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The Aesthetics of Human Rights in Franz Werfel's *The Forty Days of Musa Dagh*

Franz Werfel's novel *The Forty Days of Musa Dagh*, originally published in German in 1933, is not just as a novel about systematic violations of human rights, but above all as a political intervention, in the form of a novel, on behalf of the fundamental rights of a certain group of human beings – in this case, the Armenians. The genocide of the Armenians at the hands of the fading Ottoman Empire during the First World War forms the historical backdrop to the novel. According to estimates by the historian Michael Mann, between 1.2 and 1.4 million Armenians were killed in 1915 and 1916 – that is, probably two thirds of the Armenians living in the Ottoman Empire at the time (see Mann 2005, p. 140).¹¹³ Ideological rationales included the Turkish rulers' widespread fear that the Armenian population might collaborate with Russia, Turkey's wartime enemy (Mann 2005, p. 143). Economic motives also played a role; for example, the expropriation of the (partly prosperous) Armenians served to create a Muslim economic elite loyal to the Young Turks (see Adanir and Kaiser 2000, p. 283). Finally, the quest for a "unifying patriotism" was seen as essential for holding together the remains of the crumbling multiethnic Ottoman Empire (Anderson 2008). The Armenian genocide was not only "successful" in that there are almost no Armenians left in Turkey today; its "success" has been underscored by the fact that the mass murder has been consistently denied by all Turkish governments from 1919 to this day and only received little attention abroad. "As time passed, it became the 'forgotten genocide'," sums up Edward Minasian (Minasian 2007, p. xxx).

According to accounts of what inspired the novel, Werfel came across the story of the Armenians in 1929 while traveling in Syria. During a visit to a carpet factory, he and his wife saw "emaciated children with El Greco faces and enormous eyes" who, they were told, were "the children of Armenians killed off by the Turks" (Mahler Werfel 1958, p. 220). In a note prefacing *The Forty Days of Musa Dagh*, Werfel states that it was the "miserable sight of some maimed and famished-looking refugee children" that gave him "the final impulse to snatch from the Hades of all that was, this incomprehensible destiny of the Armenian nation" (Werfel 1934, p. v). For Werfel, the task of the literary text – following a tradition that dates back to classical antiquity – derives from its ability to preserve

113 Other estimates put the death toll at between 800,000 up to 1.5 million; see Adanir and Kaiser (2000), p. 282.

the memory and the sufferings of the dead against “time’s destructive force” (Assmann 1996, p. 124). Literature is able to do so by transforming one medium into another: The literary text converts the “miserable sight” seen by the author into writing, and, in the eyes of the readers, back into an imaginary visualization of an otherwise forgotten “that was.” That the recollection of the Armenian killings is capable of eliciting major political fears and backlashes can be seen by looking at the reception of Werfel’s novel – and the history of its failed filming in the 1930s (see Welky 2006).

In this essay, I will attempt to interpret Werfel’s novel as a draft to an aesthetics of human rights. I would like to argue in the following steps: First (II.), I’ll try to show how the issue of human rights can be understood as an aesthetic problem, and in the strictest sense as a problem of imagination. Based on Hannah Arendt’s and Joseph Slaughter’s critique of human rights, my thesis will be that the aesthetic of human rights can be interpreted as the installation of a normative imagination of a specific image of “man” – the “citizen”, which is always male, “white”, and bourgeois. Second (III. and IV.), a reading of *The Forty Days of Musa Dagh* will lead to the thesis that Werfel’s novel is structured by an aesthetics of human rights. This means that the Armenians are represented here not only as victims of a genocide, but at the same time as subjects of a “Bildungsroman” in which they develop into “citizens” and thus to legitimate holder of human rights. Werfel’s text, thus, performs an inversion – or, more precisely, an expansion – of the preference of the human rights (and of the “Bildungsroman”) towards “bourgeois, white male citizen”, since the Armenians are depicted as a non-European and non-bourgeois group.

