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WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF
ARAB REVOLUTIONS
AND
NEW HUMANISM



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and Mohamed-Salah Omri

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New humanism in times of torture

Mohamed-Salah Omri

University of Oxford, U.K.

In light of the pervasiveness of the practice across the globe and its persistence in time, how are we to make sense of torture? The present essay starts with the premise that if we believe humanity is shared and that torture targets that basic humanity regardless of class, gender and race, our methods of approaching it must reflect a wide spectrum of angles, which attempts to break the monolingualism of methodology and theory and the privileging of particular sites of knowledge. In order to reflect a diverse humanity, we must go beyond – and indeed resist and critique – monolingual practices, be that in methodology or in anthology. The present essay attempts to listen to multiple sites of theorising and production of knowledge about torture. This entails reading texts from more than one language and genre. Towards that aim, the essay includes cases from Latin America, South Africa, the United States while keeping as main focus the Arab region. It also honours and makes use of multilingual humanity by looking at Arabic, English, Spanish and French reflections on torture, aware all the while, that these are but a fraction of what can and should be listened to. To this end, it reveals the importance of insights about pain and humanity expressed by survivors. For the site of knowledge does not matter as much as the knowledge itself. The insights about body and pain by Fethi Belhaj Yahia or Kamel Cherni or J. M. Coetzee – about whom I say more in the course of the essay – are equally revealing of the way they conceived of torture, and therefore must be treated alongside each other as well as in conjunction with recent theorizing on the subject. In terms of genre and language, the study does not make a hierarchical distinction between fiction and non-fiction or standard and colloquial registers. In short, it is my contention that if torture compels us to think of what is human regardless of context (political, cultural, economic, racial, gender), then we have the responsibility to produce a knowledge which honours and respects multiple sites of knowledge production and multiple languages and genres, a human knowledge.

1- Torture, authoritarianism and revolution

It is the contention of the present essay that we cannot approach the revolu-

tions that took place across the Arab region in 2010-11 and which specifically called for the restoration of human dignity without a meaningful engagement what we might call the torture question. In fact, one could argue that the revolution was a response to torture as a means of governing and authoritarian rule. Indeed, among the apparatus of control and management of its "subjects", authoritarian regimes use systematic torture.¹ But established democracies, too, continue to use torture or have been built on a regime of control in which torture, including systematic torture, were foundational. In states which use torture as mean of governing, its function "is not only to generate confessions and information from citizens believed to oppose the government: it is used to deter others from expressing opposition" (Amati, 97). It targets the community as such. "The real purpose [of torture] is the manipulation and immobilisation of a whole population by terror and by preventive punishment of any criticism or political action" (Amati, 96). Torture targets the very humanity of the individual while its aim is to break and silence the community.

At the individual level, what I would be calling the torture situation offers a productive, indeed privileged, situation to examine what it means to be human. For torture is specific to humans, is social, and relational; specific to humans in the sense that it sets one human being against another specifically because they are human. "It is a technique", argues Reinhold Gorling, "for making the distinctive characteristics of life, its openness and dependence on others, into the means of its destruction" (Gorling 62).² In other words, torture perverts what is human in the sense that "[t]he intentional violence to which victims of torture are subjected is a deliberate destruction of subjectivity" (Gorling 62).

In the spectrum of violence, torture holds a special position "Within every hu-

1 Author's note: Research for this essay was possible thanks to a study leave funded by a Leverhulme Research Fellowship for the academic year 2015-16. The essay is dedicated to Sadok Ben Mhenni, torture survivor and continuing inspiration.

- See Silvia Amati, "Some thought on torture", *Free Association*, (1987), 8, p. 94-114. Key question: "Can this 'manipulation' by the torture system of the ambiguity, undifferentiation and catastrophic anxiety in each individual victim be compared with the manipulation of broad sections of a population by state terrorism, by insecurity and by contradictory and ambiguous information? In a population, the ambiguous nucleus may then assume the form of a region of undifferentiation common to everyone, a mimetic region of which we are unaware and through which we are easily 'massified'. And when a large population is deprived of its feeling of safety and its normal depositories, it is offered a strong and reassuring power, for want of anything better" (Amati, 112). And "Because of conformism and indifference, largely the result of unconscious fear, we tend more and more to accept things we do not approve of." (Amati, 112). This is at the heart of the manner in which the authoritarian state functions.

