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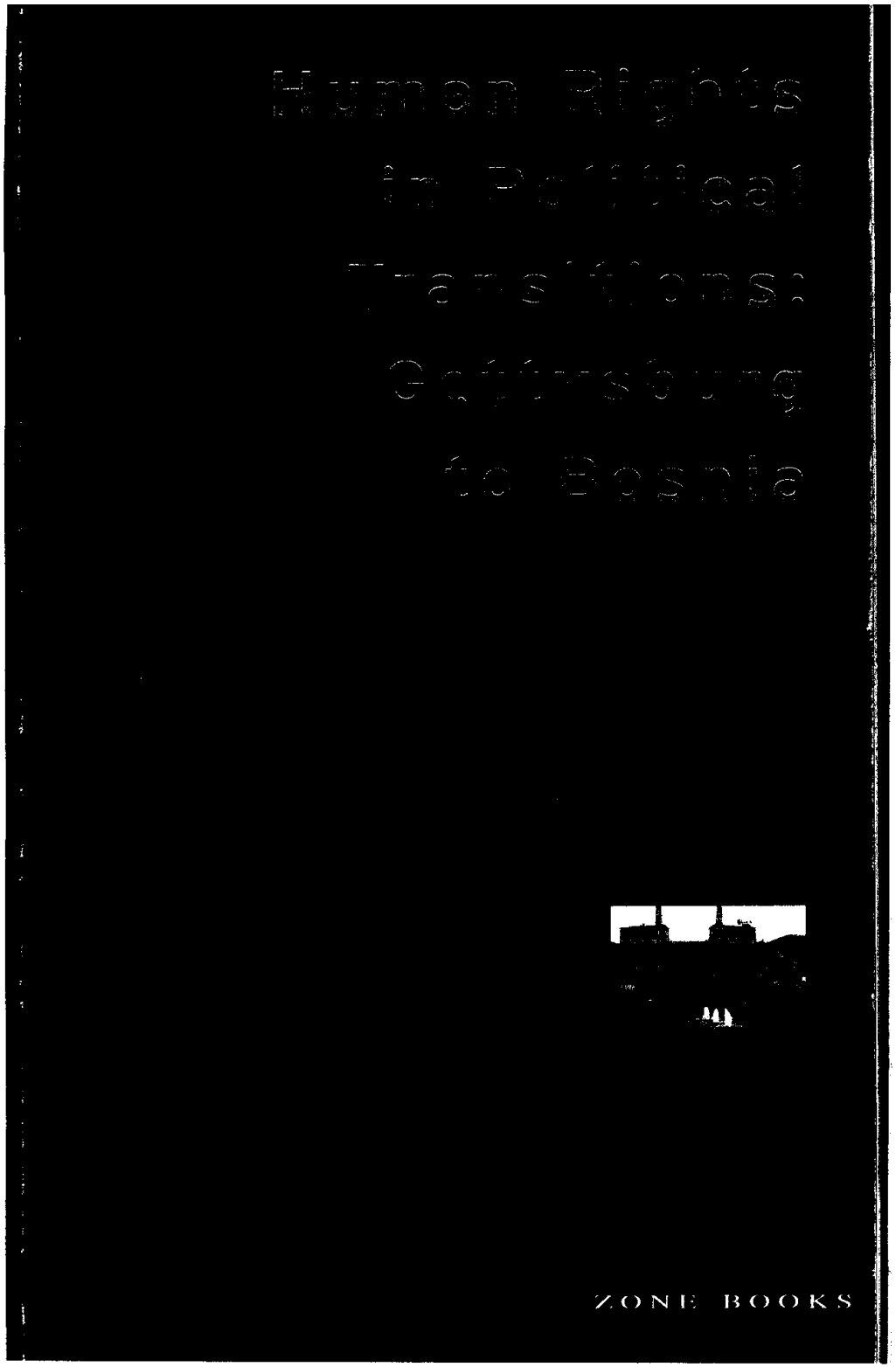

The Difficulty of Imagining Other Persons

Elaine Scarry

The way we act toward "others" is shaped by the way we imagine others. This essay is centrally focused on the difficulty of imagining others.

Both philosophic and literary descriptions of imagining show the difficulty of picturing other persons in their full weight and solidity. This is true even when the person is a friend or acquaintance; the problem is further magnified when the person is a stranger or "foreigner." Cruelty to strangers and foreigners has prompted many people to seek ways of preventing such actions from recurring in the future. I will draw on a range of materials to suggest the difference between solutions that do and those that do not assume the "imaginability" or the "picturability" of other persons. Some solutions rely on the population to "imagine" other persons spontaneously and generously, and to do so on a day-by-day basis. Alternative solutions, in contrast, attempt to solve the problem of the other through constitutional design: they seek to eliminate altogether the inherently adversive structural position of "foreignness."

