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**Theoretical and Textual Approaches to
Contemporary Humanitarian Narrative**

The Cases of Roberto Saviano's *Gomorra*, Aung San
Suu Kyi's *Letters from Burma*, Jerry Piasecki's *Marie in
the Shadow of the Lion* and Nadine Gordimer's *The
Ultimate Safari*

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this thesis is to describe how some forms of fictional and non-fictional texts can be configured as and within the framework of humanitarian practices. In exploring the definitions and features of humanitarianism and humanitarian literature, the thesis attempts to answer the question of what purpose these texts try to serve. In examining the works *Marie in the Shadow of the Lion* (2000) by Jerry Piasecki, *The Ultimate Safari* (1989) by Nadine Gordimer, *Gomorra* (2006) by Roberto Saviano and *Letters from Burma* (1996) by Aung San Suu Kyi, we will argue that the scope of these books can be located by analogy to social and political humanitarian practices. Beyond their differences in genre, style and subject matter, these texts share a common feature: they are performative, namely they strive to do things with words. The humanitarian texts discussed in this thesis can be shown to act in the world in order to implement the values proclaimed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

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INTRODUCTION

0.0 Introduction

La parola come concretezza, materia aggregata di atomi per intervenire nei meccanismi delle cose, come malta per costruire, come punta di piccone.

Roberto Saviano

To observe businessmen who come to Burma with the intention of enriching themselves is somewhat like watching passers-by in an orchard roughly stripping off blossoms for their fragile beauty, blind to the ugliness of despoiled branches, oblivious of the fact that by their action they are imperilling future fruitfulness and committing an injustice against the rightful owners of the trees. Among these despoilers are big Japanese companies.

Aung San Suu Kyi

There is a reason why this book was written. So far, no generation has been able to stop these terrible things from happening. We hope that maybe, just maybe, yours will be the first.

Jerry Piasecki

We decided that we too should wish to give something of our ability, as imaginative writers, to contribute in our way to the fight against this disease from which no country, or individual, is safely isolated.

Nadine Gordimer

This thesis is about humanitarianism, human rights and literature. Its objective is to demonstrate that there exists a specific use of the literary word which strives to improve the condition of human beings (hence a *humanitarian literature*) by denouncing violations of Human Rights (HRs). I am aware that such kind of literature, in various forms, has already come to the fore in several cultures, well before the appearance of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (henceforth, UDHRs).

According to poet and literary critic Maria Takolander there exist three novels that can be classified as great examples of literary activism in the cultural context of the West, that is: Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1851-2), which mobilized an anti-slavery sentiment; Charles Dickens' *Oliver Twist* (1873-8),¹ which prevented a full implementation of the workhouse system outlined in the New Poor Laws; and Alice Walker's *Possessing the Secret of Joy* (1992), which raised consciousness about, and finally led to actions to prevent female genital mutilation (Takolander, 2009). Indeed, as pointed out by the Nobel laureate Mario Vargas Llosa, literature has an intrinsic political goal and can be considered as:

una acusación terrible contra la existencia bajo cualquier régimen o ideología: un testimonio llameante de sus insuficiencias, de su ineptitud para colmarnos. Y, por lo tanto, un corrosivo permanente de todos los poderes, que quisieran tener a los hombres satisfechos y conformes. Las mentiras de la literatura, si germinan en libertad, nos prueban que eso nunca fue cierto. Y ellas son una conspiración permanente para que tampoco lo sea en el futuro (Vargas Llosa, 2007 [2002]: 36).

Such literature has been defined in various manners— e.g. “social reform literature”, “literature of purpose”, “engaged literature”, “literary activism”. In this thesis, I argue that the UDHRs, proclaimed in 1948 by the United Nations, can provide the theoretical framework for further characterizing a branch of such an “engaged literature” as “humanitarian” or “human-rights literature.”² According to my proposition, humanitarian literature consists of narrative texts which aim at improving people's lives, by *promoting* and *protecting* HRs, as well as *preventing* and

¹ As Karl Marx said, Dickens and the other novelists of Victorian England ‘issued to the world more political and social truths than have been uttered by all the professional politicians, publicists and moralists put together’. Karl Marx, ‘The English Middle Classes’, *New York Tribune*, August 1st, 1854, Marxists Internet Archive. www.marxists.org. Retrieved: June 10th, 2007.

² I will however use the term “humanitarian literature” instead of “human-rights literature”. This choice is just a matter of preference, since, as I shall point out in Chapter 1, I do not see any substantial difference between humanitarianism and a respect for human rights, the former being the implementation of the latter. I am aware that my argument linking HRs to humanitarianism is questionable. I will discuss contrary arguments in Chapter 1.

denouncing their violations. These verbs deliberately echo the preamble of the UDHRs:

Now, Therefore THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY proclaims THIS UNIVERSAL DECLARATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS as a common standard of achievement for all peoples and all nations, to the end that every individual and every organ of society, keeping this Declaration constantly in mind, shall strive by teaching and education to *promote respect* for these rights and freedoms and by progressive measures, national and international, *to secure* their universal and effective *recognition* and *observance*, both among the peoples of Member States themselves and among the peoples of territories under their jurisdiction. (United Nations, 1948, my own emphasis).

By relying on such “performative” verbs, humanitarian narrative can be defined as a sort of humanitarian practice,³ where the word “practice” means ‘translating an idea into action’,⁴ and the “idea” to be translated is to be found in the UDHRs.

In my definition, I have implicitly assumed that humanitarianism – which can be defined as ‘the doctrine that people’s duty is to promote human welfare’⁵ – basically consists in actions aimed at implementing fundamental HRs. However, there are scholars, practitioners and thinkers, such as Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek, who criticize the idea of HRs and humanitarianism, for several reasons.⁶ My position is that, notwithstanding some limitations and controversial applications of HRs, there cannot be welfare in people’s lives without the guarantee of fundamental rights, such as *dignity*, *liberty*, and *equality*, which are proclaimed in the UDHRs.

³ In its current usage, a humanitarian practice can mean different things: for example, the actions aimed at protecting human life carried out by such organizations as the *International Red Cross*, *Red Crescent Movement* or *Emergency*, but also quite opposite practices, such as the military operations of the UN, which are still ambiguously defined as “humanitarian”. There is much debate on whether the means by which the implementation of HRs is achieved should be peaceful or include also military operations. Humanitarian narrative can be compared to those humanitarian practices based on nonviolent means of implementation of HRs.

⁴ WordNet online, <http://wordnetweb.princeton.edu/perl/webwn>. Retrieved: March, 2011.

⁵ WordNet online, <http://wordnetweb.princeton.edu/perl/webwn>. Retrieved: August, 2011.

⁶ I will discuss them in Chapter 1.

Arguing that some kinds of narrative texts can be assimilated to the phenomenology of humanitarian practice will bring me to explore the power of “doing things with words”. As a matter of fact, in this thesis I maintain that in order to be truly humanitarian (namely, a humanitarian practice) it is not sufficient for a story to talk about HRs, but the text must be “performative” in the sense described by John L. Austin, namely it must bring about some effects in the real world (in our case, improve HRs) rather than describing something (Austin, 2005 [1962]). Therefore, I argue that the “performative power” of humanitarian literature, namely its ability to do things with words, relies on two special features: the first one is proper to all forms of “engaged literature” and consists in the fact that the narrative text can be seen as acting on the reader, and, through him/her, producing effects in the real world (in linguistics such capability is called the “perlocutionary force”). The second characteristic is, on the contrary, peculiar to humanitarian narrative and derives from the binding effects – moral as well as legal – caused by the existence of the UDHRs. In other words, many statements which would be otherwise devoid of any practical “force” can take on the status of *denunciations* and *testimony* thanks to the existence of the UDHRs (in linguistics such sentences are defined as having “illocutionary force”). In other words, the UDHRs provides the context for considering “felicitous” such statements.

However, as I shall point out, one of the main problems to face when arguing that there exist humanitarian texts capable of bringing about effects in the world is to find out those effects, and how to prove that such effects are the direct consequences of the author’s intention in the text. A first, self-evident point is that the effects of literature are not immediate, but they need time to develop in a tangible way and therefore it is quite difficult to distinguish the willpower of the author from other possible factors.

In order to demonstrate the existence of narrative texts that can be configured as and within the framework of humanitarian practices, I will draw on a

limited, but, in my opinion, highly representative sample: four books, including two fictional stories – the novel *Marie in the Shadow of the Lion* (2000) by Jerry Piasecki, and the short story *The Ultimate Safari* by Nadine Gordimer (1989) – and two non-fictional ones – *Gomorra* by Roberto Saviano (2006) and *Letters from Burma* by Aung San Suu Kyi (1996) – will be taken as case studies. It does not fall within the scope

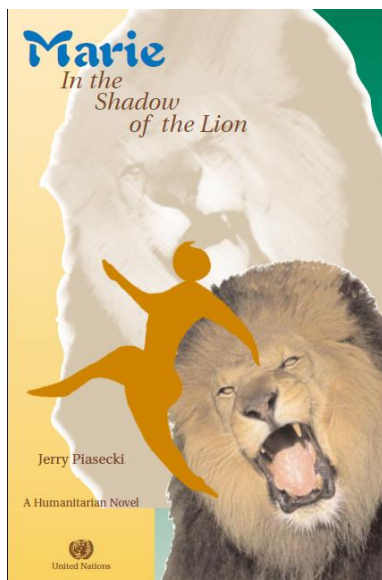


Figure 1 Front cover of *Marie in the Shadow of the Lion* (2000) by Jerry Piasecki

of this thesis to make a list of all the books that could go under the rubric of *humanitarian narrative*. However, just to mention a few, candidates might be Gino Strada's *Pappagalli verdi* (2000), Reinaldo Arenas's *Antes que anochezca* (1992), Ken Saro-Wewa's *Sozaboy* (1985), Varlan Shalamov's *Kolyma Tales* (1966), Ingrid Betancourt's *La Rage au Coeur* (1998), Anna Politkovskaja's *A Small Corner of Hell: Dispatches from Chechnya* (2003), Tiziano Terzani's *Lettere contro la guerra* (2001), Primo Levi's *Se questo è un uomo* (1958). Usually, most books – including those listed above and the ones

that I will discuss here, and many others that for reasons of space and time I cannot mention – are classified according to the conventional (sub)genre they exemplify by virtue of their content and form: fiction and non-fiction, poetry, novels and drama. By highlighting other specific features, they can also be filed as letters, documents, memories, autobiographical novels, just to mention a few categories.⁷ As anticipated, in this thesis I will instead propose to collect together

⁷ We should note that the authors of these and similar texts share some common elements, such as: 1) they are not always professional writers (apart from some journalists and writers, most of them are humanitarians); 2) they fight for a worldwide recognition of the UDHRs; 3) they have either an average or high cultural background and 4) they want to activate a *practice of union and presence*. It goes without saying that the traditional concept of “writer” acquires a different meaning in relation to those who deal with humanitarian issues. Hence, the category *humanitarian writers* can be (loosely) defined as embracing those who both practically sustain the implementation of HRs through their everyday actions and believe that writing is a powerful way to represent their experience in relation to various degrees of social injustice. The common humanitarian agency is transformed – but not undervalued – into a writing which acts towards the success of humanitarian operations.

the analysed texts (and others similar to them) under the label of *humanitarian narrative* or *humanitarian literature* because – although in a different form, style and subject matter or “genre” – they are characterised by the same extradiegetic and engaged *purpose*: they purposefully strive to improve people’s life by denouncing violations of HRs. In other words, as already explained, their *function*⁸ recalls accepted humanitarian practices.