“Men are born and remain free and equal in rights.” Thus reads the first sentence of the 1789 Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen.¹¹⁴ In fact, it reads like a reply to the opening statement of Rousseau’s *Social Contract* of 1762: “Man is born free; and everywhere he is in chains” (Rousseau 1782). It is only through a cursory reading, however, that Rousseau’s sentence can be understood as a call to return to natural freedom. On the contrary, by emphasizing that man is in chains “everywhere,” Rousseau rather stresses a fundamental difference between the sphere of the “state of nature” and the sphere of political order (see Fetscher 1993, p. 102–103). In contrast, the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen grounds political freedom in “bare natural life – which is to say,

114 An English translation of the Declaration can be found, for example, at http://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/rightsof.asp. The first article of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 – “All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights” – is an almost verbatim quote of this sentence; see <http://www.un.org/en/documents/udhr/>.

the pure fact of birth,” negating any difference between “nature” and “politics” (Agamben 1998, p. 75). The political life is thus determined by his “nature” – with nature, in the tradition of the natural law, referring both to “man’s” existence prior to civilization and to “man’s” timeless essence, the core of his being (see Hamacher 2004, p. 346). Insofar as these two dimensions of “man’s” “nature” inevitably fail to describe empirical human beings – who, in 1789 just as today, are liable to find out that they are *not* born free and equal in rights – the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen, in the figure of “man,” established a political fiction: namely that of “Man” as “a completely emancipated, completely isolated being” – who, as Hannah Arendt has noted critically, “seemed to exist nowhere” prior to his invention in the Declaration (Arendt 1962, p. 291). Postulating this fiction laid the foundations for a key political strength of human rights, as the obvious gap that exists between a freedom posited as “natural” and the empirical lack of freedom can be taken as a perennial call to political action. As a “utopian program,” human rights generate a political imagination that forces us (or, at least, should have the power to force us) to make political reality conform to a fictional *image* – even though this image may never have accorded with any reality in the first place (see Moyn 2010, p. 1).

Hannah Arendt, in her *Origins of Totalitarianism*, has shown that this political fiction produces a number of logically related paradoxes – which she calls “aporias of human rights.” First of all, there is the relationship between “nature” and “history.” By referring not to “history,” but to a “nature” thought to be unalterable, human rights claim to be fundamentally different from “privileges which history had accorded certain strata of society” – even though their formulation came out of the specific historical situation of the French Revolution. “Historical rights,” writes Arendt, “were replaced by natural rights” (Arendt 1962, p. 298). From this paradox follows the aporetic relationship between human rights and civil rights. Ever since 1789, when “the French Revolution combined the declaration of the Rights of Man with the demand for national sovereignty,” both have seemed to be inextricably intertwined: Apparently universal and valid for *all*, human rights are at the same time proclaimed to be the rights of the citizens of a specific nation-state, which is why Arendt states that “human rights were protected and enforced only as national rights” (Arendt 1962, p. 230). The association between human rights and the creation of national sovereignty is therefore more than an accident of history. By emphasizing that it takes national rights for human rights to be acknowledged and guaranteed – that is, to be more than ineffective proclamations of pure humanity – Arendt underlines the importance of institutional structures that defend and protect human rights, even though these institutions enter into an inevitable conflict with human rights (see Gündoğdu 2011, p. 9).

Following Arendt, a number of authors have criticized the linkage between universal human rights and nationally defined civil rights. Joseph Slaughter writes that “[h]uman rights are not yet the rights of humanity in general; they are the rights of incorporated citizens” (Slaughter 2007, p. 89). Arendt has described the disastrous historical consequences of this linkage: stateless people, whose numbers burgeoned after the First World War, not only lost their affiliation with a political community, but hence also their human rights: “The mere fact of being human did no longer confer any rights.”¹¹⁵ Without the protection and recognition of human rights by the nation-state, all that remains is the “abstract nakedness of being human” (Arendt 1962, p. 299). Arendt’s analysis of human rights therefore boils down to an aporia: human rights are in actual fact civil rights, the rights guaranteed to citizens of a particular nation, or else they are the rights of those who have no rights and therefore nothing but empty words (see Rancière 2004a, p. 302).