We have the obligation to commit ourselves to both solutions, rather than to choose between them. But I weight my comments to the sphere of constitutional design because if this solution is in place, then the spontaneous acts of individuals have a chance of producing generous outcomes. But the reverse is not the case. If constitutional or legal solutions to foreignness are not in place, then the daily practice of spontaneous largesse will (in my judgment) have little effect, and all our conversations about "otherness" will be idle.

The writing of this essay was directly occasioned by the cruelty

to foreigners on the streets of Berlin and Mölln. My theoretical arguments are therefore anchored to those concrete instances of injuring, as well as to parallel acts of injuring on the streets of Los Angeles and on the streets of Paris. But my insistence on constitutional design is also strongly shaped by the fact that I have recently been at work on this same problem in another area: the nuclear weapons policy in the United States. Given the magnitude of potential injury, our current military policy may be seen as the problem of the foreigner writ large. In what follows I will try to show the alternative proposals of spontaneous imagining and constitutional design in the context of both local street cruelty and international arms. Neither spontaneous imagining nor constitutional design can alone guarantee the prevention of injury. Both solutions are needed: the second provides the frame in which the first can take place.

Are there large numbers of people who advocate the imaginative solution over the constitutional one? The answer is yes. Even many of those German intellectuals most passionately dedicated to stopping the injuries to Turkish residents often ignore altogether any discussion of altering citizenship laws and concentrate instead on practices that can be summarized under the heading of "generous imaginings." Meetings among international scholars dedicated to human rights often express an indifference to, or impatience with, national protections on rights, and rely exclusively on imagining foreign populations. Discussions about foreignness among American intellectuals display an increasingly shared animus against "nationalism," which is perceived to be an impediment to "internationalism." But on close inspection this attempt to replace nationalism by internationalism often turns out to entail a rejection (or bypassing) of constitutionalism in favor of unanchored good will that can be summarized under the heading of "generous imaginings." It is therefore important to come face to face with the limits on imagining other people, since in several different spheres it is used to legitimate the bypassing of legal provisions and procedures.

The Difficulty of Imagining Others, as Shown in the Treatment of "Enemies" or Persons That We Hurt

The difficulty of imagining others is shown by the fact that one can be in the presence of another person who is in pain and not know that the person is in pain. The ease of remaining ignorant of another person's pain even permits one to inflict it and amplify it in the body of the other person while remaining immune oneself. Sustained and repeated instances of this are visible in political regimes that routinely torture. But the failure to see the reality of another person's pain has also been recently visible in each successive blow of the fifty-eight concussive strokes that fell in sequence on the body of Rodney King, as it has also been visible in the act of burning alive ten-year-old Yaliz Arslan, fifty-one-year-old Bahide Arslan, and fourteen-year-old Ayse Yilmac in their Mölln apartment house.

I focus on physical injury here because, though the well-being of persons takes many forms — voting rights, access to education, the daily possibility of interesting work — all this is premised on bodily inviolability. It is precisely in order to minimize bodily injury that the social contract comes into being. The word "injury" is used repeatedly throughout Locke's *Second Treatise of Government*. Though the "injury" is not specified as, or limited to, "bodily injury," it takes its force from that original context. Locke, for example, uses the verb "injures" both where the object is the material reality of the body and where the object is freedom,[1] just as he speaks of "invading" another's body, invading another's property (the "annexed body"), or instead invading another's rights.[2] When Locke uses the idiom of "invasion" for a nonphysical object, he often immediately follows it by the word "rapine," in order to restore the physical referent. Persons enter the social contract for mutual security: the contract comes into being to "secure them from injury and violence" which is "a trespass against the whole species."[3]

The social contract prohibits us from trespassing across the boundaries of another person's body. Locke's concreteness, his sense of persons as embodied, reflects the fact that he was a physician: one of his biographers writes that until at least 1683 Locke "regarded himself as before everything else a doctor."[4] He collaborated extensively with Thomas Sydenham, then a controversial physician, now widely regarded as "the father of English medicine."[5] Locke accompanied Sydenham on visits to patients; he wrote a prefatory poem to Sydenham's treatise on epidemics and planned a preface for a second volume never completed; each sent his medical notes and manuscripts to the other for annotation.[6]

The two also planned to coauthor a book reviewing "the whole state of clinical medicine."[7] Their correspondence reveals two key facts: Locke was extremely sensitive to his own pain;[8] more important, he was extremely sensitive to other people's pain and was able to describe it with unusual vividness and precision.[9] Locke's concern for the bodily integrity of others expressed itself not only in terms of individual patients but also in terms of the health of the public: he worked to create mortality tables in Ireland at a time when the concepts of state medicine and public health were just emerging.[10]