Such a function is becoming increasingly evident and popular in cultural products, which is, in my opinion, another valid reason for resorting to the expression “humanitarian literature”, instead of a more generic “engaged literature”. Indeed, thanks to the UDHRs there is a much wider acknowledgment among authors regarding the “performative power” of literature in relation to the improvement of HRs. The awareness that literature can act upon the reader and, through him/her, produce effects in the world to the benefit of human rights is clearly highlighted in Jerry Piasecki’s text *Marie in the Shadow of the Lion* (2000), which the author himself has defined as “a humanitarian novel”. As far as I know, this is among the first contemporary cases of a literary story purposefully conceived to have an influence on the reader and, through him/her, trigger events in the world for the cause of HRs. The words of Piasecki quoted in the epigraph which

⁸ I refer to the term ‘function’ in a more generalised way than in its common use in narratology, especially within Vladimir Propp’s seminal work (*Morphology of the Folktale*, 1928) and in the theories later developed by Greimas and the Parisian school of semiotics (for further readings, see Paolo Fabbri and Gianfranco Marrone, eds., *Semiotica in Nuce. Volume I. I fondamenti e l’epistemologia strutturale*, Roma, Meltemi, 2000). In my analysis *function* refers to the whole text acting in some way on the readers’ conscience as a result of specific authorial intentions. In other words, the *humanitarian narrative function* is measured throughout the re-action of the readers and not alongside the development of the narrative plot. The plot is not a central focus, but the diving board for a different function of the written word: the bridging of the distance between those who suffer and those who can do something to stop that sufferance. The humanitarian function of narrative texts is mainly meant to *make a difference*: authors do not want to arouse the readers’ pity, nor do they desire to stress dichotomies between ‘victims’ and ‘monsters’. Authors give voice to the silence of sufferance to trigger the reader into doing something: a variety of actions are described without needing “super heroes” to change something of *our* society. Finally, I would like to add that the humanitarian narrative function is a touchstone relating to the social dimension of texts, going back to the roots of storytelling.

opens this section clearly show the author's conviction that literature can aspire to such an ambitious and noble goal.

It is worth pointing out that my understanding of literature refers essentially to the use of written words to tell stories, without rigorous and formalistic distinctions among genres, forms, or styles. I agree with Umberto Eco here, who underlines that literature partakes of that atavistic need to tell and listen to stories (i.e. it responds to a "fabulatory function"), which 'is fundamental in the human being as much as the sexual instinct, with the exception that literature can take several forms, even that of a movie or TV series' (Eco, 2011, my translation). Therefore, in this thesis I will focus on different works of literature, including stories and novels. As a matter of fact, narration or narrative, Eco goes on, brings together the novels by Richardson and Defoe and the fairy-tale of Little Red Riding Hood, the mythological ordeals of Oedipus and Medea and the epic poems like the Odyssey, the stories told by Ovid and the Roman and Greek "novels" by Apuleius and Lucian, the chivalry romances of the Middle Ages and the novellas by Boccaccio, and so forth (*Ibid.*).

In the specific case of humanitarian literature, the need to tell and listen to stories dealing with HRs (which usually runs parallel to aesthetic, entertainment and/or educational purposes, in both authors and readers) has been conjoined with the need to do something for other human beings. In the last decades, at least in Western cultures, such a need has probably become increasingly more urgent and widespread in both writers and readers as a consequence of our living in a globalised world, where violations of Human Rights are consumed and experienced on a daily basis by masses of people. As pointed out by Dr. Peter Walker, who has been the Director of the Feinstein International Center at Tufts University (US) since 2002:

Since the civil war in the Nigerian province of Biafra in 1967, images of suffering from around the globe enter the living rooms of just about every family in the west. It is true

that there has been a “revolution of concern”. People see the suffering and they respond. The figures for public giving to aid agencies bear this out – up from US\$800 million in 1970 to US\$4.6 billion in 1997. But this increasing breadth of coverage and concern has not been accompanied by any depth of analysis, any real understanding of why there is such suffering in many parts of the world (Walker, 2004).

In the passage above, Walker, like many other scholars and practitioners in the field of Human Rights, points out one of the major drawbacks regarding humanitarian practices based on the act of “telling stories”. Whether based on words or images, stories of HRs violations are subject to what French sociologist Luc Boltanski calls the “spectacle of suffering” (Boltanski, 1999). Boltanski, critically analysed the philosophical and practical contradictions of humanitarianism, specifically through the lens of our visual culture. He labelled the phrase “spectacle of suffering” to address the increasing abuse of the suffering of the others that can be seen as reinforcing a two-century tradition of “Politics of Pity”,⁹ instead of considering the relevance of a “Politics of Justice”, meant to bring an end to suffering. The “spectacle of sufferance” although it may be good for fund-raising campaigns, does not look at the origins but only at the consequences of the disease (i.e. HRs violations). As we shall see later, humanitarian narrative texts distinguish themselves from the spectacles of suffering because, to use again the words of Walker, they are accompanied by a ‘depth of analysis [and] real understanding of why there is such suffering in many parts of the world’ (Walker, 2004).

Through the short excerpts quoted in the epigraphs opening this chapter, it is possible to get a glimpse of what I mean by humanitarian narrative. I have already mentioned Piasecki’s humanitarian novel, which both in its content (the tragic story of a teenager, Marie, and her family during one of the many African civil wars) and in its form – a sort of educational novel, containing a section with

⁹ The term is borrowed from Hannah Arendt’s *On Revolution* (1990 [1961]) where she envisaged the “Politics of Pity” as instrumental to the making up of a dichotomous code (those who suffer and those who do not) without worrying about eliminating the causes of that sufferance.

suggestions on what to do for improving the life of the many “Maries” that one can come across in the world – strives to accomplish a humanitarian mission.

Italian Camorra’s analyst Roberto Saviano writes in his book *Gomorra* about the notorious criminal association thriving on many business activities, legal and illegal, and especially widespread in the South of Italy. *Gomorra* can be read as a strong denunciation of the Camorra system, told in the form of a novel, but based on actual facts, approached by readers as a literary product, but possessing the juridical and moral value of a testimony or confession. Saviano’s words on Don Peppino Diana, here quoted in the epigraph section, can be considered as a sort of “manifesto” for a renewed belief in the “performative” function of the literary word. In *Gomorra* the word is meant to unveil the hidden mechanisms of Camorra and make them visible to a mass audience. In this way, Saviano is seeking to touch on the moral dimension of each reader, urging people to restore their dignity and freedom. As remarked by Carla Benedetti:

Dunque la prima cosa che io ricavo dal caso *Gomorra* è che i libri non sono cose inerti. I libri agiscono. Non solo “raccontano la realtà” ma la modificano. *Gomorra* ha modificato la nostra percezione della criminalità organizzata, dell’economia, persino delle *griffes* della moda e dei loro simboli (Benedetti, 2008: 177).

In her *Letters from Burma*, Burmese activist Aung San Suu Kyi (henceforth ASSK) reports on the many violations of HRs occurring in her country. In the passage quoted in the epigraph, ASSK is comparing businessmen coming to Burma to make investments to passers-by stripping off blossoms from an orchard. By this very literary simile, ASSK is criticizing the choice of foreign companies to establish manufacturing factories in Burma. As a matter of fact, according to her, such business enterprises do nothing but implement the profits of the ruling class, which in its turn is responsible for human rights violations. Suu Kyi’s critique becomes accusation/denunciation when she directs it towards a very specific target, namely Japanese companies. It is worth noticing that, before being collected in the *Letters*

from Burma, ASSK's comments appeared in the form of a signed letter on a very popular Japanese newspaper, the *Mainichi Daily News*. It is also important to consider that at that time Japan was the main provider of financial support to the military junta ruling the country. Considering all these circumstances, including the popularity of Aung San Suu Kyi in Japan and in the world (she has been a winner of the Nobel Prize for Peace), her words become as brave, strong and dangerous as an action aimed at destabilizing the regime's relations with Japan and the whole world. Indeed, as we shall see in more detail in Chapter 3, what happened also as a consequence of this letter was a world-wide boycott of companies with branches in Burma.

Finally, *The Ultimate Safari* is a short-story by South African writer Nadine Gordimer. The text was originally included in *Jump and Other Stories* (1992 [1991]) and in 2004 became part of a collection of short-stories by famous writers (among whom, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Salman Rushdie, Susan Sontag, just to name a few), titled *Telling Stories* and edited by Gordimer as a way of "doing something" against HIV. As a matter of fact, all profits from the sold copies of the collection were devolved to an association engaged in helping people suffering from HIV. This is of course another possible way in which literature can do something for the benefit of human beings. As Gordimer said, the strategy was to use the talent of writers in order to 'contribute [...] to the fight against this disease [HIV] from which no country, no individual, is safely isolated' (Gordimer, 2004: X). However, it will be a mistake to consider Gordimer's humanitarian effort only at the level of fund raising. As with the authors we have been mentioning, the events told in her short-story throw light on the political responsibilities of the governments of Mozambique and South Africa (her native country) for the deaths of many refugees trying to cross the border of Mozambique during the 1970s and 1980s and escape from civil war and its massacre. It is a story told in the first person by a young girl and part of her family trying to run away from brutality and death. In order to find

a safe place, they have to cross the Kruger Park – a real safari park, an attraction for many Western tourists every year – where the presence of wild animals makes the migration task even more dangerous. As regards the effects of this single story on the collective concern with HRs, we will see that Gordimer’s aim is twofold: on the one hand, she is trying to make us think about what is going on in that part of the world; on the other hand, she is trying to focus our attention on the economic and political interests of the apartheid government, which was indirectly supporting one group of the rebels to deflate Marxist influences in Mozambique. By setting the story in a real and very popular location (also at the international level), namely Kruger Park, Gordimer is willy-nilly leaving a mark on that place: the memory of the tragic stories of an endless number of refugees trying to cross the border.



Figure 2 Kruger Park and its website page, accessed by thousands of Western tourists every year.

0.1 Thesis Organization

This thesis is organized as follows: Chapter 1, *Improving People's Lives: Humanitarianism, Human Rights and Humanitarian Practices*, shall focus on humanitarianism, its origins, scope and achievements. Basically, the purpose of this chapter is twofold: on the one hand, it aims at explaining why and how I decided to link humanitarianism and HRs and, on the other, it tries to elucidate why I consider humanitarian *narrative* as a form of humanitarian *practice*. In order to accomplish this task, I will delve into the working of humanitarian practices through defining and describing what they are.

Chapter 2, *An Investigation of Humanitarian Narrative*, will be devoted to analyzing the four mentioned narrative texts, of which I will attempt to highlight new and traditional characteristics. My objective here is to argue that, notwithstanding peculiarities and differences, these texts strive towards exercising the same “humanitarian function” – namely implementing Human Rights – and therefore they can be grouped together under the rubric of “humanitarian narrative”.

Chapter 3, *The Political and Social Impact of Humanitarian Narrative Practice*, will deal with humanitarian narrative as a set of political and social practices. The general objective of this chapter is to illustrate how written words can really be used to improve people's life. Drawing on the texts by Saviano, Piasecki, Suu Kyi, and Gordimer, I will report on and discuss the political and social consequences related to the authors' narrative activities. In this chapter, the primary sources will be articles, documents and even “facts” somehow tied up with the publication of the text.