Linking human and civil rights enormously enhanced the status of the nation as sole guarantor of political rights; the question of the nation thus became a key political problem of modernity. Arendt accordingly emphasizes that the creation of human rights indirectly enabled modern nationalism: since the state alone guaranteed the human rights of its citizens, it lost “its legal, rational appearance and could be interpreted by the romantics as the nebulous representative of a ‘national soul’” (Arendt 1962, p. 231). By surrounding the reified state with a “pseudomystical aura of lawless arbitrariness,” the nation itself is increasingly conceived as a natural – as opposed to an historical, or contingent – entity (Arendt 1962, p. 231). In his commentary on the problem of human rights, which closely follows Arendt’s argument, Giorgio Agamben emphasizes that linking human rights to the civil rights guaranteed by the nation state has made the question of “which *man* was a *citizen* and which one not” a key problem of modern biopolitics (Agamben 1998, p. 76). With the state becoming first the guarantor of the life of its citizens and then an organic *corpus mysticum*, an individual’s participation in this collective body becomes *the* political issue that drives all forms of racism and fascism in modern times (see Koschorke, Lüdemann, Frank and Matala de Mazza 2007). The Declaration of the Rights of Man enormously exacerbates the problem of political exclusion, which is why Arendt demands that the “right to have rights” – that is, an individual’s right to belong to a political community – should be a basic right (Arendt 1962, p. 298).

115 “... entsprach dem bloßen Menschsein keinerlei Recht mehr”; see Arendt (2006), p. 619. The passage in which this phrase appears in the German version is missing in the English version.

Human rights thus formulate a yet unsolved problem of participation in political life that, since 1789, has been circumscribed by the borders of the nation-state and the possession of citizenship (see Joas 2013, p. 18). If one assumes, as Rancière does, that aesthetics is at the core of politics, this problem is an *aesthetic* issue – that is, a problem of the visibility (and perceptibility) of certain human beings or groups in political discourses (see Rancière 2004b, p. 13 and Rancière 1999, p. 58). It is, however, not only at this abstract level – at which every negotiation of political participation and perception can be called an aesthetic issue – that we can compare the implementation of human rights with aesthetic practices. A special role has been ascribed to the capacity for imagination. Rooted in aesthetic discourses since the Renaissance, imagination has been described again and again as a key prerequisite for the development of empathy (see Schulte-Sasse 2001 and Kaveny 2009, p. 110–111). Against this background, Lynn Hunt, in her book *Inventing Human Rights*, describes the development of the novel (in particular, the epistolary novel) in the second half of the eighteenth century – which was both predicated on and encouraged a new technique of imaginative and identificatory reading (see Kleinschmidt 1979, p. 50–51) – as the central cultural foundation for the emergence of human rights (Hunt 2007, p. 50–51). “In the eighteenth century,” Hunt writes, “readers of novels learned to extend their purview of empathy. In reading, they empathized across traditional social boundaries between nobles and commoners, masters and servants, men and women, perhaps even adults and children” (Hunt 2007: 40). It may be doubted, however, whether a reading-inspired extension of empathy is a sufficient explanation for the development of human rights (see Joas 2013, p. 59). Empathy, it might be said, does not function universally but selectively. Since suffering in “real life” is not always structured in an aesthetic way – simply because reality is ultimately not structured in an aesthetic way –, fictions may be regarded as being able to produce a more universal empathy than suffering in real life does. Fictional texts may be able to promote empathy with human beings, but due to their aesthetical structure they set the conditions under which a suffering human being can be given sympathy and empathy. In this sense, Rousseau had already been critical of imagination-fueled sympathy, arguing that melodramatic suffering here all too easily upstaged real suffering (see Kohns 2007, p. 47).