Locke's commitment to the practice of medicine is consistent with, and itself underscores, the emphasis in the *Second Treatise* on the social contract as the guarantor of bodily inviolability. The strong relation between the social contract and the diminution of injury is visible in social contracts that far antedate the Lockean social contract. Legal scholars describe how, in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, many of the five hundred major European cities came into existence. They did not accidentally emerge. They came about through explicit acts of oathtaking and contract making: "a solemn collective oath, or series of oaths," writes Harold Berman, "[was] made by the entire citizenry to adhere to a charter that had been publicly read aloud to them."[11] Often called "sworn communes," "conjurationes," or "communes for peace," their very names memorialized the extraordinary verbal process by which they had come into being. In the language of these city compacts, as in the Lockean compact, we can hear the key association between self-governance and the diminution of injury. The founding of Freiberg, for example, emphasizes the guarantee of "peace and protection."[12] The Flemish charter of Aire promises, "Let each help the other like a brother."[13] The articles of the charter for Beauvais in Picardy begin:

> all men within the walls of the city and in the suburb shall swear the commune;
> each shall aid the other in the manner he thinks to be right;
> if any man who has sworn the commune suffers a violation of rights, ... [the peers] shall do justice against ... the offender.[14]

It is logical for clauses of the charter promising mutual defense to be followed by clauses arranging for jury trial because such compacts seek to diminish injury issuing from outside the city (war or armed attack) and from inside the city (crime). One oath for mutual assistance from the Bologna region makes the coupling explicit: the members "should maintain and defend each other against all men, within the commune and outside it."[15] The "communes for peace" seek to secure their members from both sources of injury.[16]

The town's commitment to protecting its members from outside aggression by no means implied that outsiders were themselves subjected to aggressive treatment. On the contrary: Berman writes that "immigrants were to be granted the same rights as citizens [the right to vote, the right to bear arms, the right to a jury trial] after residence for a year and a day."[17] The relatively swift transformation from immigrant to citizen suggests that bearing the status of "foreigner" was itself seen to be an injurious condition and hence one that it was the obligation of the commune to remove. A 1303 guild statute from Verona, one of the oldest in existence, makes this thinking fairly explicit, in its specification of the recipients of special aid: one had the obligation to give "fraternal assistance in necessity of whatever kind," to give "hospitality toward strangers, when passing through the town," and to offer "comfort in the case of debility."[18] The listing of the three together indicates that "being a stranger" is perceived as parallel with being "in necessity" and with "debility." Being a stranger, in other words, is itself a form of injury. An immediate strategy for diminishing the debility is to extend hospitality to the stranger. A longer-lasting strategy (a more radical hospitality) is to eliminate the status of stranger altogether by granting the rights of citizenship.

Bodily injury is therefore of direct relevance to the social contract in both theory and practice, in both the Lockean contract and the earlier city contracts. The diminution of injury is the contract's raison d'être. At the same time, the ease of inflicting injury shows how easy it is not to know other persons. There exists a *circular relation* between the infliction of pain and the problem of "otherness." *The difficulty of imagining others is both the cause of, and the problem displayed by, the action of injuring.* The action of injuring occurs precisely because we have trouble believing in the reality of other persons. At the same time, the injury itself makes visible the fact that we cannot see the reality of other persons. It displays our perceptual disability.

The visibility or invisibility of injury in turn depends on its timing. Injury in the past is relatively easy to see. Injuring in the present is easier to see, but often still ambiguous. Injury in the future is most difficult of all. This is why our moral thinking is so different when the problem is *retrospective* than when it is *prospective*. For example, in the United States, nothing is easier for our population than to understand that there should not have been death camps in Germany in World War II. The subject arises frequently and is seldom controversial. Even when our own population has been the perpetrator of the injury, we often see it clearly: a great many people in the United States live every day with an awareness of the injury in Vietnam, just as many worry that the country will never recover from the grave injury of slavery. But nothing is more remote than the possibility that we ourselves may in the future injure another population with our weapons, on a scale as great or far greater than in the period of enslavement, or World War II, or Vietnam. I think it is accurate to say that despite my countrymen's and countrywomen's deeply genuine concern about the harms we have inflicted in the past, we are as a population almost empty of ethical worry about the future. This difference between the ease of thinking about the injuring of others *retrospectively*, and the difficulty of thinking about the injuring of others *prospectively* is especially ironic because we *cannot* intervene and change an injury that has occurred in the past. But we *can* intervene and prevent an injury in the future. Injuries that have not yet happened are the only ones that can be stopped.

Our injuring of others, therefore, results from our failure to know them; and conversely, our injuring of persons, even persons within arm's reach, itself demonstrates their unknowability. For if they stood visible to us, the infliction of that injury would be impossible. I have so far been describing the problem of imagining another human being who is a stranger, a foreigner, an enemy, a person one is willing to hurt. But the problem of imagining people can be seen from an entirely different direction, the direction of imagining a friend.

The Difficulty of Imagining Others, as Shown in the Case of Friends

When we speak in everyday conversation about the imagination, we often attribute to it powers that are greater than ordinary sensation. But Sartre's study of the imagination shows more honestly and accurately that the opposite is the case. When we are asked to perform the concrete experiment of comparing an imagined object with a perceptual one – that is, of actually stopping, closing our eyes, concentrating on the imagined face or the imagined room, then opening our eyes and comparing its attributes to whatever greets us when we return to the sensory world – we at once reach the opposite conclusion: the imagined object lacks the vitality and vivacity of the perceived; it is in fact these very attributes of vitality and vivacity that enable us to differentiate the actual world present to our senses from the one that we introduce through the exercise of the imagination. Even if, as Sartre observes, the object we select to imagine in this experiment is the face of a beloved friend, one we know in intricate detail (as Sartre knew the faces of Annie and Pierre), it will be, by comparison with an actually present face, "thin," "dry," "two-dimensional" and "inert."