In addition, the thesis contains the following sections, set apart from its main corpus:

1. An Appendix containing a short biography of the authors and a synopsis of the texts.
2. An Appendix including an interview with Jerry Piasecki.
3. An Appendix containing the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

0.2 Methodology

Two main methodological approaches can be identified in the present dissertation. The books will be first investigated according to their literary and narratological dimension. This is the literary approach, which will characterize Chapter 2. Although belonging to different classes of texts (fiction and non-fiction) and genres (the novel, letters, the short story, and documents), all these books share a common feature: they tell stories. A recent branch in narratology, or the theory of narratives, will be drawn on to analyse the texts selected here. I shall then adopt a second methodological approach concerning with the inevitable micro-political¹⁰ and social dimensions. This approach will be explained in Chapter 3. The notion of “practice”, which will be explained in Chapter 1, is discussed and newly defined in connection with “humanitarian literature”. For what concerns the section entitled ‘Doing with Words’, I will draw on linguistics. The conclusions provide an overview related to the interactions between humanitarian narrative and socio-cultural processes and consider how “humanitarian values” may circulate across cultures and be the premise for an emphatic attitude towards others.

0.2.1 Primary Sources

As already mentioned, the texts taken into consideration in this study are as follows: the novel *Marie in the Shadow of the Lion* (2000) by Jerry Piasecki, the short-story *The Ultimate Safari* by Nadine Gordimer (1989), *Gomorra* by Roberto Saviano

¹⁰ I used the term “micro” on purpose. It echoes Michel Foucault’s notion of micro-powers as explained in his seminal work *Microphysique du pouvoir* (Foucault, 1977). There, he analyses *power* not in terms of “repression” – that is the overt exercise of violence – but of “production” – that is through an invisible molecular penetration of the whole social body. The latter meaning is fundamental to analyse both the modern and democratic political state (functioning through cooperation) and totalitarian systems (based on coercion). More specifically, considering repressive power exclusively on a juridical level implies ignoring the very power basis that somehow validates it: its transformation into discourses (and thus into disciplines) is fundamental for its survival (Foucault, 2001 [1976]).

(2006) and *Letters from Burma* by Aung San Suu Kyi (1996). A short description of the texts, synopsis, as well as a short biography of the authors is provided in Appendix 1.

The analysis of the stories takes its fundamental cue from the UDHRs, ratified in 1948 by the General Assembly of the United Nations. In the textual investigation carried out in Chapter 2, I will pin down many references to the specific articles of the UDHRs in the texts by Saviano, Piaseki, Gordimer and Suu Kyi.

0.2.2 *Secondary Sources*

For a more general overview on humanitarian narrative, I have finally drawn on three main critical studies. One is by cultural historian Thomas Laqueur – a representative of the few scholars who have investigated the field of “humanitarian narrative” – who, in his essay ‘Bodies, Details and the Humanitarian Narrative’ (Laqueur, 1987), attempted to define its main features. According to him, this new “aesthetic enterprise”, as he defines humanitarian literature, is characterized by 1) ‘reliance on details as the sign of truth’ (*Ibid.*: 177). Examples are: the realistic novel, the autopsy, the clinical report, the social inquiry; 2) Reliance on the ‘personal body, not only as the locus of pain but also as the common bond between those who suffer and those who would help and as the object of the scientific discourse through which the causal links between an evil, a victim, and a benefactor are forged’ (*Ibid.*); 3) Human agency, since here ‘humanitarian narrative exposes the lineaments of causality and of human agency: ameliorative action is represented as possible, effective, and therefore *morally imperative*’ (*Ibid.*: 177-178, my own italics). On this latter point, Laqueur underlines how humanitarian narrative distinguishes itself from the literary genre of tragedy in as much as it describes sufferance while offering a model for a precise social action or remedy. On the contrary, in tragedy sufferance is seen as universal and beyond remedy, apart from catharsis (*Ibid.*).

However, Laqueur's work is mainly based on the analysis of a wide range of nineteenth-century English writings, while I was also looking for a definition based on contemporary humanitarian narrative, in the wake of the Human Rights' Declaration.

The second important secondary source for this thesis is the book *Inventing Human Rights: A History* (2007) by cultural historian Lynn Hunt. In her study, Hunt argues that:

reading accounts of torture or epistolary novels had physical effects that translated into brain changes and came back out as new concepts about the organization of social and political life. New kinds of reading (and viewing and listening) created new individual experiences (empathy), which in turn made possible new social and political concepts (human rights) (Hunt, 2007: 33-34).

In the section entitled 'Torrents of Emotions – Reading Novels and Imagining Equality', Hunt analyses the role played by eighteenth-century novels within the Human Rights field. Hunt is interested in the mechanisms brought about by these kinds of novels on readers, especially from the viewpoint of empathy. According to her,

Novels made the point that all people are fundamentally similar because of their inner feelings, and many novels showcased in particular the desire for autonomy. In this way reading novels created a sense of equality and empathy through passionate involvement in the narrative. Can it be coincidental that the three greatest novels of psychological identification of the eighteenth century – Richardson's *Pamela* (1740) and *Clarissa* (1747–48), and Rousseau's *Julie* (1761) – were all published in the period that immediately preceded the appearance of the concept of 'the rights of man'? (*Ibid.*: 38-39).

However, in her work she is not concerned with novels dealing with HRs violations, which is the typology of narrative that I mainly intend to address.

In addition, I will show that humanitarian narrative was moved not only by an urge to elicit empathetic effects between readers and suffering people, but also by a "call to action". French sociologist Luc Boltanski points out that there is a 'crucial moment of commitment', which he defines as the 'moment of

transformation from the state of being a receiver of information, that is to say, of being a spectator, observer or listener, into that of being an actor' (Boltanski, 1999: 31). How does that transformation take place? In my opinion, the moment of commitment is reached once empathetic relations have been established and the awareness of the possibility to change things (Laqueur's 'ameliorative action' represented as possible) has been raised in the reader's mind. In this thesis, my purpose will be to demonstrate that such a transformation has been achieved.

Another important study, which however I have used only partially, is *Human Rights, inc.* (2007) by American literary critic Joseph Slaughter who sets out to define the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in literary terms, underlying the presence of a "narrative plot" and of an ideal social relation between the individual and the state. He explains that:

The generic elements of this narrative consist of two primary actors (the human person and the state), a probable conflict between them, a means of remediation in the human personality, and a temporal trajectory that employs a transition narrative of the human being's socio-political incorporation into the regime of rights and citizenship. [...] This is the story that the Universal Declaration plots as the free and full development of human personality, an idealist plot to repair the division of 'civil man' from its juridical abstraction [...]. The UDHR sets the mark of narrative closure [...] to accustom the human being to regard this personalizing plot as the natural pattern of human personality development (Slaughter, 2007: 90).

He proceeds to characterize the international HRs plot as 'novelistic' because the rise of the novel was implicated in the rise of the two primary "subjects" within HRs (the individual and the state) and their interrelations in what he calls the 'Westphalian unities of nation-time and nation-space'. Also important were the transformative effects produced by the HRs narrative on the urge of personal rebellion towards the individual's collective incorporation (*Ibid.*: 92).

0.3 My Own Personal Reasons

Finally, I shall spend a few words on the motives that drove me to write a thesis on humanitarian literature: among the many reasons, three can be considered as actually underlying this work. The first one belongs to my student life: in 1992, my class had the opportunity to participate in a meeting with judge Antonino Caponnetto, during which he spoke about the extremely dangerous and honourable work of his killed colleagues, Giovanni Falcone and Paolo Borsellino, with the double intent of “not forgetting” and educating the young to (UDHRs) values and principles that refuse any kind of connection to the Mafia.

Secondly, in 2002, when I was a freelance reporter for a local newspaper, I had the chance to interview Paola Pellegrinetti, an Italian nurse who had managed to create a hospital in Rwanda. Paola’s mission was to treat child malnutrition, a serious problem in Africa, especially in Rwanda, where about 50% of 1 to 5 year-old children are affected by chronic malnutrition. Paola’s hospital, called *NutriPa* (coupling ‘Nutrition’ and ‘Paola’) is now a reality in Rwanda. It was thanks to that meeting and, in particular, from listening to Paola’s stories that I started to think about humanitarianism and humanitarians like her. I remember many details of what she told me, such as her first trip to Rwanda during the civil war (1990s), her struggle to get money to maintain the hospital, the difficulty in convincing people to trust her, her first failure to save a child’s life. However, what struck me most was the story of how she became a humanitarian, in other words, what brought her to abandon her “normal” life. Everything happened one evening, while she was watching the news on TV: again, it was because of a story. A journalist was reporting about a driver who had had a heart attack but managed to stop his car before dying. With him there was his 4 year-old daughter, who had to walk along the highway several kilometres before someone stopped and offered her help.

Paola was impressed by this event and disgusted by people's indifference towards others' sufferance, even more so because such indifference was taking place in a Western, "civilized" country. From that day, she decided to devote her life to helping others. Now Paola's life is divided between Rwanda, working in her hospital, and Italy, where she is still a nurse at Versilia's First Aid, in Lido di Camaiore (LU). Such an intense life receives strength by Paola's hope that, one day, one of the children she saved from death will become the president of Rwanda: 'Then' – she maintains – 'things will change even there'.

Finally, I share with many scholars the conviction that – drawing on Simone Weil's remarks about Hitler's paradoxical success in history and on the writers' responsibility for this misinterpretation of dictator(ship)s – there is an impellent need for an "other" use of the written word (intended to give voice to those who are usually silenced, like victims and heroes).¹¹ The examples of Caponnetto and Paola represent case-histories in which people try to diffuse – by means of stories as well as actions– a sense of altruistic behaviour. They are not only courting our mind with high values, but also appealing to our power of doing something towards change. It seems to me that, in many cases, literature stops at the first level: that of courting our senses, of stimulating our imagination. Humanitarian literature, because of its content (the sufferance of others), cannot stop at the first level, otherwise it would be voyeurism (a sort of "pornography of human rights violation").

It was, thus, with the feeling of "doing/acting to make a difference" that I started to look at humanitarianism. Very soon, during my investigation, I realized how wide the variety was of humanitarian practices that surrounded me and how

¹¹ Exemplary in this sense is the Introduction that British scholar Sybil Oldfield has added to her *Dictionary*, where she maintains that '[a]lmost all dictionaries of 20th-century biography give space to King Leopold XI, Mussolini, Stalin, Beria, Franco, Hitler, Goebbels, Himmler and Emperor Hirohito – to name but a few. But their opponents who tried to prevent or reduce or palliate their cruelty – the dogooding pests – are largely absent from the record' (Oldfield, 2001).

difficult it was to single out the ‘genuine’ humanitarian attitude from those triggered by *realpolitik*. In addition to well-known humanitarian “interventions”, such as the actions carried out by non-governative organizations (NGOs) like *Médecins Sans Frontières*, the *International Red Cross* or *Emergency*, I found out that, outside the battlefields or other critical situations, there also existed ‘other’ forms of humanitarian actions, especially in the art world. Let us think of such art reportages as A. Quadri’s *Paradise in Pain*, or sculptures, and paintings like A1ONE Street Art. We might also turn our attention to the cinema (Y. Guney, S. Akar, G. Clooney, E. Keret and S. Gefen, S. Spielberg, V. Paronnaid and M. Satrapi, A. Garcia, M. Makhmalbaf, E. Morris); contemporary theatre (Dario Fo and Franca Rame, E. Jelinek, A. Gassman, G. Guardigli, P. Brook); even the “world of fashion” (e.g. K. Arulpragasam’s ‘Terrorism Affects Tourism’), TV shows, the net (blogs, e-magazines such as Abbas’s *MisrDigital*, Peter’s Gabriel’s ‘The Hub’); music (‘Pavarotti and Friends’, M. Makeba, M.i.a, B. Geldoff, U2, etc.) and, of course, literature. I was literally overwhelmed with instances of humanitarian practices and, at the same time, surprised by the essential lack of an updated theorization that purported to explain, for example, what humanitarian practice is and how it functions, what the main characteristics of a humanitarian action might be, and, moreover, if humanitarian principles are valuable within other fields, such as child education or even business.¹²

Because of my humanistic background (a University degree in English literature), I decided to focus my attention on what was more akin to my expertise, namely books. I started thinking about “humanitarian writing” or narrative peace-writing (A. Roy, N. Gordimer, A. Yehoshua, A. Djébar, P. Matvejevic, I. Allende, E. Jelinek, A. Politkovaskeya, T. Terzani, V. Shiva). My lens for investigating and selecting humanitarian story-telling was first oriented by the principle of

¹² As regards the role of business in supporting humanitarian principles, see the text analysis of Aung San Suu Kyi’s *Letters* (Chapter 2).

