate sweep. Postwar universal humanism (promising "never again"), which totalizes all inhumanities "under the guise of a great reconciliation with democratic ideals" (59) and seeks justice "for all the victims of inhumanity" (56), whiffs of totalitarianism, born of a naive understanding of humanity:

Try as we may to be henceforth—and so ardently!—democratic anti-Nazis, antitotalitarians, antifascists, antiracists and antiapartheid—we have not yet learned to be wary of the beatific smile of fraternity. In spite of Patocka, Kundera, Hannah Arendt, or Thomas Mann, the lesson of this century has not been heard: we continue to consider life in unison as the very apotheosis of being. . . . When confronted with the racist. . . we are all brothers, next-of-kin, buddies: we are all uplifted by the same feelings, our bodies move to the same rhythm of a great "Euro-world dance," our "ten billion ears"

are enchanted by the same harmonies, our pulses accelerate simultaneously, a like energy electrifies us, and . . . we sing, by the glimmer of cigarette lighters, the same hymn of hope and love across the entire face of the earth. (58–59)

Finkelkraut does not mince his words: a similar romanticism informed National Socialism's own messianic humanism, whose conclusion was the murder not only of countless human beings but of the very idea of humanity.

Of special importance in the Barbie trial was a distinction between the categories of war crimes and crimes against humanity. Alice Vansteenberghe, a resistance fighter and one of Barbie's victims, explained:

"We in the Resistance knew the risks we were taking, and I accept everything that I suffered. But in the cell where I was thrown there were other people. I saw a Jewish woman and her child, well-groomed, very blond, with a barrette in her hair. Well, one day Barbie walked in and came to take this mother from her child.

This is not warfare—it's something unspeakable, beyond all bounds."

(Vansteenberghe qtd. in Finkelkraut 22, my emphasis)

This "something unspeakable, beyond all bounds" is what the legal category of crimes against humanity attempts to contain. "Whereas in reference to war crimes we may still speak of agents, crimes against humanity imply the eradication of agency. This, according to Vansteenberghe, is one crucial difference between the Resistance fighter (whose fate corresponds to a choice or an act) and the Jew (for whom no such correspondence exists), even when both identically suffer deportation and death.

"Finkelkraut's most essential formulation," Alice Y. Kaplan explains, "is that we once thought that individuals died but humanity itself continued unimpaired. The Holocaust taught us that humanity itself is mortal. The notion of crimes against humanity is the juridical trace of the coming to consciousness of humanity's mortality" (Kaplan 84). "Crimes against humanity" reflects the law's noble

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"We in the Resistance knew the risks we were taking, and I accept everything that I suffered. But in the cell where I was thrown there were other people. I saw a Jewish woman and her child, well-groomed, very blond, with a barrette in her hair. Well, one day Barbie walked in and came to take this mother from her child. *This is not warfare—it's something unspeakable, beyond all bounds.*" (Vansteenberghe qtd. in Finkelkraut 22; my emphasis)

This "something unspeakable, beyond all bounds" is what the legal category of crimes against humanity attempts to contain.¹¹ Whereas in reference to war crimes we may still speak of agents, crimes against humanity imply the eradication of agency. This, according to Vansteenberghe, is one crucial difference between the Resistance fighter (whose fate corresponds to a choice or an act) and the Jew (for whom no such correspondence exists), even when both identically suffer deportation and death.

"Finkelkraut's most essential formulation," Alice Y. Kaplan explains, "is that we once thought that individuals died but humanity itself continued unimpaired. The Holocaust taught us that humanity itself is mortal. The notion of crimes against humanity is the juridical trace of the coming to consciousness of humanity's *mortality*" (Kaplan 84). "Crimes against humanity" reflects the law's noble

attempt to seize that "something unspeakable, beyond all bounds," addresses the considered (rather than frenzied) assault on humanity by Germany's "exterminating bureaucracy" and "criminal public service" (Finkelkraut 4). Since by targeting people not for what they did but for who they were Nazism overwrote the "laws of humanity" (Finkelkraut 2), crimes against humanity legally restore "Thou shalt not kill" as a fundamental universal commandment. Crimes against humanity call for a truly "Kantian program of international justice" (Finkelkraut 10). They are not the affair of any particular state (or people). Though it remains unclear what form Finkelkraut intends this "program" to take, his call echoes Weil's insistence on the need for institutions—as yet uninvented and perhaps unimagined—to expose and abolish "everything in contemporary life which buries the soul under injustice, lies, and ugliness." For Weil, they will be placed *above* those existing institutions "concerned with protecting rights and persons and democratic freedoms." "Above" does not designate recourse to a higher legal authority but to a different ontological order. Both Weil and Finkelkraut acknowledge in the judicial an appeal to a fundamental and incontestable ethical realm. But they envisage this realm in significantly different terms.