Sartre tries to imagine the face of his friend Pierre while Pierre is not present. The image, he complains, "is like the silhouettes drawn by children"; "It is something like a rough draft." It is "present but ... out of reach."[19] "No development of the image can take me by surprise,"[20] he complains; and he summarizes how often consciousness consists of "a retinue of phantoms" all of which are "ambiguous, impoverished and dry, appearing and disappearing is a disjointed manner ... a perpetual evasion."[21] So too "Annie as an image cannot be compared with the Annie of perception," and he goes on to specify how not only the image but the feelings toward his friend become "schematized," "rigid," and "banal."[22]

It seems that we tend to notice this phenomenon only when we are especially keen on seeing a face, only when we desperately care to have it present in the mind with clarity and force. We then notice the deficiency and, like Proust's Marcel, who berates himself for his inability to picture the face of Albertine or the face of his grandmother, we conclude that the vacancy or vacuity of our imagining is somehow peculiar to our feeling about this particular person and that there must be a hidden defect in our affection. In fact the vacuity is general and all that is peculiar or particular to such cases is the intensity of "wishing to imagine" that makes us confront, with more than usual honesty, the fact that we cannot

do so. It is when we are soaked with the longing to imagine that we notice, as Keats confessed, "the fancy cannot cheat so well as she is famed to do." By means of the vividness of perceptions, we remain at all moments capable of recovering, of "recognizing" the material world and distinguishing it from our imaginary world, even as we lapse into and out of our gray and ghostly daydreams. Aristotle refers to this grayness as "the feebleness" of images. Sartre calls it their "essential poverty."

This description of imagining a friend illuminates the problems that await us when we attempt to rely on the imagination as a guarantor of political generosity. Sartre, in imagining Pierre on the Ku-dam or Annie while absent, is only trying to imagine a single friend. The labor is unsuccessful even though the person is, first, an intimate acquaintance and therefore known in intricate detail; and, second, a solitary person. But now transport this to the imaginative labor of knowing "the other." Now we are talking about our ability to picture in the imagination not an intimate friend, but the face of someone who is merely a neighbor, or instead someone who lives five blocks away, or instead someone who has never entered your field of perception because she lives in a different section of town, or a different country, or perhaps she works nights while you work days. So, too, now we are talking about our ability to picture in the imagination not *one* person, but instead five, or ten, or one hundred, or one hundred thousand; or x, the number of Turks in Germany; or y, the estimated number of Iraqi soldiers and citizens killed in our bombing raids; or 70 million, the scale of population that stands to suffer should the United States fire a nuclear missile, a conservative estimate. Or thirty thousand, the number of American eighteen-year-olds who were, without any congressional deliberation or debate, not long ago sent to Somalia. Or 3.5 million, the number of illegal immigrants estimated to reside in the United States as we move through the final decade of the century. Most philosophic discussions of "the other" are constrained by numbers: they contemplate the other in the singular.[23] Even Max Scheler's extraordinary study of sympathy (which periodically speaks of a generalized "fellow feeling" for other human beings) primarily sets out to provide a map of possibilities for imagining solitary persons.[24]

The human capacity to injure other people has always been much greater than its ability to imagine other people. Or perhaps we should say, *the human capacity to injure other people is very great precisely because our capacity to imagine other people is very small.* In the section of the essay that follows, I want to go on to contemplate solutions that, rather than *requiring us to imagine others*, instead require us to *dis-imagine ourselves* (a solution that is very bound up with constitutionalism). But before doing so, I want to remain for a few moments more with the strategy of picturing. I have so far been speaking about the poverty of mental imagining or daydreaming or contemplating. Here our ability to imagine is poor. But there is a place — namely, the place of great literature — where the ability to imagine others is very strong. What it therefore gives a population can be capacious, though even this solution, I will argue, has severe limits in terms of its ability to ensure the diminution of injury to live persons.

Great books, great poems, great films often achieve the vivacity of the perceptual world.[25] During the hours of reading Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, Tess comes before the mind with far more fullness, surprise, vivacity, and vividness than the two-dimensional images of Sartre's or our own daydreams. As so too does Tolstoy's Anna Karenina, Levin, Kitty. As so too does Franz Bieberkopf in Fassbinder's *Berlin Alexanderplatz*. In aesthetic discussions we often speak as though imagining-when-daydreaming and imagining-when-under-authorial-instruction are continuous. But it is crucial to notice that they are discontinuous. The flatness and two-dimensionality of the one gives way in the other case to a vividness that approximates the vivacity of perception.