“denouncing human rights’ violations”. Among the plethora of books that I found, I drew a first distinction between *fictional* and *factual* stories, as we shall see in Chapter 2. If humanitarian practice lacked a reference theory, humanitarian narrative was in no better condition, since very few critics have so far paid attention to the constitutive traits of such a narrative form.

**CHAPTER 1 –
Improving People’s
Lives:
Humanitarianism,
Human Rights and
Humanitarian Practices**

1.0 Humanitarianism

As an ethos, humanitarianism has a strong narrative and representational dimension that can generate humanitarian constituencies for particular causes. The emotional nature of compassion is closely linked to visual and literary images of suffering.

Richard A. Wilson and Richard Brown

The purpose of this chapter is to provide an overview on *humanitarianism*, *human rights* and *humanitarian practice*. As the subject is extremely vast, I am obliged to focus only on those topics which are more consistent with the objectives of this thesis. Besides considering basic notions – such as definitions, origins, and values – I will fully describe what a *humanitarian practice* is, its various levels of meaning and applicability and its complex relationships with and among *humanitarianism* and *Human Rights*.

1.0.1 Putative Origins

Humanitarianism is generally described as being rooted in the very origins of humanity, with a particular connection with religious principles. All the great monotheistic religions – Islam, Judaism and Christianity – which call for an empathetic attitude towards those who suffer, appear to conceptualize the very core of humanitarianism as “succouring the needy”. Even contemporary NGOs have been foregrounded by monastic chivalry orders – a phenomenon peculiar to the Western European Christendom of the Middle Ages – since they were initially created to help pilgrims on their way towards sacred places while professing an independence from temporal and spiritual powers (Kern, 2004). Nevertheless, it would be naive to reduce humanitarianism to a tangential legacy of religious traditions.

Among the theorists of humanitarianism and its origins who can help us understand its complex meaning and evolution, HRs scholar Micheline R. Ishay in her seminal work *The Human Rights Reader* (2007) has clearly addressed the question of the relationship between humanitarianism and religions, stating that such a direct association would be misleading, since it partly obscures the *universality* of the humanitarian attitude. More specifically, she recognizes the relevance of the debates on the different nature of religious commandments and HRs (the former being similar to absolute imperatives while the latter to legal and illegal behaviour) and finally asserts that some fundamental elements of humanitarianism are undoubtedly rooted in both religious and secular traditions, which are also at the basis of modern ethics:

The concept of proportionate punishment and justice was first professed by the Hammurabi Code of ancient Babylon. The Hebrew Bible celebrates the sanctity of life and reciprocal entitlements. The Hindu and Buddhist religions offered the earliest defence of the ecosystem. Confucianism promoted widespread education. The ancient Greeks and Romans endorsed natural laws and the capacity of every individual to reason. Christianity and Islam encouraged human solidarity, just as both considered the problem of moral conduct in wartime (Ishay, 2007: XXIII).

Nevertheless, this theory of the legacy of a universal human(itarian) beacon comes to a stalemate when the notion of an “individual’s equality” is actually recognized as being one of the most important cornerstones of Western Enlightenment: before that age ‘no ancient religious or secular belief system regarded all individuals as equal’ (Ishay, 2007: *Ibid.*). As a matter of fact, classical (and modern) history records instances of a patriarchal society which marginalized those who variously represented alterity: servants, women and homosexuals. Thus, there is a paradox embedded in all great civilizations: “[w]hile emphasizing a universal moral embrace, [they] have [...] tended to rationalize [...] the “inferior” (*Ibid.*).¹³

¹³ ‘From Hammurabi’s Code to the New Testament to the Quran, one can identify a common disdain toward indentured servants (or slaves), women, and homosexuals – as all were excluded from

Christianity, for example, argues for a patriarchal structure which is even reflected in its liturgy or Saint Paul's assertions on the need for women to wear a veil and on their natural inferiority to men.¹⁴ All this does not mirror a modern conception of humanitarianism which is based on the equality of all human beings. Similarly, Islam predicates the submission of woman to man¹⁵ and urges its followers to fight for Islam and thus reach a higher status with Allah.¹⁶ If Judaism grants a better status to women, it definitely limits their participation in synagogues.¹⁷ The very monastic chivalry orders, mentioned above, were soon

equal social benefits. (M. Ishay *The History of Human Rights*, University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 2004, p. 7).

¹⁴ In Corinthians 11, 1-16, we read: '1 Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ. 2 Now I commend you because you remember me in everything and maintain the traditions even as I delivered them to you. 3 But I want you to understand that the head of every man is Christ, the head of a wife is her husband, and the head of Christ is God. 4 Every man who prays or prophesies with his head covered dishonors his head, 5 but every wife who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head, since it is the same as if her head were shaven. 6 For if a wife will not cover her head, then she should cut her hair short. But since it is disgraceful for a wife to cut off her hair or shave her head, let her cover her head. 7 For a man ought not to cover his head, since he is the image and glory of God, but woman is the glory of man. 8 For man was not made from woman, but woman from man. 9 Neither was man created for woman, but woman for man. 10 That is why a wife ought to have a symbol of authority on her head, because of the angels. 11 Nevertheless, in the Lord woman is not independent of man nor man of woman; 12 for as woman was made from man, so man is now born of woman. And all things are from God. 13 Judge for yourselves: is it proper for a wife to pray to God with her head uncovered? 14 Does not nature itself teach you that if a man wears long hair it is a disgrace for him, 15 but if a woman has long hair, it is her glory? For her hair is given to her for a covering. 16 If anyone is inclined to be contentious, we have no such practice, nor do the churches of God' (*The Bible*, available online: <http://www.biblestudytools.com>. Retrieved: July, 2011).

¹⁵ The Koran says: '11 Allah (thus) directs you as regards your children's (inheritance): to the male, a portion equal to that of two females [...] 34 Men are the protectors and maintainers of women, because Allah has given the one more (strength) than the other, and because they support them from their means. Therefore the righteous women are devoutly obedient, and guard in (the husband's) absence what Allah would have them guard. As to those women on whose part ye fear disloyalty and ill-conduct, admonish them (first), (next), refuse to share their beds (and last) beat them (lightly); but if they return to obedience, seek not against them means (of annoyance): for Allah is Most High, Great (above you all)' (*Sura 4: vv 11 and 34*. Available online: <http://www.guidedways.com>. Retrieved: July, 2011).

¹⁶ 'Those of the believers who sit still, other than those who have a (disabling) hurt, are not on an equality with those who strive in the way of Allah with their wealth and lives. Allah hath conferred on those who strive with their wealth and lives a rank above the sedentary. Unto each Allah hath promised good, but He hath bestowed on those who strive a great reward above the sedentary; Degrees of rank from Him, and forgiveness and mercy. Allah is ever Forgiving, Merciful' (*Sura 4:95-96, Ibid.*).

¹⁷ As regards sexual equality, this is recognised at a metaphorical and highest level: God is neither female nor male. According to traditional Judaism, women were even considered as being more "intelligent" than men since the Hebrew term "*Binah*" shares the same root as "to build", as Adam's wife was made from his flesh (Genesis 2: 22) and not formed from the dust like him (Genesis 2: 7) (Available online: <http://www.biblestudytools.com/cjb/genesis/1-27.html>. Retrieved: July, 2011). Yet, although

transformed into military orders during the notorious Crusades (XI-XIII centuries), bearers of terrible violence. Even Asian religions and traditions – which contributed to a HRs’ philosophy by their notion of cosmological love and virtuous ruling¹⁸ – finally supported caste sub-divisions and the idea of a natural inferiority of women to men. Exemplary is Indian mentor Kautilya’s *Arthashastra* (4th century B.C.), where he recognized the relevance of war for a nation’s self-interest, the inferiority of women and the legitimacy of social-caste organizations and slavery.¹⁹

It is with the cultural revolution of the Eighteenth-century and the rise of the so-called *Western Power* that secular and religious constructions of human beings’ identity were increasingly regarded as unfair and inappropriate, paving the way for the rise, and the later conceptualization, of HRs. Indeed, humanitarianism has been important for social reforms and welfare programs in Europe and in the New World. Exemplary are the English Factory Acts of the Nineteenth-century, which aimed at ameliorating working conditions and prohibiting child labour (i.e. the Factory Act of 1833 and the one of 1844). The world-wide humanitarian impulse towards the creation of new societies is also witnessed by the words of John Beck,

women were also recognised to be spiritually devoted as men, they were not encouraged to pursue higher education for the fear that they would neglect their important roles of wives and mothers (available online: <http://www.jewfaq.org/women.htm>. Retrieved: July, 2011) and they were discouraged to divorce from their husbands (Ishay, 2007: 85).

¹⁸ Ishay argues, for example, that the works of Confucius (551-479 B.C.), and Kautilya (350-275 B.C.) – aiming at educating rulers to non-violence and respect for the others – positively influenced East Asia for long (including one of the greatest Indian emperors: Asoka – 304-232 B.C. – who converted to Buddhism and adopted its peace code). Indeed, according to the author, ‘there are certain moral codes shared by all Buddhists, such as strict renunciation of killing, stealing, lying, ingesting intoxicants and partaking in harmful sex’ (Ishay, 2007: 23) along with the notion of Buddha’s paradisiacal realm as a possible second birth for those who performed ‘good deeds, [...] commitment not to injure living beings, to slander, to steal, or to ravish other men’s wives, and so forth’ (*Ibid.*), which claim for an Asian contribution to the formulation of HRs. I would add that their principles of cosmological love and respect for the others (a human treatment of slaves and generosity towards all) pre-coded humanitarianism.