Finkelkraut's fundamental ethical law is at the same time decidedly and historically French: "By referring, beyond the diversity of concrete laws, to eternal principles—to laws of humanity applicable to all nations—the judges at Nuremberg were following the classical tradition of the Rights of Man that Montesquieu defined as the 'civil code of the Universe,' in the sense that every people is a citizen thereof" (Finkelkraut 5). In "The Crisis of French Universalism" Naomi Schor points out that the characteristic "Frenchness of universalism" (43) does not, in fact, originate with the French Revolution (as Finkelkraut seems to imply). Its roots lie deeper, within France's Catholic Church. We ought to see the Revolution of 1789 more accurately as the continuation of an older French universalism by other means (44).¹⁹ The inventiveness of the French Revolution lay not in universalism *per se* but in its superimposition of rights: "What the French Revolution

crucially instituted was the association of universalism and human rights; what was missing from pre-Revolutionary accounts of universalism was the modern humanistic doctrine of universal human rights" (Schor 46). Since the 1990s, French universalism has been embroiled in the "French culture wars" between the "upholders of the Republic [Finkelkraut] and the advocates of French multiculturalism and democracy [Vergès]" (Schor 48). The proceedings of the Barbie trial, in which a legal team made up of France's former colonial subjects (the French-Vietnamese Vergès, Congolese Jean-Martin M'Bemba, and Algerian Nabil Bouarfa) indicted France for colonial crimes equal to those of Nazism, epitomized the debates on France's national identity and colonial heritage vis-à-vis its universalist humanist credentials. But do the universal Rights of Man and their progeny, the curiously phrased "crimes against humanity," truly exhaust the boundless violations of Auschwitz?

Inhumanity and the Sacred

When the infliction of evil provokes a cry of sorrowful surprise from the depth of the soul, it is not a personal thing. Injury to the personality and its desires is not sufficient to evoke it; but only and always the sense of contact with injustice through pain. It is always, in the last of men as in Christ himself, an impersonal protest.

There are also many cries of personal protest, but they are unimportant; you may provoke as many of them as you wish without violating anything sacred.
—Weil, "Human Personality"

In a telling passage toward the end of *Remembering in Vain*, Finkelkraut dismisses calls to televise the Barbie trial for the supposed edification of the French citizenry. The "pedagogical and therapeutic virtues of the television screen" (70) are misconceived because

the same principle, in fact, holds true for justice as for religion, for theatre or for the act of teaching—it can be done anywhere (a table suffices), but only by isolating the time and the space of

these interactions from their secular settings. Therefore it is doubly absurd to want to televise judicial proceedings in order to educate people. For far from reproducing this fundamental separation, television presents the sacred as food for the secular, and puts the outside world at the mercy of the private world. (70)

The consecrated courtroom is at the heart of the contractual humanity that Finkelkraut espouses. It is a reminder of the sacred origins of the law, prefigured for Finkelkraut (as for Lévinas) in the face-to-face encounter between the self and the wholly other person.

Weil's essay "Human Personality" ("La personne et le sacré": the person and the sacred) also appeals to the sacred origins of justice. With "Are We Struggling for Justice?" and *The Need for Roots*, "Human Personality" is Weil's most explicit critique of rights as the foundation of justice. Written in 1942-43, concurrent with the Nazi horrors but before their ultimate unfolding, "Human Personality" touches on several of Finkelkraut's contentions about the Holocaust's judicial and ethical legacies. Weil's opinions on themes ranging from Marxism to the USSR, colonialism, and Judaism intersect provocatively with Finkelkraut's. As children of assimilated middle-class Jews (both attended Lycée Henri IV and the École Normale Supérieure), their thinking is shaped, albeit differently, by France's educational and political culture.