2 - See Reinhold GORLING, "Torture and Society" in *Speaking of Torture*, ed. By Julie Carlson and Elisabeth Weber, Fordham University Press, 2012.

man being is the knowledge and fear of pain, the fear of helplessness before unrestrained cruelty. The deliberate infliction of pain by one human being on another to break him is a special horror” (Amati, 97). The torturer starts from a worldview based on defending good or the “right” values (linked to race, nationality, class, religious or political beliefs) against a perceived threat. From this perspective, the victim is on the wrong side of human values, not human (99), or even evil. Torture marks an instance when the risk of losing belief in what it is to be human is heightened. Indeed, it targets human dignity in the deepest and most deliberate way. It makes calculated, reasoned, even scientific, effort to make the victim experience the loss of human dignity. In fact, we can speak of the torture contract, which consists in tacit agreement by which torturer and victim engage in a fight for survival, with the first intent on breaking dignity while the second seeks to preserve it.

The United Nations Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, defines torture as follows:

“[T]he term “torture” means any act by which severe pain or suffering, whether physical or mental, is intentionally inflicted on a person for such purposes as obtaining from him or a third person information or a confession, punishing him for an act he or a third person has committed or is suspected of having committed, or intimidating or coercing him or a third person, or for any reason based on discrimination of any kind, when such pain or suffering is inflicted by or at the instigation of or with the consent or acquiescence of a public official or other person acting in an official capacity. It does not include pain or suffering arising only from, inherent in or incidental to lawful sanctions.”³

This definition is based on commitment to human rights, to its premises and history. It recognizes the key value of human dignity and the responsibility to protect it. (“Recognizing that those rights derive from the inherent dignity of the human person”). Such responsibility lies with states, first and foremost.

The catalogue of torture is well-known. A lot of work has been done about this across the world, and testimonies in writing and in other media have provided us with detailed accounts. Most testimonies describe various forms of coercion, interrogation, degrees of torture, conditions of detention and

3 - The resolution was adopted and opened for signature, ratification and accession by General Assembly resolution 39/46 of 10 December 1984 entry into force 26 June 1987, in accordance with article 27 (1).

so on. Means of torture, including techniques of coercive interrogation, are global and globally traded, amounting, in fact, to an industry and a form of knowledge exchange, which is usually handed down, from today's powerful states and colonial rulers alike, to their former colonies and allies. Nor is torture a new invention in human history. There is evidence of it in classical, colonial and postcolonial periods, and across societies.⁴ In the aftermath of revelations about large-scale and extreme torture by American soldiers in the Iraqi prison Abu Ghraib, a renewed interest took place in the subject in academic and political spheres. This led in fact to important interventions on the responsibility of intellectuals, representing pain, and particularly the pain of another, as well as serious critique of Western discourses on human rights.⁵ Eventually, the scale of the horror, which was photographed by the perpetrators themselves, found its way to the media. The debate on torture was relaunched, in America and Europe at least, so to speak. The revelations confirmed what we knew all along: torture is not the exclusive domain of autocratic systems, democracies, too, practice large-scale torture. This debate recalled French horrors in colonized Algeria and elsewhere, British colonial practices and so on. Important interventions from Judith Butler and others have nuanced our understanding of the subject.⁶ In art, a flurry of renderings took place, most notable of which are the remarkable paintings by the Columbian artist Fernando Botero who devoted the year 2005-6 to paint the horrors of Abu Ghraib in his own distinctive style. Indeed, reporting the facts of torture does not tell us about the experience and even much less the interpretation of torture. Narratives of torture, which are always a recollection or a retelling, attempt not only to capture the effects of torture but also to make sense of what it is that makes humans engage in such a deeply anti-human act. In the process, these narratives try, most notably, to make sense of the torturer's humanity, as I will explain below. At the same time, they index strategies

4 - In the sense that the suffering caused is similar regardless of the culture victims come from, torture "deculturalizes" its victims (62). Iraqi writer and torture survivor, Haifa Zangana, speaks of the Oneness of torturers, specifically because they all share one goal: to break the will of their victims. (Haifa ZANGANA, "Solitude and dream: literature post 9-11", Open Democracy, 2012). See: <https://www.opendemocracy.net/frances-pinter-haifa-zanaga/solitude-and-dream-literature-post-911>. Here, one can speak of some form of universalism, the Universalism of a specific pain (endured and inflicted). Zangana calls it *al-alam al-mahdh* (pure pain).

5 - Practices such as "Sleep deprivation, sexual humiliation, sensory disorientation and the imposition of physical and psychological pain" were sanctioned at the highest level of the American administration. See Philip GOUREVITCH, "Exposure: The woman behind the camera at Abu Ghraib", *The New Yorker*, March 24 2008 <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2008/03/24/exposure-5>.