¹⁹ Nevertheless, Kautilya calls for some prescriptions against slave abuse (as the prohibition of enslaving children and the necessity of freeing female pregnant slaves), while he thinks of women as sensual and efficient weapons to use in war time. Even the Buddhist religion, which refuses caste regulations – rigidly supported and coded by the Laws of Manu (3rd century B.C.), along with the understanding of women as inept – establishes a misogynist view (see Diana Y. Paul, *Women in Buddhism Images of the Feminine in the Mahayana Tradition*, University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1985 (1979). *Arthashastra* by Kautilya is available online at <http://www.hinduwebsite.com/history/kautilya.asp>. Retrieved: July, 2011.

an eminent representative of the Department of Education of New Zealand, who, in commenting on the results of his child-welfare system, recognized a personal ‘mounting ambition ...[to] be the one chosen to undertake this *humanitarian reform*’ (in Dalley, 1998: 68, *my own italics*). Slavery was eventually abolished in the British colonies with an act signed by then Prime Minister Earl Grey (1833). As a consequence, other countries made it illegal (France, Holland, Portugal). In 1860, the first professional nursing school was founded at St Thomas Hospital (London) by British nurse Florence Nightingale (1820-1910), after her heart-rending experience of alleviating the sufferance of wounded soldiers during the Crimean War (1853-1856). Some years later, humanitarianism would have, as we will see later, a first international status with the foundation of the *International Red Cross* by Henry Dunant, while, recently, its redefinition in relation to the Human Rights’ agenda has finally transformed it into a relevant ramification of ethical foreign policies (Chandler, 2001).

Finally, the concept of *humanitarianism* can be even dated back to the first known set of written laws ascribed to Sumerian leader called Urukagina (c. 2350 B.C.). During his reign, he introduced moral and social reforms aiming at protecting the weak, the poor, widows, and orphans. It is significantly in the code of Urukagina that we note for the first time a written reference to the concept of *liberty* (*amagi* or *amargi* → “return to the mother”), whose original meaning implied a return to the social order decreed by the gods. Especially when compared to the main Mesoamerican culture – the Olmeca, also called “mother culture” for its influence on pre-Colombian civilizations (2500 B.C. – 200 A.D.), which emphasised the sense of power and of a social-pyramid structure – Urukagina’s code is undoubtedly a relevant text for further developments of humanitarian culture. Almost two thousand years later, ancient China philosopher and founder of Mohism, Mozi (late 5th century – beginning 4th century B.C.) promoted the idea of a “universal love” or “impartial caring”, which could be loosely defined as the

unconditional “caring” for the other, who is, on this principle, considered as compellingly worthy of receiving material benefit and protection from physical harm. Needless to say, according to Mozi, a society encouraging such a “collective love” refuses any form of violence, including a state war.

According to historian Thomas L. Haskell, humanitarian sensibility can be assumed to originate in England, Western Europe and North America by the end of the XVIII century, a period when many social reforms started to take place in schools, madhouses, prisons and a different attitude towards the young, the insane, the criminals, and the poor began to develop. As Haskell has it, among the most “spectacular” reform movements was the one that aimed at abolishing slavery.²⁰ Yet, this new humanitarian sensibility should not be seen as the result of a sudden moral advancement or burst of altruism, but, on the contrary, as the counter-effect of a particular economic and social phenomenon, namely capitalism. If historians seem to come together by aligning the rise of a humanitarian sensibility with capitalism, they nevertheless disagree on the arguments used to explain this connection (Bender & Ashworth, 1992). According to Haskell, capitalism brought about a change in what he terms the “cognitive style”: namely, ‘a change in the perception of causal connection and consequently a shift in the conventions of moral responsibility’ (Haskell, 1985: 342). This scholar’s argument can be related to Lacqueur’s conception of “humanitarian narrative”, which, as already seen, he characterises as exposing ‘the lineaments of causality and of human agency’ (Laqueur, 1989: 178) so as to represent ameliorative action as: ‘possible, effective, and therefore morally imperative’ (*Ibidem*).

From this short overview on the origins of humanitarianism, it seems possible to highlight a few aspects characterising it: the desire to help people, which is often linked to religious as well as secular traditions and which capitalizes on

²⁰ See also the following comment: ‘Although its morality was often questioned before 1750, slavery was routinely defended and hardly ever condemned out-right, even by the most scrupulous moralists’ (Ashworth, 1987: 813).

human beings' innate capability to feel for the others, and the aspiration towards universality, which is often compromised by cultural practices marginalising people on the ground of gender, race, social class.

1.0.2 *Definitions and Meaning*

What is Humanitarianism? The concepts regarding humanitarian(ism), as it is commonly intended, were originally established by J. Henry Dunant in his seminal work entitled *Un Souvenir de Solférino* (2009 [1862]),²¹ where he described the terrible sufferance of wounded soldiers after the battle of Solferino and San Martino (Italy, Lake of Garda, June 24th, 1859). In his text one can find the seeds of the seven principles that still today are seen – although not unanimously – as characterizing the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and in some ways structuring humanitarian interventions: *humanity, unity, universality, impartiality, independence, neutrality* and *volunteering*. As regards the *humanitarians* to come, he speaks of the necessity for a body of volunteers, since, within the range of his experience, nurses who are paid for their job often become rough and lazy, while for this mission love and untiredness are needed. Thus, he calls for ‘volunteer nurses’ to be politically recognized by all countries so that their mission might be facilitated. Incidentally, Dunant uses writing to trigger people’s conscience and significantly wishes writers to join him in dealing with this subject, because nobody can be sure to be safe of war risks.

Canadian anthropologist Pierre Minn, who has called for an “anthropology” of humanitarianism, characterizes it as a term that has no single accepted definition because its complexity has been undervalued by those who wrote on the subject. Going through the various definitions of humanitarianism, he has nevertheless run across two constants consisting in ‘a reference to “humans” or “humanity”, and a

²¹ J. Henry Dunant, *Un Souvenir de Solférino*, Ed. italiana a cura di Costantino Cipolla e Paolo Vanni, Milano: FrancoAngeli Editore, 2009.

relational element' (Minn, 2007). In the face of such semantic vagueness, Costas Douzinas, Professor of Law at London University, studied the origins and cultural meanings of *humanitarianism* and *humanity* in his important essay entitled "The Many Faces of Humanitarianism", believing that '[t]he definition of the human will determine the substance and scope of rights' (Douzinas, 2007). The idea of "humanity" should indeed be implicitly included in the notion of humanitarianism, generally associated to a sentiment of active goodwill towards mankind. Famous *International Committee of the Red Cross* (ICRC) Vice President Jean Pictet asserts that *humanitarian* relates to a happy feeling of openness or positive attitude towards other human beings (1979). This definition also elicits the notion of "relation", linking it to this "assistance feeling", a sense of empathy that inevitably involves psychical (and physical) contact among people. Similarly, although mainly focusing on "humanity", English lexical database *WordNet* defines the word *humanitarianism* as 'the doctrine that people's duty is to promote human welfare' (WordNet, 2010) referring to a broad range of practices within the *making real* (realization and activation) of human welfare itself. If one uses the term in this way, humanitarianism should mainly be regarded either as a *vocation* towards helping people in need or as an *impulse* to aid and provide relief to victims of man-made or "natural" disasters.²²

In this thesis, I am defining humanitarianism in relation to actions and agents, namely *humanitarians*, taking a cue from the work of the General Director of

²² Undoubtedly, "natural" is one of the most complex words in Western language and nowadays culture (c.f. the huge production of studies on this subject in all disciplines of *savoir*, whose main reference scholar was Michel Foucault). "Natural" is also being considered controversial if associated to "Nature": indeed, catastrophic events of the last decades, like floods, have been unquestionably provoked by a human lack of responsibility and respect for the ecosystem. As a practice aimed at helping victims of natural or man-made disasters, humanitarianism has also its detractors. According to American journalist David Rieff, who chronicled some humanitarian failures of the Nineties, humanitarianism has lost its ideals to become part of larger political and military interventions. It has masked, for example, the actual unwillingness of both UN and USA to stop violence in Bosnia and Rwanda's genocides. Inevitably, it proved to be an ineffective response to political problems. Hence, Rieff argues that humanitarianism has to recognise its limited power to find again its original integrity and operate within a specific area (Rieff, 2002: 367).

MSF (Holland) Austen Davis, who states that ‘Humanitarianism is an action-oriented philosophy’ (Davis, 2002), with a specific ‘humanitarian space’ and *modi operandi*.²³ Noticeably, in 1979 Pictet had already characterized the “new” humanitarianism as laying a particular emphasis on preventing suffering:

Humanitarianism is a doctrine which aims at the happiness of the human species, or, if one prefers, it is the attitude of humanity towards mankind, on a basis of universality. Modern humanitarianism is an advanced and rational form of charity and justice. It is not only directed to fighting against the suffering of a given moment and of helping particular individuals, for it also has more positive aims, designed to attain the greatest possible measure of happiness for the greatest number of people. In addition, humanitarianism does not only act to cure but also to prevent suffering, to fight against evils, even over a long term of time. The Red Cross is a living example of this approach (Pictet, 1979).

Through these important mechanisms, that is, by being engaged in the socio-political net where it intervenes, *recent humanitarianism* marks a definite change of meaning from its former model, which often consisted in curing war victims. Moreover, this *humanitarian-action shift* highlights the importance of creating bonds between “giver” and “receiver”, going further than an active-passive dichotomy towards a human(itarian) interaction. By means of an *empathetic ability*, different relationships are thus activated within an international *zona franca* with a global reach and a flourishing *narrative* rapidly growing in importance and entailing forms of cultural initiatives. This is why I think we are allowed to speak of *contemporary humanitarians*.

²³ Daniel Thürer, Professor and Head of the Institute for Public International Law and Comparative Constitutional Law at the University of Zurich, in his essay ‘Dunant’s Pyramid: Thoughts on the “Humanitarian Space”’, uses the metaphor of a pyramid to describe a humanitarian action. Humanity stands at the top while international humanitarian laws are the basis, and the sides are constituted by the principles of impartiality, neutrality and independence (see Thürer 2007).

1.1 The Universal Declaration of Human Rights

In the previous section we have seen how humanitarianism can be defined as the attempt to ameliorate human beings' life, even though the claimed universality is sometimes hampered by religious as well as social customs. In this thesis, I argue that the UDHRs provides a useful tool for granting such universality and providing a concrete way for making sense of otherwise vague terms, such as the "amelioration" or "improvement" of human beings' conditions.

The UDHRs is a declaration adopted by the United Nations General Assembly on December 10th, 1948, in Paris. It derives from the globally shared desire to stop and avoid atrocities such as those committed during the Second World War. The UDHRs is based on 30 articles that potentially create a global target structure for ameliorating life by both promoting the individual's "fundamental-universal" rights and indicating an agenda of possible operations. The thirty articles can be assimilated and related to four major 'pillars', as famously asserted by the document's second drafter René Cassin, French jurist, Peace Laureate and former President of the European Court of Human Rights.

Cassin devised a way to "teach" the UDHRs to people worldwide. He compared the architecture of the Declaration to that of a temple with four pillars supporting a roof and the courtyard steps (Cassin, 1968: 4-6). The first pillar consists of rights 1-11, which he called personal or civil rights. They include dignity, equality, non-discrimination, life, security, prohibition of slavery and torture, recognition and equality before the law, protection by the law, the right to a remedy, the prohibition of arbitrary arrest, detention and exile, the right to a fair and public hearing, the right to a fair trial and to be presumed innocent. The second pillar is made of articles 12 to 17, which Cassin defined social rights. These rights are about privacy, freedom of movement and residence, asylum from

persecution, nationality, marriage, family and property. The third pillar stands for political rights and it includes articles 18 to 21, which are about the freedom of thought, conscience and religion, opinion and expression, peaceful assembly, and participation in government and free and fair elections. Finally, the last pillar, which includes articles 22 to 27, focuses on economic rights, that is: social security, realization of economic, social and cultural rights, the right to work and freely choose one's employment, the right to rest and leisure, the right to an adequate standard of living, to education and participation in the cultural life of the community, including sharing scientific advancement and its benefits.