"Human Personality" begins with the assertion that "something is amiss with the vocabulary of the modern trend of thought known as Personalism" (70). "I see a passer-by in the street. He has long arms, blue eyes, and a mind whose thoughts I do not know, but perhaps they are commonplace. It is neither his person, nor the human personality in him, which is sacred to me. It is he. The whole of him. The arms, the eyes, the thoughts, everything" (70-71). Profound injustice offends neither the man's body nor his personality (his intelligence or character). Nor even is his singularity defined by his human capacities and attributes. The "whole of him" is larger than the sum of his parts and makes it "impossible to define what is meant by respect for human personality. It is not just that it cannot be defined in words

That can be said of many perfectly clear ideas. But this one cannot be conceived either: it cannot be defined nor isolated by the silent operation of the mind. To set up as a standard of public morality a notion which can neither be defined nor conceived is to open the door to every kind of tyranny" (71). Next, Weil considers the combination of "human personality" with a second erroneous notion: rights. The universal principle of human rights amounts to a double inadequacy, whose source is the French Revolution and its Rights of Man, the very legacy Finkelkraut champions as enshrining humanity's "eternal principles": "The notion of rights, which was launched into the world in 1789, has proved unable, because of its intrinsic inadequacy, to fulfill the role assigned to it. To combine two inadequate notions, by talking about the rights of human personality, will not get us any further" ("Human Personality" 71). Weil's rejection of rights-based humanism weakens the disparity between Finkelkraut and Vergès, both heirs to the French Revolution. From this perspective, French Republicanism and postcolonialism seem locked in a struggle over the interpretation and application of universal rights, exposing the congenital link between rights and power: "Rights are always asserted in a tone of contention; and when this tone is adopted, it must rely upon force in the background, or else it will be laughed at" ("Human Personality" 81).

In bracketing off rights and human personality as sources of the sacred, Weil is already signaling toward what I would call creaturely reflections on the Holocaust. Weil's question "What is it, exactly, that prevents me from putting that man's eyes out *if I am allowed to do so?*" ("Human Personality" 71; my emphasis) recognizes the Third Reich's self-suspension of law (which Carl Schmitt called the "state of exception").¹⁴ Weil replies that "at the bottom of the heart of every human being, from earliest infancy until the tomb, there is something that goes on indomitably expecting, in the teeth of all experience of crimes committed, suffered, and witnessed, that good and not evil will be done to him. It is this above all that is sacred in every human being" (71). Although the language is emphatically humanist here, Weil's understanding of justice is not. As Cora Diamond argues in "Injustice and Animals," Weil offers a powerful model for

animal ethics because "what underlies the animal rights movement is a responsiveness to the vulnerability of animals in the face of relentless exercise of human power, and . . . the articulating of responsiveness calls for a grammar akin to the grammar of justice." Weil describes it" (120). Weil's grammar of justice is, it seems to me, so oriented toward life and not toward destruction. This orientation constitutes the "expectation" (or plea) Weil distinguishes from eligibility for rights: "this profound and childlike and unchanging expectation of good in the heart is not what is involved when we negotiate for our rights" ("Human Personality" 72).

In *The Need for Roots* Weil maintains that "it makes nonsense to say that men have, on the one hand, rights and on the other hand obligations. . . . A man left alone in the universe would have no rights whatever, but he would have obligations" (3-4). Rights and obligations are not symmetrical. It is not a matter of simply shifting perspectives in which what looks like my right is another's obligation. Obligations are primary and removed from the order of facticity. Rights come into being only "when obligations descend to the realm of fact" (4) and are therefore "related to certain conditions. Obligations alone remain independent of conditions. They belong to a realm situated above all conditions, because it is *situated above the world*" (4; my emphasis).

As if directly addressing Finkelkraut, Weil continues that the "next of 1789 did not recognize the existence of such a realm. All they recognized was the one on the human plane. That is why they started with the idea of rights" (4). This mistake "is largely responsible for the present political and social confusion" (4). As we shall see later on, the accusation of a confusion of the realms resurfaces in Weil's critique of Marxism.