The act of imagining oneself as another person is central to literature. How central it is can be seen by the position it occupies in the thinking of political philosophers. Whether political philosophers approve of or disapprove of the theater turns on whether they believe it is dangerous or instead advantageous for a population to place themselves imaginatively in the position of other persons.[26] For example, in his political treatise on reform, the Romantic poet Shelley argues that "a man, to be greatly good, must imagine intensely . . . himself in the place of others."[27] In contrast, Plato in the *Republic* or Rousseau in "Letter to M. D'Alembert on the Theater" disapproves of this imaginative emptying out of the self and replacement with others. What is at the moment relevant to my argument is not whether Plato or Rousseau or Shelley advocated or instead condemned this

theatrical practice, but how consistently they associate theatrical practice with the practice of placing oneself in the space of mental "otherness."

Because literary artists are dedicated to the labor of imagining others, they are appropriately called on when the need to imagine others grows urgent. Throughout November 1992, for example, Berlin's Schiller Theater, Distel Cabaret, Tribune Theater, Deutsche Theater, and Deutsche Opera all devoted programs to the difficulty of being a foreigner in Germany: there took place a poetry reading at the Schiller, for example, on the German constitution's Article 1 pledge to uphold as "inviolable" the "dignity of man," a cabaret performance at the Distel defending the constitution's controversial "asylum" clause, and a program of readings at the Deutsche Theater on the contributions of foreign philosophers, musicians, and writers to art in Berlin. So, too, in Frankfurt in December 1992, writers such as Saliha Scheinhardt, Darryl Pinckney, and Scott Momaday were called on by Fischer Verlag to assist in sorting out the problem of otherness in Germany.

Yet while a poem is far more able than a daydream to bring other persons to press on our minds, even here we must recognize severe limits on what the imagination can accomplish. One key limit is the number of characters. A novel or poem may have one major character. Or four major characters. It is impossible to hold rich multitudes of imaginary characters simultaneously in the mind. Presented with the huge number of characters one finds in Dickens or in Tolstoy, one must constantly strain to keep them sorted out; and of course their numbers are still tiny when compared with the number of persons to whom we are responsible in political life. Public life requires that we be capable of exercising not so much personal compassion as what, within medical writing, has been called "statistical compassion."[28] For this, literature prepares us inadequately, since even secondary characters (let alone second-hundredth or second-thousandth characters) lack the density of personhood that is attributed to the central character. Thomas Hardy's heroine Tess, in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, worries to her lover about the fact that her fellow milkmaids, themselves secondary and tertiary characters, are made to seem lesser persons than they are, merely by virtue of the fact that they are not themselves the heroine. Literature — even when it enlists us into the greatest imaginative acts and the most expansive compassion — always confesses the limits on the imagination by the structural necessity of major and minor persons, center stage and lateral figures.

There are other limits as well. The latent nationalism or tribalism of great literature may make it a seductive vehicle for an exercise in self-reflection and self-identification, rather than reflection on and identification with people different from oneself. Despite, for example, the emphasis on artistic multi-culturalism in the United States, it sometimes appears that Asian-American literature is being read by Asian-Americans, Afro-American literature by Afro-Americans, and Euro-American literature by Euro-Americans. But, of course, literature at least holds out to us the constant invitation to read about others, not only other ethnic groups within one's own country but the great Russian or German or Chinese writings; and universities are, in their departmental organizations, still structured to encourage this cross-country imagining. The potential of art to make an alien people knowable receives what is perhaps its most optimistic salute in French citizenship laws: a foreigner who enters France can become a citizen in *five* years; a foreigner who enters France with an undergraduate degree in French literature can become a citizen in *two* years.

A third limit is the lack of any anchor in historical reality. Sometimes fictional "others" do have actual referents in material reality. But more often they lack any reference to material reality. It has often been a criticism of literature that the very imaginative labor of picturing others that we ought to expend on real persons on our city streets, or on the other side of the border, instead comes to be lavished on King Lear or on Tess. Pushkin provided a stunning portrait of how we come out of the opera, weeping with compassion for those on stage, not seeing the cabdriver and horses who are freezing from their long wait to carry us home.[29] William James was haunted by the same picture.[30]

Literature, it seems fair to conclude, is most helpful not insofar as it *takes away* the problem of the other — for only with greatest rarity can it do this — but when it instead *takes as* its own subject the problem of imagining others. Thomas Hardy is a brilliant explicator of this problem. He places before our eyes the dense interior of a man or a woman. He then juxtaposes this ontological robustness with the inevitable subtractions, the flat-

tenings, the emptyings out that occur in other people's vision of the person. He shows the way a young woman like Tomasin in *Return of the Native* comes to be only "a piece of gossip" for the other people on the heath; how Tess is, even for her schoolhood friends, only "a [verbal] warning" to others of what can happen between men and women; how Michael Henchard in *Mayor of Casterbridge* can be reduced from his monumental proportions to a horrifying caricature of public shaming. In all these instances, Hardy maximizes the imaginary density of a person, then lets us watch the painful subtraction each undergoes as she or he comes to be perceived by others. He repeatedly contrasts the immediacy and weight of an embodied gesture – Tess standing on her toes reaching for a dish to take down from the family cupboard, or Tomasin in the attic plunging her heavy arms into a bag of ripening apples – with the weightless categories of "gossip," "warning," "moral example," by which even friends and genial acquaintances narrate their lives. The person in her full weight and solidity disappears.