These four pillars support the roof of the temple, which consists of the last three rights, articles 28-30. Article 28 states that everyone is entitled to social and international order, which are the necessary conditions under which rights can be fully realized. We know that this right was developed by Dr. Edward Malik of Lebanon, a Christian delegate from an Arab state. Article 29 focuses on the duties towards the community, and was supported by Ghandi, who passed away soon after the adoption of the Declaration (Ghandi died on January 30th, 1948). The last article of the Declaration, Article 30, was added in order to prevent anyone from using and interpreting the document so as to destroy any of the rights and freedoms set forth in it (it claims that 'Nothing in this Declaration may be interpreted as implying for any State, group or person any right to engage in any activity or to perform any act aimed at the destruction of any of the rights and freedoms set forth herein').

Although criticized for its alleged proximity to Christian values (and for not opening a dialogue with – for example – Islamic culture), the UDHRs undoubtedly represents an important text for international relationships. It is therefore no coincidence that it is the most published text in the world and that it proved to be influential for both international law and effective diplomatic relationships with those nations that were not acquainted with its contents. Moreover, it is the

structural basis for such International Treatises as those against torture and the discrimination of women, and for the rights of the child – among others.

Within the widespread debate on “universalism”²⁴ there is however an increasing number of eminent scholars expressing doubts on HRs real efficacy in paving the way for a new democratically super-structured world. One of them is the already mentioned philosopher Slavoj Žižek who, in his *Against Human Rights* (2006), explains his thesis about the mystifying content of most appeals to HRs.²⁵

²⁴ The alleged “universality” of human rights and its function as a ‘welfare measure’ seem to be liable to criticism. For instance, Iranian representative to the United Nations – Said Rajaie-Khorassani – claims that the UDHRs originates from ‘a secular understanding of the Judeo-Christian tradition’, and as such, is in conflict with the Islamic law. David G. Littman, (January, 19th 2003), *Human Rights and Human Wrongs*, (available online: <http://www.nationalreview.com/comment/comment-littman011903.asp>. Retrieved: March, 2010). It is no coincidence, thus, that the Arabian States decided to write and sign a *Universal Islamic Declaration of Human Rights* (September 19th, 1981). This decision indirectly recognises the relevance of Human Rights, although stressing some Western relativism. Yet, it is also important to emphasise that the drafting of the UDHRs included a questionnaire, commissioned to a famous French political scholar and expert of religion and culture (Jacques Maritain) by the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in 1947. Maritain said he had formulated his questionnaire asking himself: ‘[h]ow can we imagine an agreement of minds between [...] men who come from the four corners of the globe and who not only belong to different cultures and civilizations, but are of antagonistic spiritual associations and schools of thought?’. He had no doubts: since the aim of UNESCO is a practical one, it would eventually be possible to make a spontaneous agreement among them based on practical ideas that should form ‘a single body of beliefs’ to finally create a ‘guidance in action’ (in Ishay, 2007: 2). Maritain’s convictions about a possible universality of rights and on the fundamental role of liberty for the world community are also sustained in his *La Persona e il Bene Comune* (original title *La Persona et le Bien Commun*, 1947), where he famously asserted that ‘[s]e un giorno potrà fondarsi una società politica mondiale, ciò sarà dovuto ai mezzi della libertà. E’ coi mezzi della libertà che i popoli della terra saranno portati a una comune volontà di vivere assieme’ (‘if one day it will be possible to found a world-wide political society, that will be the result of the tools of liberty. It is through the tools of liberty that the peoples in the world shall nourish a common wish to live together’, Maritain, 1947, my own translation). It is not surprising, then, that the UNESCO questionnaire was sent to relevant world-wide leaders and thinkers in order to challenge any future charge of relativism. The seventy and different responses received created the platform of universal liberties with a view to making the Declaration of Human Rights a shared guidance in action for the whole world. Among some of the most significant filled questionnaires received were those of Mahatma Gandhi and Muslim poet Hamayun Kabir (India), Benedetto Croce (Italy), philosopher Chung-Shul Lo (China) and historian E.H. Carr (Great Britain).

²⁵ Although he denies the existence of any presuppositions for an effective and efficient translation of Western HRs appeals (also tied with humanitarianism), he allows for an authentic potentiality whenever HRs are grasped and employed for a defence of the dispossessed. Other HRs opponents to mention are: Pierre Chassard (*Remarques sur le droits de l’homme*, Bruxelles, Mengal, 2002), Alain de Benoist (*Au delà des droits de l’homme*, online version: www.alaindebenoist.com, 2004,), and Eric Delcroix (*Le Théâtre de Satan. Décadence du droit, Partialité des juges*, online version: www.scribd.com, 2002). They generally criticise HRs’ pretence of universality, which, in their view, hides a specific cultural background.

As regards the ways to promote human rights, the UDHRs generally indicates “teaching”, “educating” and “securing”,²⁶ without planning *HRs practices* in detail. It is this lack of specificity that, I think, left room for infringements, violations and misuses of the document during its 60 years of existence.²⁷ American historian Samuel Moyn goes even further when asserting that the UDHRs had no tangible effects until the Seventies, due to the collapse of other ideologies and its consequent emergence in terms of “the last Utopia”.

A fundamental aspect of HRs remains the notion of *indivisibility*, aiming at preventing any deviant and personal resort to them: for example, the right to security must not be used to abolish another’s right to dignity, or the right to development must not go to the detriment of someone else’s liberty. Philosopher Zigmun Bauman sustains that today there is a decline of the notion of *community* (as sharing and communicating) due to the rise of agglomerations fostering a diffused sense of insecurity and a “de-responsabilization” of one’s actions. He maintains that those who claim for “community” rights in the name of human beings’ equality activate an integration process, while those who exclusively promote cultural (and void) distinctions end by fuelling deflagration (Bauman, 2001: 75). Accordingly, the UDHRs – with its universal essence – might activate a process of collective community socialization since it finally aims at leading to a reciprocal and responsible understanding of *humanitas*.

We should remember that the declaration sprang as a response to the Second World War, whose atrocities, as famously asserted by philosopher Hannah Arendt, were socio-culturally triggered by the replacing of the primacy of common

²⁶ From the preamble of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (United Nations, 1948).

²⁷ Needless to say, there exist institutions and organisations devoted to the monitoring of human rights’ abuses. Among the most important are *Amnesty International*, *Human Rights Watch*, *World Organisation Against Torture*, *Freedom House*, *International Freedom of Expression Exchange* and *Anti-Slavery International*. At the European level, there are: the *Council of Europe*, founded in 1949, and set in Strasburg (France), which is responsible for the European Conventions on Human Rights; still in Strasburg there is the *European Court of Human Rights*, the only international court allowed to deal with cases brought to the attention by individuals (rather than states).

welfare with egoistic and partisan interests (Arendt, 2001 [1963]). Those who drafted the UDHRs could not but think of particularisms in terms of potential dictatorships, although in the preamble they recognised human specificities within the category of *humanitas*. Indeed, they indicated in ‘the *inherent* dignity’²⁸ and in ‘the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family [...] the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world’ (United Nations, 1948, see Appendix 3).

Finally, I would add that the ethical stand of the UDHRs rests in its giving all people their own voice while at the same time respecting different opinions and constructing a dialectical space to hopefully establish new human principles and relationships. In the end, the very critical arguments throw light on another side of a large edifice: the UDHRs is not a rigid structure, but a malleable building aimed at preventing historical atrocities in the future. It leaves to posterity the impelling necessity for textual amelioration, as was the case with the original IRCR.

²⁸ My own italics.

1.2 Humanitarian Practice and Human Rights

Usually, humanitarian practices are considered as the very core of humanitarianism along with its “doing-against-sufferance” feeling, whose expressions are strictly connected with specific socio-historical factors.²⁹ Indeed, the rise of humanitarianism and its multifarious practices – along with the emergence of the modern conceptions of Human Rights – dates back to a specific historical period that, according to Ishay, can be clearly identified with the Enlightenment and its controversial legacy linked to the global rise of ‘Western Power’. Nowadays there are even guidelines for those who wish to become “humanitarians”, as testified by Dunant’s ethical portrayal of a volunteer nurse (see par. 1.0.2). Many manuals (called “best” or “standard practices”) are being adopted by important agencies like *MSF* and *Oxfam* and have been rationalized in the *Sphere project*.³⁰

Although codified by a wide range of declarations, principles and rules, humanitarian practices involve both an incorporation of and a dialogic relationship with HRs. Indeed, Human Rights provide a theoretical pattern for humanitarian practices and await the realization of such practices as their final aim.

²⁹ A kind of understanding of humanitarian practices can be found in the words of Johan Schaar, a Swedish government humanitarian aid-official: ‘I like to think, and talk about, our work as the practical enactment of some very high and important principles, or ethics, as they are codified in IHL [International Humanitarian Law], or in the kind of customary law that regulates human social interaction. These ethics have no meaning other than when they are translated into action, which makes our task a very special one.’ (J. Schaar, quoted in Walker, 2004).

³⁰ ‘Launched in 1997 by a group of humanitarian NGOs and the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement (IRCRC), *The Sphere Project* is an initiative to define and uphold the standards by which the global community responds to the plight of people affected by disasters, principally through a set of guidelines that are set out in the *Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards in Disaster Response* (commonly referred to as the *Sphere Handbook*). *Sphere* is based on two core beliefs: first, that those affected by disaster or conflict have a right to life with dignity and therefore a right to protection and assistance, and second, that all possible steps should be taken to alleviate human suffering arising out of disaster and conflict. *Sphere* is three things; a handbook, a broad process of collaboration, and an expression of commitment to quality and accountability.’ (Available online: <http://www.sphereproject.org/>. Retrieved: July, 2011).

Notwithstanding possible controversies over humanitarian practices and their whole applicability in the light of HRs' tenets,³¹ there is a feeling that the ethics and praxis of humanitarianism will exist until there is the need to defend HRs' dignity. In their turn, humanitarian experiences can add to the sensibility towards Human Rights in an extraordinary way.³² In 1948, when the General Assembly proclaimed the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, there was the wish and hope that the document might give voice to an inter-national ideal to be supported through education. Therefore, when seen from the perspective of a new terrain for humanitarian relationships, humanitarianism seems to claim for a socio-political experience, echoing the Greek *agora* where *citizens* were all actors in the public space. By recognizing a universal principle of *human dignity* – that is, the postulate that being human means having indisputable rights – humanitarianism (its practices but also its “culture”) has a social impact since it erases ideological dividing-walls and it gives voice to those who were considered without any social status and rights (those situated “outside” were assumed not to be “proper” citizens). In so doing, it marks a fundamental shift in the meaning of *individual*, *social organization* and *community*, and this kind of re-coding of concepts endowed with a long tradition is particularly evident in the writers' works that I selected for this study.

It is possible to distinguish two main ‘traditions’ of humanitarian practices, corresponding to as many specific historical events. The former is connected to the

³¹ Applying Foucault's concepts of power related to knowledge (bio-power), it is possible to see *if* and *how* a humanitarian practice normalises a specific typology of subjectivity. That is, a humanitarian practice, “signifying” in relation to socio-cultural norms, may define and construct its subject, the one who receives help. Just to have an idea: a simple donation of money reinforces the givers' power on the territory where it is addressed. On the other hand, aiming at developing local skills reinforces the power of the receivers. French scholar Pierre Bourdieu, however, negates the possibility for any practice to be free of a political involvement: he asserts that practices tend, regardless of the actor's intentions, to reinforce the claims of the powerful (P. Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, Cambridge, CUP, 2002 [1972]).