This problem is taken into account by Slaughter who analyzes the connection between aesthetic imagination and the formulation of human rights. In his *Human Rights, Inc.*, Slaughter argues that human rights and the narrative genre of the *Bildungsroman* are closely related. He defines the genre rather conventionally as a narrative elaboration of the protagonist’s socialization in the form of an eventually harmonious relationship between individual self-determination and social determinism (see Slaughter 2007, p. 100). Insofar as both human rights and the

Bildungsroman are predicated on, and produce, the same norms and forms for an individual's socialization, Slaughter sees their relationship as one of "codependency" (Slaughter 2007, p. 52). For Slaughter, who takes his cues from Arendt's critique of human rights, these norms and forms undergo an ideologically driven elevation from the particular to the universal by nominating the "bourgeois white male citizen to universal subject" (Slaughter 2007, p. 4). The hero of the novel is not universal "Man," but a specific representative of a cultural and political constellation that the novel is capable of turning into a universal norm. Though the novel as an aesthetic form is able to produce sympathy and empathy with its heroes, and it can be seen as an invitation for sympathy with human beings in general, this process includes a normative imagination of what a human being should look like.

According to Slaughter, human rights and the *Bildungsroman* are "mutually enabling fictions: each projects an image of the human personality that ratifies the other's idealistic visions of the proper relations between the individual and society and the normative career of free and full human personality development" (Slaughter 2007, p. 4). These two dimensions – the idealistic notion of the relationship between individual and society, and the normative notion of free and full personality development – are mutually dependent on each other. Slaughter refers to Étienne Balibar's term of the "citizen subject," which, as the latter argues, has taken the place of the "subject" since the French Revolution. While the "subject" is conditioned to obey rulers and other authorities, the "citizen subject" is subject only to laws; however, he has to obey them more unconditionally than any subject has ever had to obey a prince (see Balibar 1991, p. 48–49). For Slaughter this transition is made possible because of the power of education that makes citizens internalize respect for the law. As a fictional articulation of this process in its ideal form, the *Bildungsroman* produces, in Slaughter's words, "a narrative pattern for participation in the egalitarian imaginary of the new bourgeois nation-state"; the *Bildungsroman* tells the story of men's transformation into law-abiding, loyal, and thus free "citizens" (Slaughter 2006, p. 1410). Seen from this perspective, the novel, including the *Bildungsroman*, appears as a key cultural form that, by presenting an eventually harmonious order between the individual and the state, makes it possible to "imagine" both human and civil rights (see Slaughter 2007, p. 4).

Thus, to imagine human rights is to imagine the figure of the citizen, which is why the *Bildungsroman*, as a narrative of becoming a citizen, seems to be a form particularly suited to imagining human rights. Imagining human rights in an aesthetic medium – such as, for example, the novel, particularly the *Bildungsroman* – thus has a specific function: It makes available a cognitive model both of an individual's development into a citizen and of a person's legitimate legal status

and thus mediates between the proclamations of human rights and empirical reality (analogous to the schema of imagination in Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* [see Kant 1922, p. 114–115]). As vehicle for imagining human rights, fictions gain political importance while remaining ideologically unstable. Fictions can adopt a normative perspective (by positing the “bourgeois, white male citizen” as social norm), but they can also make visible and audible formerly negated or repressed demands for human and civil rights – and thus draw attention to what Rancière has called “scenes of dissensus” (Rancière 2004a, p. 304). Or, to quote Slaughter, “the projection of a normative egalitarian imaginary not only sets the terms and limits of universality’s constituency, it makes possible nonhegemonic rearticulations of universality’s compass” (Slaughter 2007, p. 5).