"Otherness" can be, as it is in Thomas Hardy, depicted through an elaborate sequence of additions and subtractions. Two other essential methods of depicting the other are underexposure and overexposure. Underexposure is illustrated by Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*. Overexposure is exemplified by the monster in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. Monstrosity and invisibility are two subspecies of the other, the one overly visible and repelling attention, the other unavailable for attention and hence absent from the outset. The two are common strategies for representing the other in actual political life. Turkish persons in Germany can be underexposed, nameless,[31] while also being overexposed, as in the unclothed belly dancing by which they are known to German citizens and tourists.[32] Each representational strategy, far from contradicting the other, instead makes its counterpart possible: the dancing fills the field of vision and helps push complicated syllables like Yaliz Arslan, Bahide Arslan, and Ayse Yilmac out of the way; in turn the absence of these names prevents the racial picture from becoming cluttered with psychological detail that might obscure the stark outlines of the dance. So, too, during the Gulf War, the Iraqi other was underexposed, invisible, absent. No soldiers or civilians were pictured on United States television. If only one person was killed for each American sortie, then there must have been at least ten thousand people killed (and it is extremely unlikely that only one person was killed for each flight). Yet no injuries or deaths appeared before us. This underexposure had as its counterpart the magnified, overexposed, sexually caricatured image of Saddam Hussein.[33] As we watched missiles going into targets that appeared to have no people within, it was as though either no one would be killed or the Gruesome Tyrant alone would be killed.

The Saddam Hussein pictured may not have been a caricature of the actual Saddam Hussein, for the historical person seems to have many of the attributes that were credited to him. But certainly he was an unjust caricature – a magnified cartoon of swagger and cruelty – of the otherwise missing, hence featureless, Iraqi population. It is interesting that Sartre – who writes so eloquently about the dryness, thinness, and two-dimensionality of the daydreamed faces of our friends – is the same Sartre who shows in *Anti-Semite and Jew* how the racial caricature as a genre acquires the very vividness the imagined friend lacks. The "opinions" of the anti-Semite, argues Sartre, are as intractable as perceptions: "tastes, colors, and opinions are not open to discussion."[34] The stereotype is animated and energized by the anti-Semite's whole being: "Only a strong emotional bias can give a lightninglike certainty; it alone can hold reason in leash; it alone can remain impervious to experience. . . ."[35] "It is a faith."[36] It has the "permanence of rock."[37] William Hazlitt, the British essayist of the early nineteenth century, also talks in his essay "The Pleasure of Hating" about the way the energy of hate animates and vivifies: "[W]e cannot bear a state of indifference and ennuie," he writes. "The white streak in our own fortunes is brightened (or just rendered visible) by making all round it as dark as possible, so the rainbow paints its form upon the cloud. Is it pride? Is it envy? Is it the force of contrast? Is it weakness or malice? But so it is. . . ."[38] These polarities of overexposure and underexposure, racial magnification and racial miniaturization, are richly excavated by the great literature about "the other."

I have been calling attention to the limits on solving real-world otherness through literary representation alone: the number of characters; the lack of a material referent; the seduction toward cultural egotism and self-identification. I have also been saying that literature ordinarily makes its contribution by critiquing the

origins of (rather than by providing solutions to) the problem of otherness: it makes visible the perceptual disability that gives rise to otherness; it also makes visible representational strategies such as underexposure and overexposure, whose operations we can then locate at work in the material world. Once these restrictions are acknowledged, it is appropriate to notice the one or two extraordinary instances in which literature has itself been part of the solution. Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* made blacks – the weight, solidity, injurability of their personhood – imaginable to the white population in the pre-Civil War United States. The scale of the book's immediate readership, its impact on actual political reality, is without an equivalent in Anglo-American literature, though it also exemplifies, more generally, the politically radical work of sentimental literature.[39] E.M. Forster's *A Passage to India* has occasionally had parallel claims made about it: the book, overnight, according to Stephen Spender, enabled the British population to reimagine itself as no longer the colonial overlords of India.[40] But the Stowe and Forster examples are extremely rare, both because they required readers to imagine not just "a person" but "a people," and above all, rare because they modified the well-being of actual persons, to bring about greater freedom and hence a diminution of the status of Otherness. More often we must say of literature what the poet W.H. Auden wrote in his elegy for Yeats: "Poetry makes nothing happen: it survives. In the valley of its saying. . . ."[41]