Rights are not merely worldly but economic. Their "commercial value" (Human Personality" 81) is due to their origin in Roman property law. Weil's antipathy to Rome (second only to her objections to Judaism) leads to comparisons with Nazi Germany: "The Romans, like Hitler, understood that power is not fully efficacious unless clothed in a few ideas, and to this end they made use of the idea of rights, which

admirably suited to it. Modern Germany has been accused of flouting the idea: but she invoked it *ad nauseam* in her role of deprived, proletarian nation. . . . The Greeks had no conception of rights. They had no words to express it. They were content with the name of justice" (81-82). Weil's syncretic swoops across cultures and periods seem impetuous (she routinely connects Christian mystery with Buddhism and the Greeks), but they are an essential part of her method of attentive contact with ahistorical truths.¹⁵ Since rights, modeled on property law, are a euphemism for power, they can only yield victor's justice—*Vae victis* or *Siegerjustiz*.

Weil begins "Are We Struggling for Justice?" with a quote from the "Melian Dialogue" in book 5 of Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War*. The exchange between the Athenian generals and the besieged representatives of Melos famously sums up Greek *Realpolitik*: "The examination of what is just is carried out only when there is equal necessity on each side. Where there is one who is strong and one who is weak, the possible is done by the first and accepted by the second" (120).

The truth that "when someone does not have the capacity to refuse, one is not going to look for a way of obtaining his consent" (121) is not just Machiavellian but describes precisely the workings of interspecies justice, the truth of which mainstream animal rights discourse has in fact inverted: the drama of unequal power (arguably, necessity/natural law operates equally, if differently, on humans and nonhumans, only humans refuse to acknowledge it) and animals' incapacity to refuse is recast as the drama of animal otherness (nonhuman subjectivity) misrecognized or misconceived by the human mind. *A drama of force becomes a story about poorly understood concepts*.

When in *The Lives of Animals* Elizabeth Costello says that "we point to the Germans and Poles and Ukrainians who did and did not know of the atrocities around them. . . . We like to think that in their nightmares the ones whose suffering they had refused to enter came back to haunt them. . . . But probably it was not so. The evidence points in the opposite direction: that we can do anything and get away with it; that there is no punishment" (35), she suggests that a similar *Realpolitik* operates also at the level of conscience. Before rejoining Weil, I want

to briefly look at one example of post-Holocaust cinema that examines Costello's dark vision.

Passenger (*Passażerka*, 1961–63), by the Polish director Andrzej Munk remembers the Holocaust through Liza, a former German SS prisoner in Auschwitz. While on a holiday cruise with her husband ten years after the war, Liza catches sight of a woman she believes to be Marja, a Polish political prisoner in the camp. Fearing exposure, Liza confesses to her husband in the form of two flashbacks. She first presents herself as a victim of circumstance and describes her efforts to help Marja. The second flashback is a more accurate version of Liza's recollection after failing to "recruit" Marja. Liza's two narratives, the film's voice-over suggests, are reminders that "justifying oneself is only human": "What is this recollection of a game . . . between overseer and chosen prisoner, an apology, an escape from cruelty and evil, only too human? In the unreal background, people die, silently, casually, anonymously, as often perform their duty. . . . Victims trampled into the mud, over whom she walked, unseeing."¹⁶ *Passenger* focuses on daily life in Auschwitz, showing the more ideological narratives of resistance typical of earlier Polish Holocaust films. The film is indebted to the writings of Tadeusz Borowski, for whom the camp world swallows up both perpetrator and victim, leaving them in what Primo Levi dubbed the "gray zone," a morally ambiguous space that corrupts all who inhabit it.

When Marja disembarks at the next port, the disturbance is over. Life goes on, crime goes unpunished. Liza's confessions, sparked partly by fear, vaguely by guilt, reframe notions of memory, witnessing, and testimony in a transient, fleeting light. Neither imprisoned nor tormented by her past, Liza has successfully reintegrated in life. When pressed, she remembers with a mixture of admission and self-justification. *Passenger* affirms the "mechanicity" Weil sees as shaping human behavior. It allows one to carry on, beyond trauma and guilt. If the human drama is most frequently defined as the internal conflict between conscience and circumstance, Weil sees it no less as the external drama and mystery of force.¹⁷

Weil wrote one of her finest essays, "The *Iliad* or the Poem of Force," between 1940–41, early in the war, some two decades since Rudolf