That Werfel’s novel *The Forty Days of Musa Dagh* aims to be something other than a sentimental portrayal of human suffering is shown by the political discourses that are inserted into the text, especially the two “Interlude of the Gods” chapters set in Constantinople. Clearly taking his cues from Johannes Lepsius’ 1916 *Bericht über die Lage des Armenischen Volkes in der Türkei* (Report on the Situation of the Armenian People in Turkey) as well as his 1930 account, *Der Todesgang des Armenischen Volkes* (The Way to Death of the Armenian People), Werfel actually grants Lepsius an appearance in the novel.¹¹⁶ The conversation between Lepsius and Enver Pasha in the first “Interlude” in particular shows that Werfel was interested in the ideological motivation behind the genocide. Confronted by Lepsius with the “Armenian question,” Enver Pasha, in Werfel’s account, marshals every argument he can think of in favor of ethnic nationalism (Werfel 1934, p. 132). Not without contradicting himself, Lepsius first refers to the Armenians as Enver’s “fellow-countrymen” and immediately afterwards as “another race [*Nation*], with the conclusion being in both cases that the Ottoman army has no right to annihilate the Armenians” (Werfel 1934, p. 136). Enver rejects both arguments, calling the Armenians, in a paradoxical turn of phrase, “internal enemies”: an enemy within the state that not only stands in the way of the enforcement of the “national will,” but, by hindering the nation’s unity, even prevents the formation of this will (Werfel 1934, p. 135–136). Taking the metaphor of the nation as an organic body literally, Enver sees the Armenians – who for him are only a nui-

116 The conversation between Lepsius and Enver Pasha and the account of the deportation of the inhabitants of Zeitun are in parts taken verbatim from Lepsius’ report; see Lepsius (1930), p. xii–xviii, and 4–11. As for the events on Musa Dagh, Werfel based his account on the priest Dikran Andreasian’s report about “Zeitun and Suedije,” which was published in German translation in 1919 in an anthology edited by Lepsius; see Kugler (2000), p. 124.

sance in the formation of a “natural [sic] empire” (Werfel 1934, p. 138)¹¹⁷ – not as human beings but as pathogens in the body of the Turkish people. “There can be no peace ... between human beings and plague germs,” postulates Werfel’s Enver, anticipating the rhetoric of the Nazis (Werfel 1934, p. 139). Through the perspective of Johannes Lepsius, Werfel’s analysis of the genocide transcends the clichés of “Asiatic barbarous backwardness” and presents it as the consequence of the “narcotic of nationalism,” that is, as a product of the country’s modernization (Werfel 1934, p. 139).

The second “Interlude of the Gods” then plays out the conflict that continues to be central to human rights discourse to this day – that is, the conflict between the imperative of universal human rights on the one hand and the insistence on national sovereignty on the other hand. There, Lepsius tells a nameless German privy councillor: “This isn’t by any means a mere matter of domestic policy, for the Turks to settle as they see fit. Not even the complete extermination of a tribe of pygmies can be considered as entirely a matter between exterminators and victims” (Werfel 1934, p. 532). It is only consistent that the fight for human rights thus shifts away from the question of national sovereignty towards a “*Weltinnenpolitik*” (global domestic politics) that also includes the colonialist regimes of Africa. By focusing the main story on the fate of the Armenians, Werfel’s novel clearly sides with Lepsius’ arguments, resisting the German privy councillor’s desire to avert his eyes from what is happening. The novel tries to refute Enver Pasha’s ideology and to present the Armenians as human beings – which, in the era of human rights, means: as potential citizens.

That Werfel decided to act on his allegedly galvanizing encounter in Syria by writing a historical *novel* – and not a political or documentary treatise – is not a matter of course (see Buch 1987, p. 113). We therefore need to ask what it is that fiction in particular can do on behalf of political intervention – in this case, to demand human rights or lament their massive violation. The answer undeniably is to be found in the specific form of imagination conveyed by the novel. The fictional character of *The Forty Days of Musa Dagh* becomes evident in those elements of the novel that Werfel could not have taken from any of his sources – because he made them up. Among these elements are changes in the historical chronology that serve to heighten the symbolism. The eponymous “forty days” are a case in point: While the historical flight of the Armenians to Musa Dagh lasted forty-six days (Minasian 2007, p. 21–22), Werfel’s “forty days” not only refer to the forty days that Moses spent on Mount Sinai – “Musa Dagh” means “Mountain of Moses” (Werfel 1934, p. 295) – but also to the “forty-year crossing of the

117 The German original reads “nationales Reich”; see Werfel (1990), p. 164.

desert of the children of Israel” mentioned in the novel.¹¹⁸ The most significant deviation from the historical record, however, is the introduction of the Bagradian family for which there is no historical evidence.