The section that follows turns from the literary to the legal, from daydreaming to constitution making. What makes Stowe and Forster remarkable is precisely that their writings were followed by legal and structural outcomes. If there had never been the Independence of India Act of 1943, or if the U.S. Constitution lacked the Reconstruction Amendments (prohibiting servitude; ensuring due process across race and religion; prohibiting racial restrictions on voting) no daily rereading of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* by the United States population, no daily rereading of *Passage to India* by the English population, could in themselves have the smallest healing power. Some of the 1992 theater productions in Berlin described earlier also focused on constitutional solutions: rather than speaking in the voice of fictional characters, the artists spoke in the collective voice, the collective aspiration, encoded in the German constitution's asylum and protection clauses. This

essay concludes by turning to that sphere as well: it argues that the capacious vision implied by the "asylum" and "protection" clauses (Articles 16 and 1) as yet has no counterpart in the laws governing the process by which a foreigner may become a citizen. Solving the "problem of otherness" in Germany appears to require that these citizenship laws be changed.

The present arrangements allow foreign born adults who have lived in the country legally for fifteen years to have the presumptive right of citizenship.[42] Again they permit sixteen- to twenty-three-year-olds who have lived legally in Germany for eight years, and who have attended German schools for six years, to have the presumptive rights of citizenship.[43] These arrangements may be fine for people who are already in Germany and have fulfilled the temporal requirement. But, as Ulrich Preuss argues, for newly arriving immigrants, fifteen years or eight years are extremely long periods. Further, if the present 1995 deadline is held in place, then the statutes for adults will not even be open to present and future immigrants. The provisions are too slow for those already in Germany; and they are unmindful of those who have just arrived or who will come next year. Hence they are unmindful of the new century about to come forward. As Preuss observes, "They refer to the past, not to the future."[44]

Through its asylum clause, the country welcomes heterogeneity; but it does not at present protect the principle of heterogeneity through benign and rapid processes for citizenship.

Two Paths for Achieving Mental Equality: Giving to the Other the Same Weight as One's Own, or, Instead, Giving to Oneself the Same Weightlessness that Others Have

When we seek equality though generous imaginings, we start with our own weight, then attempt to acquire knowledge about the weight and complexity of others. This is, as I have said, very difficult because of the constraints on imagining others. It is difficult to accomplish with the face of a friend, let alone the face of a neighbor, stranger, or enemy. It is difficult to do it with one person or five persons, let alone with the thousands and hundred thousands that deserve our labor of imagining. It is more possible when imagining under authorial instruction than under daydreaming, but is limited in both instances.

The alternative strategy is to achieve equality between self and

other not by trying to make one's knowledge of others *as weighty as* one's knowledge of oneself, but by making one ignorant about oneself, and therefore *as weightless as* all others. This strategy of imaginative recovery is exemplified by Bertrand Russell and, more elaborately and influentially, by John Rawls. It is also the strategy embedded in constitutional arrangements since they are independent of any one person's personal features.

Bertrand Russell argued that when reading the newspaper each day, we ought routinely to substitute the names of alternative countries to the reported actions in order to test whether our response to the event arises from a moral assessment of the action or instead from a set of prejudices about the country.[45] This ethical practice would obligate us to *decouple* a given action from country *x* and reattach it to country *y*. An event occurring between the United States and Somalia would be reversed and dispersed across imagined substitutes in Germany and France, Italy and Ethiopia, former Yugoslavia and Sweden and so forth. This ethical habit might be called "the rotation of nouns." It is equally valid for assessing the actions of ethnic groups toward one another inside a given country. The firebombing of a Turkish person's house by a German citizen would be mentally reversed so that a German household were burned by a Turkish noncitizen, or instead by an occupying British soldier, or instead by fellow citizen. The action of mentally detaching the action from one country or ethnic group and reattaching it to another helps ensure that moral claims about actions really are about those actions, and do not simply restate national prejudices or ethnic prejudices that are already in place. It protects against cultural narcissism by setting forth a sequence of locations that dislodges one from one's own geographical center.

A second example is John Rawls's "veil of ignorance" as a condition for achieving — at least in the imagination — just social relations. I say "at least in the imagination" because he requests us "to simulate the deliberations of this hypothetical situation, simply by reasoning in accordance with appropriate restrictions.[46] The "veil of ignorance" in Rawls's *A Theory of Justice* requires that one become temporarily ignorant about one's own physical, genetic, psychological, and even moral attributes. We enter into decisions about the best social arrangements without knowing what position within that social arrangement we occupy: "no one knows his place in society, his class position or social status; nor does he know his fortune in the distribution of natural assets and abilities, his intelligence and strength.... Nor, again, does anyone know his conception of the good, the particulars of his rational plan of life, or even the special features of his psychology such as his aversion to risk or liability to optimism or pessimism."[47] The act of making oneself featureless accomplishes the same outcome as making oneself a composite of all possible features: one makes decisions about legal structures as though one were saying, what if I were black, white, brown, yellow, red; what if my family lived in this town for thirty years, three years, three generations, three centuries, three days; what if I lived in the inland region, the eastern border, western border, north, south?