6 - For example in Judith BUTLER, *Frames of War*, London, Verso, 2009. Sontag, Susan. "Regarding the Torture of Others." *The New York Times* 23 May 2004, <http://www.nytimes.com/2004/05/23/magazine/regarding-the-torture-of-others.html>. In art, a flurry of renderings took place, most notable are Botero's memorable paintings of 2005-6.

of preserving dignity and humanity under extreme threat.

The present essay is in part an initial exploration of the notion that reflections by victims and survivors – or indeed by those who try to represent them – define humanism in relation to torture. Humanism here is linked to notions of truth, justice and dignity. For torture is a special moment which tests the capacity to empathize and the belief in shared humanity. Writing is a moment of making sense of it. It challenges the capacity – even the right – of literature to form metaphors. Torture imposes on narrative the striving for concreteness for fear of falsifying the experience or aesthetizing it, as I explain below. In other words, to write about torture amounts to conveying an anti-human practice in, arguably, the most humanist of modes. In post-authoritarian situations, there is usually a particularly heightened interest in this type of literature and small booms in testimonial writing tend to occur. Post-2011 Tunisia is a case in point, to judge by the number of books published since. But during repressive rule, literature which denounces abuse and torture circulated in secret, underground or from hand to hand. In Tunisia, Abdeljabbar Maddouri's book *Ahlam Hariba* (Fugitive Dreams) and *Raghma Anfihi* (Despite himself) were circulated in photocopy format; the poetry of Ammar Mansour was smuggled out of prison while the colloquial poet Belgacem Yacoubi read his work on university campuses and trade union offices, to cite only some examples. In Egypt, Ahmed Fuad Nigm and Naguib Surur, may be the emblems of the genre but known writers have tackled the subject, including Naguib Mahfuz in *al-Karak* (Carkak Café), Zyaneb al-Ghazali in *Ayyam min Hayati* (Days from my life), Sonallah Ibrahim in *al-Lujnah* (The Committee) and Yusuf Idris, whose work it treated in more detail in the present paper. Many others across the Arab region were routinely censored and banned, most notably the work of Abderrahman Munif, whose seminal novel on torture and its effect on the individual and the community, *Sharq al-Mutawasit* (East of the Mediterranean (1970)) was banned by several Arab states. They all speak of human suffering, the values of dignity and the need for freedom, even at a time when no hope of freedom was in sight.

2- The torture contract: Breaking and preserving human dignity

By contract, I mean a tacit understanding, sometimes explicitly mentioned in testimonies and other sources, between torturer and victim around the question of personal dignity. While the first aims to break the dignity of his – most torturers are male – victim, the latter aims to preserve it. One of the

strategies used by the torturer in this process is to insert ambiguity with the aim of creating confusion. The use of the hood, eye cover or band is an example of this. It seems that in the modern era there is a reversal of the practice. In earlier times, the torturer usually wore a hood in order not to be recognised, then hooding the victim became the norm: "with the hood, you can't run away, or see your attacker, you can't defend yourself or hit back, you have to walk and you bump into the wall. With the hood, they take your face away; they take away your identity. The same happens when they strip you naked." (Amati, 101).⁷ Other practices of ambiguity include: making the victim walk on all fours or eat like an animal; rape, thereby inserting ambiguity in terms of a person's sexuality; turning the victim into a child; turning the victim into a thing.⁸ In order to break a victim's normal mental processes, "the torturer tries to bring the prisoner to an extreme degree of physic-affective regression, in which: The prisoner can no longer relate to his own body, because of extreme fatigue, pain (...), the prisoner can no longer relate to his own reality: time, space (...). The prisoner can no longer relate to others" (Amati, 107).⁹ This, in addition to deliberate acts of humiliation and denigration: peeing on the victim, insults, and so on.

On the side of the victim, preserving even the slightest reason for self-esteem becomes a main focus.¹⁰ The victim usually makes efforts to counter the practices mentioned above: to avoid confusion, to keep one's integrity, to remain identical to oneself, and to stay detached from the torturer, to retain one's self-esteem and to create new insights. Here, a question emerges whether militants endure torture better than non-militants. "Torture puts the entire person to the test; it seeks to provoke breaches in the identity, i.e., in the sense of internal cohesion and continuity" (Amati, 112). To have a system of beliefs, "meta-comprehension", whether political or not does help. Militants often speak of being sustained by principles, beliefs, a sense of feeling they were on the right side, feeling they were better or stronger than the torturer. Here, Arab prisoners/survivors, for example, draw on various symbols and resources, some of which are universally recognized as such. These include famous global cases of courage (Che Guevara), or Arab symbols, such as Algerian or Palestinian heroes under French or Israeli torture (Jamila Bouheirad, Laila Khaled, Laarbi Ben Mhidi) or historical figures (accounts of Early Muslim

7 - From the testimony of young women from Uruguay in the early 1970s. (AMATI, *ibid.* 100).