Höss first associated with the notorious *Freikorps* and seven years after he joined the SS and began an illustrious career of running concentration camps.¹⁸ One way of reading Weil's text is as an essay on the anthropomorphizing of force, whose effect is always, in turn, a deforming of the human. "To define force—it is that x that turns anybody who is subjected to it into a thing" ("Iliad" 183). Homer's war epic is an ingenious illustration of the desire to humanize force and the result of being dehumanized by it. Homer achieves this by making the inhuman—rather than the human—the poem's protagonist: "the true hero, the true subject, the centre of the *Iliad* is force. Force employed by man, force that enslaves man, force before which man's flesh shrinks away. In this work, at all times, the human spirit is shown as modified by its relations with force, as swept away, blinded, by the very force it imagined it could handle, as deformed by the weight of the force it submits to" (183). Weil's idea that "force is as pitiless to the man who possesses it, or thinks he does, as it is to its victims" (191) is close to Levi's (and Borowski's) view of the camp as a morally corrupting force field.

As early as 1934, in the essays comprising *Oppression and Liberty*, Weil presented an analysis of the "play of blind forces" (74) and their relation to structures of social oppression. Throughout her writing, Weil retained the notion that human action is mechanistically determined:

there are no other restraints upon our will than material necessity and the existence of other human beings around us. Any imaginary extension of these limits is seductive, so there is a seduction in whatever helps us to forget the reality of the obstacles. That is why upheavals like war and civil war are so intoxicating: they empty human lives of their reality and seem to turn people into puppets. That is also why slavery is so pleasant to the masters.

("Human Personality" 72)

This vision (indebted to, yet already exceeding, Marxist historical materialism) sees human action as regulated first by obstacles—the play of forces—not by ideas (not even the idea of class struggle). War and revolution create the illusion of human mastery of force and a canceling

out of obstacles. When, in the sway of force, one meets with no resistance, it is easy to forget one's own essential vulnerability. This radically materialist vision of human action is integral to thoughts on justice. The "Iliad" essay makes the connection to the resistant element: in the human substance that surrounds him has the power to interpose, between the impulse and the act, an interval that is reflection. Where there is no room for reflection, there is none either for justice or prudence" ("Iliad" 193). Justice is possible only in the form of a disturbance to the crushing impulses of power. This disturbance consists in the recognition of the reality of vulnerability and its relation to the sacred—a religious recognition. It can deliver justice or liberty that are not a mere reshuffling of power. Thus, in Marxism's disavowal of religiosity, Weil recognizes an invitation to tyranny:

When force changes hands, it still remains a relation of stronger to weaker, a relation of dominance. It can go on changing hands indefinitely, without a single term of the relation being eliminated. At the moment when a political transformation occurs, those who make ready to take over power are already in possession of a force that to say a dominance over weaker men. If they possess none at all, power will not pass into their hands, unless an effective factor other than force should intervene, which Marx did not admit as possible.

(*Oppression and Liberty* 149; my emphasis)

Political power never materializes ex nihilo. The problem with revolutionary politics (perhaps with politics as such) is that it always comes late. If Marx's laboring masses have assumed power, this is not because they obtained it at will, but because they were already in possession of force. Weil distinguishes here between force (the natural laws governing motion and rest) and power anthropomorphized, incarnated in particular human structures and institutions (the distinction will be made by Arendt). Once in possession of power, the proletariat already no longer itself: it has become embroiled in the very dynamics

of domination against which it rose up in just indignation. To transform social injustice, a principle wholly other than force is required. Yet "Marx's revolutionary materialism consists in positing, on the one hand, that force alone governs social relations to the exclusion of anything else; and, on the other hand, that one day the weak, while remaining the weak, will nevertheless be the stronger. He believed in miracles without believing in the supernatural. From a purely rationalist point of view, if one believes in miracles, it is better to believe in God as well" (*Oppression and Liberty* 149–50; my emphasis).