³² Gino Strada's experiment is in this case exemplary: he purposely put two wounded enemies one next to the other in order to make them understand that war was their real enemy and that they could manage to live together respecting each other's diversity (Gino Strada, *Pappagalli verdi: cronache di un chirurgo di guerra*, prefazione di Moni Ovadia, Milano, Feltrinelli, 1999).

Cold War (1947-1991), a term which was introduced by George Orwell,³³ and generally to the World Wars: humanitarian practices were then intended to alleviate suffering, responding to either a sudden natural or man-made disaster. This approach is strongly exemplified by the interventions of International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement (IRCRC), which generally intended to protect human life and health without any distinction of race, nationality, sex, religious belief or political opinions. In other words, this typology of humanitarian practices, focusing on the suffering body and its fundamental right to live, makes no distinction between friends and enemies: *neutrality* is a constituent pillar for IRCRC and it is no coincidence that Red Cross organizations gained respect and access to all battlefields. John Tirman, the American director of the Program on Global Security and Cooperation (Washington D.C), significantly identifies in the concept of *neutrality* an indispensable tool for keeping humanitarian practices far from the circuit of business industry since – without neutral image and action – they may ‘appear to be tools of the powerful’ and become ‘vulnerable to attack’ (Tirman, 2003). In this view, humanitarian practice may become ‘a vast enterprise of relief and development (political and economic) in places the international community’s most powerful members deem important’ (*Ibidem*). Although there is a long tradition acknowledging the importance of neutrality, some have also pointed out that this tenet can have negative implications, at least as far as recent contexts are concerned.

The second strand of humanitarian practices, which also gave rise to modern or recent humanitarianism, is the result of the watershed event of the Fall of Berlin Wall (November, 9th, 1989) and the end of the Cold War. Humanitarian operations can be shown to promote, respect and sustain HRs with a view to formulating new ideas for different societies. The practices corresponding to this strain are politically addressed and can be loosely distinguished between those that used force to stop

³³ G. Orwell, ‘You and the Atomic Bomb’, published in the British newspaper *Tribune*, October 19th, 1945.

human rights' violations – exemplified by some notorious military interventions (Kosovo and Rwanda, for example) – and those that refused any forms of violence, keeping in mind the religious imperative of non-violence, the *Absolute Love* of Hinduism, the Gospels and Koran (let us think of Gandhi in the first decades of the XX century).

Is there any contradiction in saying that humanitarians work for HRs? Is it possible to make an equivalence between humanitarian practice and HRs activities? In the very opening pages of *Mobonk Criteria for Humanitarian Assistance* (1993) – one of the responses to a documented concern for widening and deepening *humanitarianism*, as we shall discuss later – Jon M. Ebersole, Director of the Programme on Humanitarian Assistance, underlines the fundamental interrelation between humanitarianism and HRs:

the premise that a mandate for providing humanitarian assistance to those in need emerges from notions of fundamental human rights. Specifically: Everyone has the right to receive and request humanitarian aid necessary to sustain life and dignity [...]. Humanitarian agencies have the right to offer and deliver that humanitarian aid where needed, consistent with universal principles embodied in international humanitarian and human rights law (Ebersole, 1995).

Nevertheless, according to many scholars, there is an incommensurable difference between *humanitarianism* and HRs: the former implies helping without taking political sides, while the latter is allegedly based on political issues. That is, the relation between humanitarianism and HRs is connected with the terms of the old *querelle* regarding classical and recent humanitarianism. As a matter of fact, classical humanitarianism is apolitical and cannot be subsumed into political activities, while 'human rights, development, democracy promotion, and peace building are political because they propose to treat causes and not symptoms and thus are implicated in a politics of transformation' (Barnett & Weiss, 2008: 5).

Nevertheless, we should also consider that the recent turning-shift has finally recognised a political involvement within humanitarianism itself and a tie with HRs

organizations and movements, as explained by Jack Donnelly, Professor at the University of Denver:

The human rights movement emerged in the 1970s, especially from former socialists in Eastern and Western Europe, with major contributions also from the United States and Latin America. The movement quickly jelled as social activism and political rhetoric in many nations put it high on the world agenda (Donnelly, 2003).

David Chandler, another eminent International Relations Professor of the University of Westminster, further specifies that ‘The transformation of humanitarianism from the margins to the center of the international policy agenda has been achieved through the redefinition of humanitarian policy and practice and its integration within the fat-growing agenda of human rights’ (Chandler, 2001).

This process appears to have reached forms of perfect confluence within the XX century (Leebaw, 2007; Moyn, 2010). According to Chandler, the “new HRs humanitarianism” originated by the need of Non-Governmental Organisations to justify their greater involvement with solidarity and long-term assistance,³⁴ widely ratified in the *International Red Cross and NGO Code of Conduct* (1994), *Providence Principles* (1993), the *Mobonk Criteria* (1993), *Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards in Disaster Response*. These organizations loosely summarised their focus on peace-keeping and the intent to overcome the causes of sufferance (called

³⁴ Chandler specifies that the advent of a HRs solidarity was preannounced by two strands: firstly, there was a diffused concern with going beyond a first aid assistance to victims, in order to protect people whose HRs were clearly in danger; secondly, there was an increasing interest among NGOs for long-term assistance – a fact which dates back to the Biafra emergency (1968) and to the subsequent creation of *Médecines sans Frontières* (MSF, 1971) by French doctor Bernard Kouchner, who refused and denounced the ICRC principle of “neutrality” as getting mixed up with deleterious “silence” (Chandler, 2001). It is thus no coincidence that MSF has since symbolised the “new humanitarian” cause. Moreover, Chandler underlines that ‘[t]here are two “solidarity” principles, which were developed out of the Biafra experience and have since become central to the new rights-based humanitarianism. Firstly, the “freedom of criticism” or “denunciation” [...]. Secondly, the “subsidiarity of sovereignty” or the “right of intervention”, the “sans frontières” of the MSF movement’ (*Ibid.*). Finally, it is important to note that in *The Code of Conduct for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and NGOs in Disaster Relief*, published in 1995, one can find the newly coined term *Non-Governmental Humanitarian Agencies* (NGHA), which encompasses both ICRC and NGOs responses to disasters. The notion of “neutrality” does not appear, while widely accepted is the one of “impartiality” (Available online: <http://www.ifrc.org/Docs/idrl/I259EN.pdf>. Retrieved: July, 2011).

“capacity-building”), while acting for the empowerment and development of those who receive help (Chandler, 2001). Once the ‘new humanitarian’ NGOs focused on solidarity or long-term development,

it became necessary to make strategic choices regarding which aims to prioritise and which groups to work with. The desire to politicise involvement in aid provision without sacrificing their neutral and ‘non-political’ status, led NGOs to seek to justify their strategic choices through the language of morals and ethics rather than politics. It was this conflict between evolving policy practice and the traditional humanitarian basis for involvement that laid the basis for the human rights discourse of today. The humanitarian NGOs were the first international organisations who sought to use the terminology of human rights in an attempt to justify political policy choices in the language of ethics (Chandler, 2001).

Others, like American HRs scholar, Bronwyn Leebaw, claim that although both HRs activism and humanitarianism are responses to sufferance and violence, they have to maintain a critical distance to avoid reciprocal short-circuiting (Leebaw, 2007).

As already explained, within this complex horizon of debates, I am inclined to see contemporary humanitarianism as rooted on a HRs basis, a conjunction corroborated by the events of the late XX century. Moreover, Ishay’s efforts to define contemporary trends in the HRs approach – going beyond what she calls the “Spartacists and Caesarist” schism – move her towards an understanding of HRs drawn from considerations on the impact of globalization, humanitarianism and nation-building (Ishay, 2006: 439).

1.3 Humanitarianism and the Law

One interesting cultural phenomenon related to *contemporary humanitarianism* is the use of its language in other domains often combined with media forms. The recent rise of a sort of humanitarian reconfiguration of Western cultures (due to numerous debates, practices, interventions³⁵, successes and failures – all tied to an increasing *humanitarian sensibility*) has led to the development of a diversified vocabulary. First of all, the term “humanitarian” has been combined with “law” thanks to their common terrain rooted in (H)Rs. Indeed, *Humanitarian law* has substituted the traditional phrases *law of war* or *law of armed conflict*, bringing about a radical change in their original meaning. Polish Professor and member of the Institute of International Law Theodore Meron points out that humanitarian concerns and strategies played an unquestionably important role in ‘triggering the negotiation of treaties prohibiting the use of certain weapons, as well as arms control treaties’ (Meron, 2000). *Humanitarian actions* have proved to be a kind of crossover among cultures and to be able to provide the scenario for a different level of dialogue. Similarly, the concept of *humanitarian law* has been influenced by the developments of *international law*, as depicted by humanitarian lawyer William G. O’Neill:

³⁵ The term *humanitarian intervention* describes a way of giving shape to humanitarian principles in relation to HRs. Nevertheless, since its pacifistic intents overlapped with the legitimization of governmental military strategies (peculiar to the Nineties), it may also acquire military connotations (sustained by those who believe in the rightness of fighting for a fair cause). This is bound to disappoint those who claim that military interventions cannot be humanitarian and hides a political imperialism contradicting the nonviolent principles of HRs. It is for this reason that some prefer to speak about humanitarian “actions” or “operations” (replacing “interventions”) in order to distinguish humanitarian practices from any military plan. Hence, for example, Austen Davis, General Director of MSF-Holland, believes that humanitarian actions are linked to ethics and are a-political: ‘Humanitarian action cannot be subordinated to political interests, military rationales or even socially progressive moves towards peace and democracy. These are different ideologies and actions.’ And later, he adds that ‘[h]umanitarian action is a moral philosophy rather than a political philosophy – it does not require political positioning’ (Davis, 2002). Henceforth, I will use the term *action* in relation to humanitarianism, and *intervention* only when military aspects come to the surface. Nevertheless, another issue remains unsolved: “How shall we label the political actions of the so-called *humanitarian writers*?”

The evolution of international law, including the creation of international courts to try individuals accused of genocide, war crimes, and crimes against humanity, has clear implications for the work of humanitarian and human rights staff and agencies. The new instruments do not automatically change the situation on the ground, but they strengthen international law guaranteeing respect for the rights of civilians and for those seeking to assist and protect them (O'Neill, 1999: 56).

As asserted above, HRs represent the essence of humanitarianism and they are fundamental for its strategies and practitioners, usually operating in situations where there is a long tradition of disregard towards such rights. It is thus vital for humanitarians to be trained on their chances and modes of applicability in order to increase their capacity to contribute to the erosion of perpetuated violations. It is still O'Neill who measures the humanitarian *raison d'être* through the complex lens of the law: 'the effectiveness and efficiency of humanitarian and human rights activities is enhanced by how much they are firmly grounded in international legal principles and how much those principles are upheld' (*Ibid.*: 62). In the upshot, we may say that humanitarianism is not only tied up with HRs, but that the very (international) law emerges as the touchstone of its efficiency.