8 - I provide examples of this from memoirs and testimonies in the long version of the present essay.

9 - Torture results in "primitive agony", a state deeper than anxiety. See AMATI, pp. 109.

10 - Some of this may be understood in light of the suggestion that of Gaining the admiration for the torturer ("the prisoner tries to use the torturer as a narcissistic support object" (AMATI, *ibid.*, 103).

converts or Sufis figures tortured under orthodox Muslim rule and so on....).

In the torture contract, the body becomes the battle ground. In "Forgetting the embodied past: Body memory in transitional justice", Teresa Koloma Beck recognises that torture, being violence directed to the body (as well as the psyche), defies representation in the sense that representational memory - memory which functions through evocation and imagination, narration of the past (of violence) - is different from body memory.¹¹ Representational memory starts from the present (remembers the past from the starting point of the present). Body memory is about the effect of the past on the body itself and how it is in the present (e.g., body habits acquired during a period of repressive rule, prison, etc., such as sleeping with a door open at all times). It enacts the past in the present.¹² Belhaj Yahia, former prisoner of conscience in Tunisia, notes his reluctance to broach the topic for fear of "opening a door I would find difficult to shut or of getting lost in its labyrinths" (Yahia, 190).¹³ The body and body memory are central to this fear: "never have I become conscious of my self through my body as when being subjected to the assault I mention". He explains: "I grew up in a popular neighbourhood where manhood and value were measured in proportion to the disfiguration of one's body and the harm one caused to other bodies" (Yahia, 191). This culture of enmity to the body by using the body, not as sacred untouchable, but as a "tool whose value increases through its capacity to violate the bodily sanctity of others" (Yahia, 191) has social roots in "our" culture: "they [torturers] resemble us, Tunisians, to the point of confusion. They did not hail from another planet" (Yahia 191-3). One needs to understand why we resort to violence and "the difficulty to produce mechanism of protection against this daily destruction which takes a tragic dimension when the state itself deliberately reproduces this destruction in methodical, conscious and calculated manner" (Yahia 193). Yahia makes a direct link between what may start as a social phenomenon and the instrumentalisation and systematisation of it by the state. This makes what I have been calling the torture contract a matter of state vs people. The stakes become a battle opposing those who want to preserve the dignity and will of an entire people to those who seek to break them. It is in this sense that social revolution and torture become inseparable. Torture perverts the social contract by which society invests the state with the

11 - See Teresa Koloma BECK, "Forgetting the embodied past: Body memory in transitional justice", ed., Susanne Buckley-Zistel, Teresa Koloma Beck, Christian Barain and Friederike Mleth, Routledge, 2014.

12 - In "The Black Policeman", a story by the Egyptian Youssef Idriss, the young doctor has acquired distinct body habits, such as avoiding eye contact. Examples of this abound.

13 - Belhaj YAHIA, *Al-habs kadhdhab wa al-hay yarawwah Fethi*, Tunis, Kalimat, 'Abirah, 3rd edn, 2011. First published in 2007.

power to rule in exchange for the preservation of peace and the operation of justice, including the right to protect the body from violation and violence. In doing so, torture sanctions rebellion against the abusive state or at least gives the right to denounce it for breaking the social contract.

3- Debating the humanity of the torturer

Accounts of torture inevitably pay special attention to the figure of the torturer. They also usually perform their own justice against the perpetrator. This takes a variety of forms: bestialisation (he is a dog, a snake, an insect, etc.); cannibalization (an eater of human flesh, and occasionally of his own); castration (he is impotent); sexual predator and pervert; he ends up ill, discarded by his masters and shunned by society.¹⁴ The question asked in countless accounts is this: Is the torturer a human being just like me? If so, why has he turned inhuman? Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians* is a case in point.¹⁵ The magistrate puzzles at the Colonel's vocation: "I am only trying to understand. I am trying to understand the zone in which you live. I am trying to imagine how you breathe and eat and live from day to day. But I cannot!" (Coetzee, 138). This inability to understand what motivates the torturer makes it impossible to share his position, to be him: "If I were he, I say to myself, my hands would feel so dirty that it would choke me" (138).¹⁶ What kind of man is the torturer? Coetzee explains: "I find myself wondering too whether he has a private ritual of purification, carried out behind closed doors, to enable him to return and break bread with other men. Does he wash his hands very carefully, perhaps, or change all his clothes; or has the Bureau created new men who can pass without disquiet between the unclean and the clean?" (Coetzee, 13).¹⁷ This type of men is perhaps what Hannah Arendt had in mind in connection with a well-known torturer. Judith Butler explains: "In other words, it is now possible that some persons have become, historically, instruments of implementation and that they have lost the capacity for what she calls thinking. In a sense, the problem is for her both historical and philosophical: how did it come to pass that persons can now be formed in such a way that thinking, understood as a normative exercise of judgement, is no