Like Russell's rotation of nouns, the veil of ignorance is a way of bringing about equality not by giving the millions of other people an imaginative weight equal to one's own — a staggering mental labor — but by the much more efficient opposite strategy, the strategy of simply erasing for a moment one's own dense array of attributes. By becoming featureless, by having a weightlessness, a two-dimensionality, a dryness every bit as "impoverished" as the imagined other, the condition of equality is achieved. One subtraction therefore has the same effect as a hundred thousand additions. Through it we create what Rawls describes as "the symmetry of everyone's relations to each other."[48]

The stress here on temporarily dis-imagining oneself, on becoming featureless, on making oneself weightless, may mislead one into thinking that this strategy produces a featureless or homogeneous society. But precisely the reverse is the case: it is when a social contract privileges a certain set of features (for example, medium length curly red hair) that the whole society drifts into acquiring those features. When a social contract is instead wholly independent of specific features, no political liability or credit is attached to any one of them, and hence the greatest possible diversity and heterogeneity are brought about. The only trait encouraged is psychological and moral "tolerance" of high levels of difference.

The problem with discussions of the other is that they sometimes allow the fate of the other to be contingent on the imaginer: now another person's fate will depend on whether we decide to be generous and wise, or instead narrow and intolerant.

But solutions ought not to give one group the power to regulate the welfare of another group in this way. Picture, for example, a town in which third generation light-skinned residents can vote but third generation dark-skinned residents cannot vote. The light-skinned residents – through goodwill and large mindedness – take into consideration, before they vote, the position of the dark-skinned residents. They ask themselves, for example, which candidate will best serve the needs of both themselves and the dark-skinned coresidents in their city. (This is a utopian assumption, of course, given the difficulty of imagining other people; but for the sake of argument, let us suppose they are able and willing to do it.) Thus they have acted to minimize the problem of foreignness or otherness by holding in their minds a picture of those other people on the basis of which they go on to make their political decisions. Now contrast this to a second situation. The dark-skinned third generation residents are citizens and vote for themselves. There is no longer the need for the light-skinned residents to act on behalf of the "others." Because a constitutional provision enables each group to act on its own behalf, no group any longer occupies the legal position of the "other." Even if we stipulate that in the first solution the light-skinned third generation residents act with maximum generosity and largesse, the second solution is obviously much stronger. They would, even at best, be acting paternally, and hence operating outside the frame of the social contract, whose purpose, as Locke argued in the *Second Treatise of Government*, was precisely to decouple paternal power from political power.

What differentiates the first and second strategies of inclusion (let us call them Town One and Town Two) is the principle of self-representation, a principle perhaps too elementary and self-evident to require recitation. Yet I introduce the principle here because – at least to the ears of an outsider – discussions of the problem of otherness in Germany sometimes seem not to take "self-representation" centrally into account. The words "protection" and "foreigner," for example, often seem to be used in ways compatible with Town One rather than Town Two. In its opening words, the German constitution pledges to protect the inviolable dignity of persons, and this pledge of "protection" is often appropriately cited in lamentations over injuries to Turkish-German[49] residents. But since self-representation is the sturdiest form of

"protection," it is not clear what any account of protection means that does not include the aspiration to change the current citizenship laws, voting rights, and other forms of procedural access (phenomena often omitted from the lament[50]). The "protection" clause in the U. S. Constitution has played a major role in shaping modern U.S. law: one legal scholar even makes the extraordinary claim that this sentence "has become the text on which most twentieth-century law is a gloss."[51] But this key phrase in the Fourteenth Amendment, "equal protection," is inseparable from a second phrase in the same sentence, "due process," and hence inseparable also from the equitable distribution of rights across different ethnic, religious, and gender groups. It would be inconceivable to propose that equal protection among adults in the United States could ever be secured by empowering an enfranchised group to look after a disenfranchised group by means of generous imaginings.

The use of the word "foreigner" illustrates the same problem. In her December 1992 reading in Frankfurt, Saliha Scheinhardt said that being called a "foreigner" was, for her, a painful insult. One respondent in the audience expressed genuine bewilderment about why this apparently neutral descriptive word, not intended to injure, should be perceived as negative. But to call Saliha Scheinhardt – or any other person who has lived in Germany five years, twenty years, two generations, three generations – a "foreigner" conforms to, and endorses, the Town One model.[52] If the light-skinned residents speak about the dark-skinned residents as "foreigners," the word cannot refer to a geographical location since both have resided in the same geography for substantial periods.[53] It seems instead to refer to, and to accept, the political geography of noncitizenship. The idiom soon comes to sound circular and self-justifying: the lack of voting rights is explained on the basis that the people are foreigners, but what makes them appear foreign is only the fact that they lack voting rights. The idiom places them outside the city gates, outside the political mechanism of self-representation that it is the very logic of the city to ensure. Even Chancellor Kohl's heartfelt response to the burnings in Mölln sounded like the words of a Town One imaginer rather than one who desired to inhabit Town Two. He extended his sympathy to the families of those killed and "to the Turks *in our country*, who have lived here for many years, whom