It is customary these days to denounce Marxism as a religion and link its totalitarianism to this religiosity, as if religion and totalitarianism were interchangeable. Weil's point is different: the horrors of Stalinism are proof that Marxism was not religious enough. Not seeing through to its logical conclusion to its own materialist principles, Marxism ended up with some very bad theology. Not owing up to the implications of his own analysis, by which the play of material forces miraculously yields the good, Marx attributed to matter (gravity) the qualities of divine intervention (grace): he attributed to matter itself the capacity for moral transformation while denying the reality of God; he may have thought that no one would notice his leap of faith. "Man cannot bear to be alone in willing the good. He needs an all-powerful ally. If this ally is not spirit, it will be matter. It is simply a case of two different expressions of the same fundamental thought. But the second expression is defective. It is a badly constructed religion." (*Oppression and Liberty* 154). Weil considered Marxism a "religion devoid of mystique" (154). As with Montesquieu's "civil code of the Universe," which I discussed earlier, the confusion of levels between here and elsewhere produces an empty religion of the Rights of Man. For Weil, therefore, the natural and spiritual orders are not in opposition. Rather, the logicality and integrity of each requires their total separation. Separation does not denote incompatibility; on the contrary: "The idea of working out a mechanics of social relationships had been adumbrated by many lucid minds. It was doubtless this that inspired Machiavelli. As in ordinary mechanics, the fundamental notion would be that of force. The great difficulty is to grasp this notion. Such an idea contains nothing incompatible

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of domination against which it rose up in just indignation. To transform social injustice, a principle wholly other than force is required. Yet "Marx's revolutionary materialism consists in positing, on the one hand, that force alone governs social relations to the exclusion of anything else, and, on the other hand, that one day the weak, while remaining the weak, will nevertheless be the stronger. He believed in miracles without believing in the supernatural. From a purely rationalist point of view, if one believes in miracles, it is better to believe in God as well" (*Oppression and Liberty* 149–50; my emphasis).

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with the purest spirituality: it is complementary to it" (Oppression and Liberty in my emphasis)

Strict adherence to the mechanics of social relationships, insists, makes the sacred possible as separation. On both sides of the infinite partition, something inhuman is at work. Both power and justice are conceived nonanthropocentrically. Humanity's susceptibility to the inhumanities of force (gravity) and to the good (grace) has little to do with the faculties of reason or language. The material and the supernatural meet for Weil in the reality of vulnerable bodies whose oppression is not a crime against humanity but a violation of the sacred.

Animality and the Holocaust

Herman Gombiner, I. B. Singer's main character in the short story "The Letter Writer," lost his family in Europe and lives alone in a cramped New York apartment. When he discovers a mouse in the flat, Herman leaves her food and names her Huldah (Hebrew for "rat," and the name of the biblical prophetess). Herman is haunted by the Holocaust, which returns in his memories, dreams, and philosophical musings. Interiorizing the Holocaust in this way reinforces Herman's sense of life's interconnectedness, which makes the mouse "just as much a part of God's creation as the planets, the stars, the distant galaxies" (225).

Fearing that Huldah has died, Herman eulogizes her in the story's famous "eternal Treblinka" passage: "What do they know—all those scholars, all those philosophers, all the leaders of the world—about such as you? They have convinced themselves that man, the worst transgressor of all the species, is the crown of creation. All other creatures were created merely to provide him with food, pets, to be tormented, exterminated. In relation to them, all people are Nazis for the animals: it is an eternal Treblinka" ("Letter Writer" 234). The pairing of the Jewish Holocaust with the puny life of a mouse is not immediately contentious (as it is in *The Lives of Animals*). Singer's religious themselves often make the analogy: It is a sign of their altered perspective on the laws of the universe, their loss of faith, or divergence from ordinary Judaism.

eternal Treblinka

When the lonely Herman finally accepts the love of Rose Beechman, the woman who well-nigh miraculously saves his life, he is "filled with love both for the mouse and for the woman" ("Letter Writer" 237). This bemuses Lawrence S. Friedman, who writes that "at some risk of trivializing Herman's epiphany, Singer insists upon juxtaposing the sudden surge of love for Rose with the love for a mouse" (*Understanding* 211). Friedman believes that the "eternal Treblinka" passage is no more than an expression of Herman's mental crisis. Yet nothing in the story suggests that Herman's love for the mouse is more "trivial" or silly than, say, his belief in the occult or Rose's insistence that her dead grandmother speaks to her. To argue as much is to misrecognize the peculiarities of Singer's universe, in which shtetl humor and fairy-tale elements fuse with modernist mores, and where the Holocaust acts as an irrevocable cosmic intervention.