14 - These cases are taken up in the longer version of the present study.

15 - J.M., COETZEE, *Waiting for the Barbarians*, London, Vintage, 2004. First published in 1980.

16 - This impossibility to understand the perpetrator extends, according to Coetzee to the victim, a point to which I will return.

17 - Similar ideas are found in Idris, Bel Hadj Yahia, Cherni, Baldwin, Zangana, Sahrawi, Fliss, Nasraoui, which I address elsewhere.

longer possible for them".¹⁸ James Baldwin has this to say about the Sheriff who, as a boy, witnessed an act of collective torture, the lynching of a black man, and continued to torture blacks in his town: "Sheriff Clark in Selma, Ala, cannot be dismissed as a total monster; I am sure he loves his wife and children and likes to get drunk".¹⁹

Ahbab Allah by the Tunisian Kamel Cherni, who was jailed when he was secondary school student, opens with a memorable fierce encounter between a violent guard and the young student, who is also the narrator, which is worth retelling here, for in it we find in condensed form the whole story as well the stakes involved in writing, the dignity to defend and the arbitrariness of the torture system.²⁰ The prisoner sits in a corner reading a book of philosophy smuggled through complicated means. He is called forth by this guard who snatches the book from his hand and starts tearing up its pages one by one while staring at the prisoner with contempt (Cherni, 17). He then orders: "Now you must gather the pages which have polluted the yard. And you don't have the whole day to it" (Cherni, 19). The reaction was swift: "I did not know how my arm reached to him, lifted him up by the collar of his shirt, which was decorated with the state's emblem, and pulled him to me with all the violence in my heart". The prisoner then continued to beat up the guard through the fence "with personal pathological pleasure" (Cherni, 20). The guard was almost typical of his kind: "Thirty five years old, perhaps slightly older, thin, with dark features, closer to being blue, thin sideburns and the moustache of an adolescent, but with harsh and violent features" (Cherni, 15). He was more like an emotionless animal: "At that moment when he called me up, the guard appeared to me darker than usual, almost blue, with the eyes of a dead snake" (Cherni, 17).²¹ And almost typical as well is the perception among prisoners who thought he was sexually impotent and as a consequence pours his frustration on them.

In the novella, *The Black Policeman*, by the Egyptian Yusuf Idris, the wife of a torturer describes her husband as someone who has tasted human flesh, and once one does that, he will never become the same).²² Here, the encounter

18 - Judith BUTLER, "Hannah Arendt's death sentences", *Comparative Literature Studies*, Vol 48-2, 280-295 (283).

19 - James BALDWIN, "Going to meet the man", 1965.

20 - Kamel CHERNI, *Ahbab Allah (God's Friends)*, Tunis, Karem Cherif Publications, 2011.

21 - Here is how Coetzee describes the eyes of the torturer: "with a shift of horror I behold the answer that has been waiting all the time to offer itself to me in the image of a face masked by two black glassy insect eyes from which there comes no reciprocal gaze but only my doubled image cast back at me" (Coetzee, 238).

22 - Yusuf, IDRIS, *Al-Askari al-Aswad (The Black Policeman)*, Cairo, Nahdat Misr,