The main focus is on Gabriel Bagradian, the novel's protagonist and the leader of the Armenians on Musa Dagh. The parallels to the mythical figure of Moses are striking (see Eke 1997, p. 712). Like Moses in the Exodus story, Gabriel – who had lived in “complete assimilation” in Paris for the past twenty-three years and, since his marriage to Juliette, a Frenchwoman, had been “more French than ever” and “Armenian ... only in a sense – academically” (Werfel 1934, p. 5–6) – assumes his leadership role as a complete outsider and stranger among the Armenians. It might be argued that Werfel, by inserting Gabriel Bagradian into the story and thus creating the impression that the Armenians were capable of survival only because of a “Westernized” leader, does not do justice to the actual, historical resistance of the Armenians at Musa Dagh. As Ritchie Robertson has noted, however, the figure of Gabriel fulfills a narrative function: As a “Europeanized” Armenian, Gabriel mediates between the “Oriental,” foreign Armenians and the (implied) ‘Western’ readers of the German-language novel and is thus able to encourage the development of empathy with the fate of the Armenians (see Robertson 1992, p. 253). It needs to be noted, however, that Gabriel's perspective on the differences between the “European” and the “Oriental” way of life is undergoing a fundamental transformation in the course of the story, as the development of the fictional character is defined by his increasing “re-nationalization” – that is, a return to his Armenian “roots” and his progressive identification with the Armenians.

At the beginning of the story, Gabriel is introduced as “a scholar, a *bel esprit*,” a philosophizing cosmopolitan who does not care much about nationalities: “He was a thinker, an abstract man [*ein Mensch an sich*]” (Werfel 1934, p. 6–7). Like Arendt's study of totalitarianism several years later, Werfel's novel, too, sets out to prove the impossibility and barrenness of being an “abstract man.” The “new direction to fate” that brings Gabriel, together with his family, first to Stambul and eventually to Musa Dagh is therefore the first step towards his taking leave of his identity as a “*Mensch an sich*” (Werfel 1934, p. 7). Intuiting the coming calamity, Gabriel explains to his wife: “My ancestors in me, who suffered incredible things, can feel it. ... Nobody could understand who hasn't been hated because of his race” (Werfel 1934, p. 63). He was, he now realizes, “Armenian! In him an ancient blood-stream, an ancient people” (Werfel 1934, p. 28). Gabriel is “re-

118 “... vierzigjährige Wüstenwanderung der Kinder Israels”; see Werfel (1990), p. 780. This passage has been left out in the (abridged) 1934 translation.

nationalized” by recognizing his biological and psychological roots and by becoming aware of the “ancestors in [him]” and their – and thus also his own – collective, ethnic history of persecution.

Whereas Gabriel initially sees himself as a “bad speaker,” concluding that he could never be a “leader of the people,” he realizes, at the moment of greatest danger, that he has the ability to become the military and political leader of the fugitive Armenians (Werfel 1934, p. 59). The moment when Gabriel speaks to the “people” [*Volk*] of the Armenian villages at the foot of Musa Dagh to incite and encourage it to flee to the mountain, seems to be a critical turning point in his life:

He knew with his whole being: ‘For this one second it’s worth while to have lived.’ Always, when talking to these villagers, his Armenian had seemed laboured and embarrassed. But now it was not he who spoke to them – and this knowledge brought him complete peace – it was the force which had brought him here, down the long, winding road of centuries, the short, twisted path of his own life. He listened in amazement to this power, as it found the words in him so naturally. (Werfel 1934, p. 206)

The passage is about self-discovery, which paradoxically comes through this being seized from outside: As “the force which had brought him here,” Gabriel’s “ancestors in [him]” speak through him, and it is then and there, as it were, that his process of becoming aware of his Armenian origins is completed. By speaking in a foreign voice, Gabriel finds himself and regains access to his native tongue which had become foreign to him after spending more than two decades in France. Following the logic of the topos of inspiration, this becoming aware happens effortlessly, transforming Gabriel’s previously “laboured [*gekünstelte*]” relationship to his own language into a natural one. Given this transformation, it is possible to read Gabriel’s stay on Musa Dagh as a process of subjectivation that can be described, by using Slaughter’s categories, as *acculturation*, *apprenticeship*, and *socialization* (Slaughter 2007, p. 100). Werfel’s novel can thus be understood as a *Bildungsroman*.