"Like so many of Singer's Jewish refugees who have lost their families in the Holocaust," writes Friedman, "Herman is prematurely aged, physically decrepit" (209). Singer describes Herman as a "short man, in oversize pajamas, emaciated to skin and bone, with a scrawny neck and a large head. . . . His forehead was wide and deep, his nose crooked, his cheekbones high. . . . The remaining strength in Herman Gombiner's body—a body worn out by illnesses and undernourishment—seemed to be concentrated in his gaze" ("Letter Writer" 208). Herman suffers from memory loss (207) and "tremors of the hands and feet" (210) and feels himself a "corpse returning from its own funeral" (222). His pneumonia is accompanied by resignation in the face of pain and death. In his anorectic-apathectic state Herman resembles not the archetypal survivor but that other central figure of the Holocaust, the *Muselmann*.

When Rose cares for the dying Herman, she is helping the one who, like the *Muselmann*, does not ask for help, who is very nearly beyond help. Reading Herman as a *Muselmann* throws light on what some critics dismiss as the story's curious lowly ethics. For the *Muselmann* is the ruin of Enlightenment morality: "The *Muselmann* has . . . moved into a zone of the human where not only help but also dignity and self-respect have become useless. But if there is a zone of the human in which these

concepts make no sense, then they are not genuine ethical concepts for no ethics can claim to exclude a part of humanity, no matter how unpleasant or difficult that humanity is to see" (*Remnants* 63–64). For Singer (and his characters), however, the challenge of the *Muselmänner* is not confined to a "zone of the human," but projected unto creation as a whole. The Holocaust in Singer never functions simply as the cause of the characters' psychology; It enters as a cosmic upheaval shaking the characters' faith and turning them into skeptics or else into occultists.¹⁹ But both positions—materialism and spiritualism—lead to the practice of vegetarianism, not as the attainment of what Calarco calls an "ethical ideal" (*Zoographies* 135) but as an ethical foundation: a creaturely fellowship grounded in the vulnerability of living bodies that the Holocaust laid bare.²⁰

Herman "couldn't take a bit of meat if his life depended on it" ("Letter Writer" 210). When Herman Broder, of *Enemies, a Love Story* (1972), to which "The Letter Writer" is a kind of prelude, discovers that his lover Masha prepared a meal of meat, he protests: "You promised me not to cook meat any more.' I promised myself, too, but without meat, there's nothing to cook. God himself eats meat—human flesh. There are no vegetarians—none. If you had seen what I have seen, you would know that God approves of slaughter!" (166). And a visit to the zoo reminds Herman Broder of the camps: "Herman often compared the zoo to a concentration camp. The air here was full of longing—for deserts, hills, valleys, dens, families. Like the Jews, the animals had been dragged here from all parts of the world condemned to isolation and boredom. Some of them cried out their woe; others remained mute" (177).

As is widely acknowledged, National Socialism was not simply opposed to ideas of Enlightenment humanism. Rejecting some, it nonetheless shared the happy vision of humanity's improvableity: "Human progress is like ascending an endless ladder," wrote Hitler in *Mein Kampf* (122). In the name of progress, the Holocaust drained not only the idea of humanity but of inhumanity as well of their intelligible powers. It took to its limit the violence inherent in the distinction between

human and inhuman. For if the Holocaust proves anything at all, it is that Jewish (and other) bodies are animal bodies. The monotony of assembly-line production of corpses and the withered physique of *Muselmänner* do not, in effect, reveal anything new.

We go to great lengths to forget the Holocaust's systematic demystification of human identity. In much academic and popular Holocaust discourse, this forgetting takes the paradoxical form of grandiose remembrance. As I have tried to show, remembering the Holocaust in this way amounts to a "remembering in vain." To bear the weight of an "eternal Treblinka" is to approach the Holocaust with something other than the stillness of human commemoration. I have been arguing—not as mere semantic quibbling—that in trying to address its specific and excessive transgression, the notion of "crimes against humanity" in fact obscures the Holocaust's fundamental unraveling of the human. Weill's understanding of affliction and the sacred is an invitation to think through the insufficiencies of a humanist project of remembrance whose implications for the practical pursuit of justice for living beings are as far-reaching as they are debilitating.