reveals how both, victim and torturer, have lost their humanity in the process. Both experience moments of disconnection, even more, transformation, making them turn into animals of a special kind, dogs or wolves.²³ The story is told by a doctor who tries to understand his old fellow student leader, Shawqi, who seems to have undergone a dramatic change during his time in prison. This is a case which demonstrates the complexity, even the impossibility, of representing what the experience of torture may have been like. The story stages an encounter between the torturer Abbas and his victim in a reversal of situations and roles whereby the victim is now a doctor visiting the torturer in his home (described as a prison cell). In the encounter, we learn from Abbas' wife how her husband has lost his will to live, became drug addict and was unable to handle his sexual impotence. Abbas howls like a wolf, barks like a dog and finally turns cannibal and eats his own flesh. At a powerful moment Shawqi and Abbas engage in a shouting match: unable to articulate the horror of torture which bounded them, they simply howl.²⁴ Above Abbas's bed hangs a framed official certificate which reads: "To honour his dedication in the service of the supreme interest of the nation" (Idriss, 68). The hollow phrase is used to devastating effect, a testimony that Abbas' self-destruction and the destruction of others was all for a presumed higher patriotic cause. On his part, Shawqi who had lost his "human security (*amn bashari*) once, will never return to being human like us." (Idriss, 70).²⁵ This loss of humanity finds frequent echoes in narratives of torture. In many instances, the perpetrator is a

2009. First published in 1962.

23 - Dogs are pervasive in this literature, as I show elsewhere. Images of Abu Ghraib prison, particularly in Botero's memorable paintings, are striking. Cherni and Sahrawi depict graphic attacks by dogs as means of terror. But animals are not only treated as part of the torturer's arsenal. They are also a reflection on the liminal boundary between human and beast, sanity and madness in the torture situation.

24 - In the play, *Junun* (Madness) written by Tunisian actress and playwright Jalila Bakkar (Tunis: Dar al-Janub, 2001), Yusuf, the former prisoner of conscience, describes Gaddour, a notorious figure in the Ministry of the Interior, thus: "He was cold, silent and never uttered a word. No sign appears on his face... Sometimes he stops - beating me - to bite my arm... It did not occur to anyone that the matter is a confrontation between two human beings" (152). Once broken and "out of service", Gaddour becomes "an old man. Bold. Wrapped in a grey coat. His back is bent. He limps" (119). We know that he lost his wife, his job, his friends and his teeth... The play includes a questioning of the torturer, trying to understand why he does it, what does he feel. He shows no remorse. He was ordered. It was his job. His victims were enemies of the nation. This is how Fethi Belhaj Yahia describes his own encounter with his torturer: "Life can come to you in the form of a farce when you meet your torturer in a cafe, and he offers, nicely, to buy you a coffee, adding, "I had nothing against you. They were orders. That's all" (Yahia, 179).

25 - Note: http://hekiattafihahgedan.blogspot.co.uk/2011/10/blog-post_06.html; on the death and career of Nasser's torture leader see: <http://www.masress.com/alwafd/1427>. For a review of Idriss' book, see: http://www.alfanonline.com/show_files.aspx?fid=376359.

whole community which dehumanizes the victim, and loses its own humanity in the process.

Indeed, torture is almost always collective, perpetrated by a system and a human collective, which includes those who give orders, those who set the policy, those who execute, and those who cover up. The spectrum of examples is very wide: ethnic cleansing situations; religious conflicts; public group punishment of crime, such as public stoning or public beheading, etc.. A prominent and telling case is the practice of lynching of slaves and former slaves in the American context.²⁶ James Baldwin describes on such the scene: "The cry of all the people rose to answer the dying man's cry. He wanted death to come quickly. They wanted to make death wait: and it was they who hold death, now, on a leash which they lengthened little by little" (1760). The crowd burns the man's genitals and then cuts them off in theatrical manner, before proceeding to burning him alive in a collective orgy: "[T]he crowd screamed as the knife flashed, first up, then down, cutting the dreadful thing away, and the blood came roaring down. Then the crowd rushed forward, tearing at the body with their hands, with knives, with rocks, with stones, howling and cursing." (1760). The torturing crowd is completely disconnected from its victim, whom they treat as subhuman because of his race and sexuality. Lynching in this sense goes to the very heart of the state. In other words, it has to do with the humanist bases of human forms of government. Baldwin sees in this a flaw in the very making of the nation. On the American constitution, he writes: "These architects [of the American State] decided that the concept of property was more important – more real – than the possibilities of the human being" (Baldwin, 359).