The Forty Days of Musa Dagh unfolds a structure of the “double subject” – double subject, double topic.¹¹⁹ Gabriel Bagradian, who first sees himself as a universal, “abstract man” – as a pure individual – learns at the outset of the novel what it means to be an “Ottoman subject” of Armenian background (Werfel 1934, p. 7). The crimes committed by the government in Constantinople render it impossible

119 According to Slaughter, the genre of the *Bildungsroman* has “double subjects”: “it imagines a relational individualism – a harmonious concordance of the person’s universalist predispositions and the interpellative force of social formations and relations, of which the human personality is a part and an effect” (Slaughter 2007, p. 100).

to have a “harmonious concordance” of an Ottoman subject and the “social formations and relations” of his nation, but Werfel’s text nevertheless adheres to the genre rules of the *Bildungsroman* by proposing a second collective subject: the Armenian people on Musa Dagh. By becoming increasingly aware of his Armenian roots, that is, his ethnic, biological and cultural background, Gabriel is able to experience, in a completely harmonious way, the formation of his new but at the same time ‘real’ self as part, and as consequence, of his relationship with the Armenians as a collective people. It is only in the course of the novel, however, that this collective group (whose existence is necessary to render the relationship between the two subjects completely harmonious) comes into being as a political subject – primarily because Gabriel’s enthusiasm and commitment offer his fellow Armenians the option of self-determination and survival on the mountain as an alternative to certain death in deportation.

In this sense, the unity of the Armenian “people” [*Volk*] is established only when it assembles in front of Gabriel and when he speaks to it. The “people” here for the first time appears as a grammatical subject and an active protagonist:

By one o'clock the people had begun to arrive. ... The people massed on the wide empty space in front of the house. About three thousand men and women. ... Gabriel Bagradian stayed as long as possible in his room, the windows of which were turned away from the crowd. ... He came out of the house only when Ter Haigasun sent for him. Sallow, despondent faces stared up at his, not three thousand, but one face only. It was the helpless face of exile, here as in hundreds of other places at this hour. (Werfel 1934, p. 201–2)

The “people” receives its unity – literally its “one face” – only at the moment when it is seen and addressed by Gabriel as one. As Gabriel finds his (Armenian) voice, he is at the same time capable of conferring upon the “people” the unity of a face and a voice. The term of the “people” is marked by an ambivalence: While the gathered “crowd” is in the process of becoming a political subject (the Armenian “people”), it is (still) a “people” in the pejorative sense of the word, the common people [*das bloße Volk*], that is, the suppressed, exiled, and hopeless masses.¹²⁰ It is only after Gabriel’s speech that the two terms – the “people” as a potentially independent political body and the “people” as the humiliated, expelled and per-

120 This fundamental ambivalence inherent in the notion of the “people” has been described by Agamben: “It is as if, in other words, what we call people was actually not a unitary subject but rather a dialectical oscillation between two opposite poles: on the one hand, the *People* as a whole and as an integral body politic and, on the other hand, the *people* as a subset and as fragmentary multiplicity of needy and excluded bodies; on the one hand, an inclusive concept that pretends to be without remainder while, on the other hand, an exclusive concept known to afford no hope”; see Agamben (2000), p. 30.

secuted dregs of the Ottoman state – can be differentiated. In Werfel’s novel, this split happens via the Armenians’ different responses to Gabriel’s proposal. As the narrator comments rather subjectively, “the Armenian, too, could not rid himself of his doglike fear and servility towards this benevolent state.”¹²¹ This explains why one group of Armenians stands by Pastor Nokhudian and obeys the deportation order, while the bigger group follows Gabriel to defy the authorities and to organize itself politically on Musa Dagh. While the group headed by Nokhudian marches towards its death, the remaining Armenians retreat to the mountain to no longer live as subjects of the Sultan, but under their own government. “Musa Dagh! Mountain of Moses! At its summit, in the grey dawn-light, a whole population [*das ganze Volk*] set up its camp,” the beginning of the second book notes triumphantly (Werfel 1934, p. 295). The “whole population” [*das ganze Volk*] has now become the subject of its own history.