Conclusion: Truth, representation, pedagogy

There is paradox at the heart of the torture situation. The torturer, the victim and those who seek to understand torture are all truth seekers, only their truths differ and so do their methods of seeking them. Coetzee debates this point in a seminal contribution. The magistrate in Coetzee's book reflects: "They [my torturers] were interested only in demonstrating to me what it meant to live in a body, as a body, a body which can entertain notions of justice only as long as it is whole and well, which very soon forgets them when its head is gripped and a pipe is pushed down its gullets and pints of salt water are poured into it till it coughs and retches and flails and voids itself" (Coetzee, 126). *Torturers*

26 - We saw this in witch-hunting; we see it now in hunting other human beings for race, sect or gender, or political difference, from Salem, Massachusetts to Nigeria with Boko Haram to Syria and Iraq with ISIS.

were not interested in hearing a confession: "They came to my cell to show me the meaning of humanity, and in the space of an hour they showed me a great deal" (Coetzee, 126). The young daughter of a victim loses her humanity as a result of torture: "They exposed her father to her naked and made him gibber with pain; they hurt her and he could not stop them ... thereafter she was no longer fully human, sister to all of us" (Coetzee, 88). In Idris, as I mention above, Chawki, has lost the capacity for compassion. While in Sahrawi's Arabic novel, *Two faces of one corpse* (2007), the victim loses all sense of right and wrong as well as conceptions of wholeness due to his body mutilated by torture.²⁷ He ends up torturing a corpse and having sex on top of another.

Seeking inspiration in other human acts of resistance and trying to convince the torturer that one is telling the truth fail in the face of extreme, incomprehensible violence. In Sahrawi, the activist seeks inspiration in inscriptions written in blood on the wall of a cell: "What do my enemies want from me? My paradise is in my chest and my garden is in my heart. My prison is a time of seclusion (khulwa), my tiredness a journey, my death martyrdom" (Sahrawi 22). But they are of no help when he was hung from his penis and testicles (22). In reaction to pain, human language recedes: "the filthy room was filled with mixed voices coming out of the first human: 'ooh, ah ah, hab hab bah, bu yu, oooooh' ..." (22). This leads to meditation on torture and language: "when I heard the animal voices coming out of me, I realised that the moment of physical torture is a special moment, a time in which the necklace of language is dispersed, its order turned into chaos, its clarity into ambiguity; the engine of speech is destroyed when hellish punishment is poured on the body, the frightened animal returns to pre-language in order to express the depth of its pain" (23). Such pain is unspeakable in human language. Elaine Scarry has argued the case: "Physical pain does not only resist language but actively destroys it, brings about an immediate reversion to a state anterior to language, to the sounds and cries a human being makes before language is learned" (*Speaking*, 118).²⁸ Should we then give up on representing torture?

In literature as in visual arts, the distance between the direct experience of torture and representation is impossible to bridge. Talking about the photographs of Abu Ghraib, Solomon-Godeau notes: "When we confront the actual

27 - Abdelmajid SAHRAWI, *Wajhan li jutha wahida* (Two faces of one corpse), Damascus, al-Naya, 2007.

28 - On the perils, limits and history of representation of torture in visual arts, see Abigail-Soloman GODEAU, "Torture and representation: the art of détournement", *Speaking of Torture*, ed, Julia Karlson and Elizabeth Webber, New York, Fordham University Press, 2012.

photographic representation of acts of torture that emerged from Abu Ghraib prison, there is obviously an unbridgeable gulf between our reception of these fifteen hundred-odd pictures as spectators and those acts as they were experienced by the victims, or for that matter, by the perpetrators" (118). Coetzee states: "The novelist must struggle to articulate torture without falsifying it, to understand and to depict oppression without unconsciously aiding the oppressor, to find texts transparent enough to carry meaning" (Zanten 280).²⁹ Solomon-Godeau discusses the ethics of representing torture where the writer and artist bear responsibility along the lines argued by Coetzee. In image, in particular, the task is complex. She explains: "If the ethics and politics of representation turn on the responsibility of the imagemaker to resist the lure of spectacle as well as that of aestheticism, this requires some form of reckoning with the complex attributes of the spectatorial gaze, its elements of eroticism, mastery, projection, and fantasy" (*Speaking*, 123).

Coetzee considers what the body goes through impossible to represent by another. But Belhaj Yahia extends this even to those who seek to represent themselves or their own experience. He speaks of prison, particularly solitary confinement, as an experience situated beyond the capacity of collective writing or even solidarity. "Prison is an individual solitary experience impossible to write collectively no matter how strong the unity and the solidarity of the group... For pain, loneliness, sexual misery, the need of the body for warmth, are things that you can accept no substitutions or postponing for inside yourself" (Yahia, 84). This experience can put one on the edge of madness. But if one overcame it, they would find in themselves a type of "internal solidity and reconstitution of the self because it breaks inside him or them the walls of fear, not fear of the other or authority or guards or watchmen, but fear of oneself" (Yahia, 85).

Yet, in my view, this is precisely where radical humanism is most needed and most urgent. It resides in the capacity to empathize, even when, or perhaps specifically when, knowing that the pain of another human being is unrepresentable. It impels us to condemn torture and reject it at all times.³⁰ The

29 - Susan VAN ZANTEN and J.M. COETZEE, "Torture and the novel: J.M. Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians*", *Contemporary Literature*, vol. 29, no. 2, 1988, 277-285.

30 - This raises the question of the right to refuse orders in cases of torture. In 1960, the so-called Manifesto of the 121 issued by French intellectuals who objected to torture by the French colonial state in Algeria argues that torture can never be justified, even under military orders. . J. P. Sartre was uncompromising in his introduction to Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*: "Eight years of silence; what degradation! And your silence is all to no avail; today, the blinding sun of torture is at its zenith; it lights up the whole country. Under that merciless glare, there is not a laugh that does not ring false, not a face that is not painted to hide fear and anger, not a single action that does not betray our disgust,

fact that torture is part of the system of repressive authority compels us to align ourselves with the victim, be they an individual or a collective, to stand against authoritarianism. Writing about torture amounts to a commitment not to turn a blind eye. It has to do with solidarity, indeed, with responsibility for fellow human beings, as Coetzee stresses. In the corpus studied here, instances where Arab writers on torture discuss the ethics of their act are limited to care to protect the identity of witnesses or complicit guards; to be fair and accurate, and to faithfulness to the memory of fellow survivors. It seems that in the conflict between the ethical pitfalls of representation on the one hand, and the ethical responsibility to bear witness and denounce torture, on the other, they opted for the latter.³¹ Torture narratives are unique expressions of a practice which while it affects only some members of society remains relevant to society as a whole, to its past and its future. They help construct a consciousness of the manner in which human beings perpetrate, condone and devise anti-human acts. They also demonstrate human resistance to such acts and determination to preserve human dignity. In this, they play a crucial part in developing consciousness of a humanism which denounces individual abuse while standing for wider social justice.³²

Writings about torture and abuse under authoritarian rule serve, additionally, a pedagogical aim. They draw lessons from the past and alert to the risks of not learning from history, which is a side of post-trauma literature usually treated under the aim of “memory against forgetting” or “in order not to repeat the past”. Holocaust studies had pioneered this type of pedagogy and turned it into a global pursuit, if not an industry. Societies which are now emerging from dictatorship are beginning to learn from this experience and paying special attention to the torture literature in their societies. While specialised associations and the media take part in making these experiences and literature better known among their target audiences, I think society as a whole is concerned by them. And to reach society and particularly young people, school curricular are the appropriate places to start. School and university reform in Tunisia, for example, should include, as has been done in the case of several other societies which emerged from authoritarian rule, the teaching of memoirs, testimonies and protest poetry in schools. Should the process of

our complicity” (30). He adds: “Very well then, if you are not a victim when the government which you’ve voted for, when the army in which your younger brothers are serving without hesitation or remorse have undertaken race murder, you are without a shadow of a doubt, executioners” (25). (Frantz FANON, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington, New York, Grove Press, 1963),

31 - See, for example, Cherni, 12, for a discussion of the “ethical dilemma” related to the question of identity.

32 - The lesson from Coetzee is this: “Those who passively allow torture and oppression to take place are just as much Barbarians as much as the torturers” (Zanten, 285).

documentation, and archiving - a process pioneered by the Temimi Foundation and now an important part of the brief of the independent Commission of Truth and Dignity (IVD) formed in 2013 and given important powers and wide brief to deal with the past and shape national memory - succeed, then this literature should find the value and function it deserves, not only locally but globally.³³ For, if accounts of torture allow us to think about what is human, beyond our own cultural and personal confines, it is incumbent upon us to devise methods of approaching torture, and writing on torture, which reflect, and reflect upon, this humanity; that is, a new humanist knowledge which contributes to commitment that torture and oppression should always be denounced and should not happen again.

33 - Fondation Temimi dedicated dozens of seminars and several conferences to the subject. Abdeljalil Temimi has edited, notably, *Etudes et témoignages sur la torture et répression au Maghreb (1956-2010)*, Tunis, FTERSI, 2013, 450 pp; *Eclairages sur la Gauche tunisienne et arabe: Parcours individuels*, Tunis, FTERSI, 2011, 341 pp; *Le Terrorisme d'État contre les militaires dans le dossier de Barraket Es-Sahel (1991-1992)*, Tunis, FTERSI, 2013, in addition to *Observatoire de la révolution tunisienne* in three volumes, (2011-2015), Tunis, FTERSI, 1500 pp.