From this moment on, there are two separate embodiments of the Armenian “people” in Werfel’s novel. This split, which is enacted through the separation of the two groups following Gabriel’s speech, makes it possible to juxtapose accounts of the oppression and annihilation of the Armenians with a positive counter-image. Through this doubling, Werfel’s novel is able to present the Armenians as a group of rightless outcasts and *at the same time* as a self-governed (albeit small and threatened) nation composed of a people with human and civil rights. By means of this contrast – which is heightened by the fact that the story of the Armenians on Musa Dagh is interrupted again and again by reports of what happened to the deported Armenians – Werfel’s account of the horrible events becomes more than a humanistic plea for empathy with the victims; it becomes a political demand for human and civil rights. The discrepancy between the rightless and killed Armenians and their politically organized counterparts on Musa Dagh is – to use Rancière’s terms – an *enactment* of a *dissensus*, that is, of a “division ... in the ‘common sense’” as to the question of who is entitled to rights and who is not (Rancière 2004a, p. 304). This also explains Werfel’s decision to present the genocide “by means of an atypical episode” (Kugler 2000, p. 122) instead of focusing on the deportations and killings. This contrasting technique transforms a potential discourse of empathy into a discourse of rights – and thus forms the core of the political aesthetics in Werfel’s novel: his imagination of human rights.

121 “... das hündische Gefühl der Angst und Ergebnisheit gegen diesen wohlwollenden Staat wurde auch der Armeniersohn nicht los”; see Werfel (1990), p. 247. This sentence has been left out in the (abridged) English translation.

The two embodiments of the Armenian “people” in Werfel’s novel thus stage two different ideas of political organization. The decision to remain subjects of the Ottoman state has made veritable martyrs of the Armenians led by Nokhudian. In contrast, the Armenians who have decided to escape to Musa Dagh immediately start to “choose representatives” [*Führer*], form a “council of leaders,” and appoint the priest Ter Haigasun “Supreme Head of the People” (Werfel 1934, p. 217–19). Given this vocabulary – and the novel’s pro-Armenian stance – Werfel has occasionally been accused of having been infected by the language and logic of a totalitarian regime (that is, that of the National Socialists, which gained power just around the time when he wrote *The Forty Days on Musa Dagh*).¹²² In the eyes of these critics, Werfel has sketched a totalitarian vision of a political community that is predicated on an almost “Manichean” opposition between Christians/Armenians on the one hand and Muslims/Turks on the other hand (see Heizer 1996, p. 76). They overlook, however, that the political organization of the Armenians on Musa Dagh described by Werfel is anything but the utopian organic community envisioned by fascist ideology. The political organization of the Armenians on Musa Dagh is based not on a belief in a mythically reified “leader” or on the ideology of a “*Volksgemeinschaft*,” but on the casting of votes, elections and, again and again, arguments and discussions about important decisions. The Armenians transform themselves from subjects of the Ottoman state to Balibar’s “citizen subjects” – that is, not subject to a ruler, but subject only to the law. Reading the novel, thus, tells something about the relation on the imagination of human rights in a novel: Since *The Forty Days of Musa Dagh* develops an imagination of the human rights, it is necessarily related to its ideology, the installation of the imagination of the “male bourgeois white citizen” as normative image. In this process, Werfel’s novel performs an expansion of the ideology of human rights to include the explicitly non-European and non-bourgeois Armenians.

Translated by Manuela Thurner

¹²² See Heizer (1996), p. 87–88; Buch (1987), p. 114–115; Eke (1997): 715; and Kugler (2000), p. 144–145.

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