**CHAPTER 2 -
An Investigation of
Humanitarian
Narrative**

2.0 Preliminary Remarks

In this chapter I will analyse four texts: Roberto Saviano's *Gomorra* (2006), Aung San Suu Kyi's *Letters from Burma* (1996), Jerry Piasecki's *Marie in the Shadow of the Lion* (2000) and Nadine Gordimer's 'The Ultimate Safari' (1989). After providing some basic information and a structural analysis of these texts, I will approach them according to the humanitarian lens that I have discussed so far. For the reader's convenience, it is worth reminding here that the central tenet of this thesis is that a humanitarian text presupposes two main features: 1) the presence of a humanitarian discourse. The texts analysed are in fact characterized by a common substructure: all of them appear to embody the UDHRs' principles, which are adapted according to the very text genre and author intention. In the texts analysed in this study, the humanitarian discourse is mainly provided by the denunciation of HRs violations; 2) the performative nature of the texts. In other words, the presence of illocutionary and/or perlocutionary elements. Drawing on John L. Austin's *How to Do Things with Words* (2005 [1962]), I will examine the range of strategies allegedly used by the authors in order to generate some sort of concrete or pragmatic effects on a collective sensibility towards HRs. This latter feature can be identified as a sort of call for action addressed to the reader. In a more or less explicit way, the authors try to eliminate the distance between the readers and the needy – by eliciting empathic relations with the story's characters – or by means of a direct call for action addressed to the readers (as in Piasecki's *Marie*) in the hope of generating a sense of both impellent necessity and real possibility to do something for other people. These are the two *sine-qua-non* conditions which, in my opinion, define a text as a humanitarian practice.

Point number 1 will be tackled in the present chapter, while the second point will be addressed in Chapter 3.

2.1 Towards a Humanitarian Narrative Theory?

You write in order to change the world [...].
The world changes according to how people
see it and if you alter, even by a millimetre,
the way people look at reality, then you can
change it.

James Baldwin (African-American writer)

My humanitarian approach emphasises less the distinction between what a narrative is and what it is not than narrative in relationship to humanitarianism and HRs studies. At the same time, I briefly focus on some (common) issues which are related to the notion of “narrative” to better understand how it functions in the humanitarian sphere. Indeed, by focusing on the use of a written language for humanitarian purposes,³⁶ this thesis necessarily refers to and, consequently, entails a definition of *narrative*.

As already remarked, I refer to *humanitarian narrative* as a literary post-1948 phenomenon because I decided to place and frame “humanitarianism” – or, better, “modern humanitarianism” – within the HRs theory and practice that originated from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Obviously, this is not to say that before 1948 there were no texts that could be defined as “humanitarian”, but, for evident reasons of selection criteria, I prefer to catalogue them under the label of ‘pre-modern humanitarian narrative’. Similarly, I elected 2000 – corresponding to the appearance of Piasecki’s *Marie* (the first text that called itself a “humanitarian

³⁶ This decision aims at delimiting the scope of this thesis and is not a way of claiming that movies, pictures and other media cannot share the characteristics of humanitarian narrative as defined here. Indeed, as already emphasized by Tzvetan Todorov, who coined the term ‘narratology’ referring to structuralist studies, a literary work is both a “story” and a “discourse” since a story can be related in a variety of forms (Todorov, 2002 [1978]). That assertion has been later reinforced by Greimas’s famous statement on the ‘storyness’ of every kind of manifestation of meaning, which became a sort of manifesto of contemporary narratology (Greimas, 1987). Moreover, as regards “narratology”, intended as a study-field of the invariant properties and principles of “narrative”, I would briefly add that it was officially born in the late Sixties, although it was largely inspired by Vladimir Propp’s seminal and formalist study, *Morphology of the Folktale* (Propp, 2003 [1928]).

novel” on its very cover) – as the starting date of official “contemporary humanitarianism”. Needless to say, that subdivision merely indicates turning-point dates and does not presuppose a straight categorization of the texts through their placement in time.

Looking up in the dictionary, we find that the word *narrative* is described as ‘a message that tells the particulars of an act or occurrence or course of events; presented in writing or drama or cinema or as a radio or television program’ (WordNet, 2010). In the definition of narrative, therefore, one can include novels, short stories, tales, but also testimonies, reports, and so forth.

As a general definition, a narrative can be depicted as an orderly description of events and characters, real or fictitious, told by a narrating voice and using a literary method of expression, with a specific purpose in mind, i.e. informing, entertaining, denouncing. In using the qualifying term “prose”, I intend to distinguish the objects of this study from lyrical forms. As one can understand, prose narratives can be further differentiated as novels, novellas, or short stories.

Narrative can be loosely taken to mean “the telling of a story”, although that definition does not fully make clear its main characteristics and mechanisms. ‘What is a “story”?’ and moreover, ‘How can we accurately define a “text” as “narrative”?’ Turning to my specific purposes, ‘Are all texts examples of narrative?’ Noel Carroll defines a “narrative” as a series of events that are necessarily organized according to some sort of sequence structure – minimally framed by a common subject, temporal ordering and some basic causal links – that he labels with the phrase ‘narrative connection’ (Carroll, 2001: 21).³⁷ Some years earlier,

³⁷ This three-module prerequisite is fundamental for Carroll’s definition of a narrative. Indeed, as he explains later, a discourse which is exclusively based on a time-sequence is not a story but an annal and, conversely, a discourse that only focuses on time order and a common subject is a chronicle. Needless to say, a list of events that only share the same subject is not a story. Let’s see some explanatory examples: ‘Jane was born in 1975’; ‘My dog won its first medal last year’. Then he quotes a famous example of E. M. Forster’s (*Aspects of the Novel*, 1927) that was originally proposed as a model for a “story” or a linear narration (“The king died and then the queen died”). Carroll actually sees it as a “chronicle”, with its initial transformation (“The king died and then the queen died, of grief”) not as a relevant example of a “plot” – how that “story” has been narrated – but of a “narrative”.

another narratology scholar, Mieke Bal,³⁸ had defined a “narrative text” through a sort of *matrioska* reasoning: he first of all claimed that a “text” is a finite whole composed of language signs and, since “narrative” indicates the act of telling and, by extension, of the agent who narrates, it is possible to identify a text as a “narrative” when ‘a narrative agent relates (“tells”) a story in a particular medium, such as language, imagery, sound, buildings or a combination thereof’ (Bal, 1997: 5). Finally, Bal specified that a “story” is a particular *fabula*, referring to ‘a series of logically and chronologically related events that are caused or experienced by actors’ (*ibid*). In other words, while Carroll emphasises the notion of a “story” and its “narrative quality” as being crucially related to its content organization and various combinations, Bal connects the linguistic level with the question of agents – that is of both intrinsic and extrinsic actors (characters and narrator).

According to theologian Adolf Deissmann, literature is ‘that which is written for the public, or for a public, and which is cast in a definite artistic form’ (Deissmann, 1912: 50). Deissmann makes an example: ‘the man who writes a lease or a receipt [...] or a letter, does not in so doing contribute to literature.’ (*Ibid*: 50-51). All these texts are non-literary texts because they are ‘created not by art, but by the necessities of life, destined not for the public and future generations but for the trivial round, the household purposes, so to say, of a man’s life, or dedicated to the memory – alas so brief – of one fallen asleep’ (*Ibid*. 51). In other words, ‘they are to a large extent documents of human life, not creation of art; [...] they are records of work and joy and sorrow, not intended for us, but placed in our hands by a kindly fate’ (*Ibidem*).

In some sense, humanitarian narrative shares certain characteristics of non-literary texts: as a matter of fact, it is primarily created for a purpose which could be subsumed into the category of “the necessity of life”, namely Human Rights’ amelioration. However, as we shall see, the texts examined in this thesis are also

³⁸ Mieke Bal, *Narratology: An Introduction*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press Incorporated (second ed.), 1997 [1985].

literary in the sense that they are “created by art”: Saviano’s *Gomorra* and even ASSK’s *Letters from Burma* are very different from a catalogue or a chronicle because they possess literary characteristics and metaphorical richness.

In this chapter, I will analyse the four mentioned texts with a view to highlighting the presence of a humanitarian discourse, that is, of references to specific HRs. The textual analysis is organized as follows: a general overview which provides information about first appearance and controversies surrounding the work in question; an outline of the major topics and themes, the style and the historical context that influenced the author; a critical analysis along humanitarian lines, aimed at demonstrating the presence of a human-right idea in the framework of the text itself. A brief author’s biography and a plot summary can be found in Appendix 1.

2.2 A General Overview of Aung San Suu Kyi's *Letters from Burma*

All barriers of race and religion can be overcome when people work together on common endeavours based on love and compassion. Together we can help to develop a happier, better world where greed and ill will and selfishness are minimized. This is not impractical idealism: it is a down-to-earth recognition of our greatest needs.

Aung San Suu Kyi

Letters from Burma is a collection of 52 letters originally written for the Japanese newspaper *Mainichi Shimbun*, and its English-language version, the *Mainichi Daily News*, where, from November 27th, 1995 to December 9th, 1996, ASSK had a weekly column entitled 'Letters from Burma'. The column was restarted in January 2011, after two months from ASSK's release. The length of *Letters* is about 800-900 words (2/3 pages). Each letter has its own title and some of them are divided into parts, such as 'Water festivals', which has a 3-section subdivision. Although the letters were scheduled for the Monday edition, there were a few delays due to ASSK's lack of time.

As regards the *Mainichi Shimbun* (in Japanese, *Shimbun* means "daily newspaper"), it was founded in 1872 and it is one of the oldest Japanese newspapers. It is published by The Mainichi Newspapers Co., Ltd and appears in two editions (morning and evening) in Tokyo and Osaka, respectively. Since 1922, it has been issuing an English version. With its daily circulation of about 4 million copies for the morning edition, and 1.5 million for the evening one, the *Mainichi Shimbun* is considered one of the three main dailies of Japan. As to the political orientation of the newspaper, the *Mainichi* has a progressive editorial outlook and

appeals largely to a middle-class readership³⁹, so much so that it represents the only newspaper to have won a *Pulitzer Prize* (in 1961)⁴⁰.

The idea of the weekly column led by ASSK belongs to the editor, Mr Hiroshi Nagai – a former *Mainichi* foreign correspondent and, at that time, a professor of International Relations at Shizuoka Eiwa College.⁴¹ We know that Mr Nagai and ASSK met in Yangon⁴² and that ASSK accepted his proposal to undertake the weekly column (she was already well-aware of the interrelations between writing and freedom of thought), although she was afraid of not having enough time to complete the letters. Indeed, such a concern has been frequently manifested by ASSK on several occasions, as, for instance, in one of the last letters, in which she apologizes to her readers for the delays in keeping up with the task:

The intervening twelve months since my first letter have been most eventful. There were weeks when so much was happening I could not complete my letter by the agreed deadline. But the *Mainichi Shimbun* did not once reproach me for my failure to deliver on time; instead, Mr Nagai Hiroshi and other members of the staff demonstrated a fine understanding of the difficulties with which I had to contend (Letter 52, 1997: 207).

In another message to the *Mainichi* readers, she apologizes not just for the delays but also for the mistakes and lack of care characterizing the style of her letters:

There have been times when, due to pressure of work, I have been obliged to write my weekly “Letter” in such a rush I was barely able to look it over. Later, sometimes days or even weeks after a “Letter” had been dispatched, I would discover careless mistakes, sloppy constructions or infelicitous expressions that could have been avoided had I been in less of a hurry. I would like to apologize to the *Mainichi Shimbun* and my readers for my

³⁹ See *Encyclopædia Britannica*. Retrieved: October 07th, 2010, from *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*: <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/685519/Mainichi-shimbun>.

⁴⁰ In September 4th, 1996, the *Mainichi-Shimbun* won the *Japan Newspaper Publishers and Editors Association Award* for publishing the series *Letters from Burma* by ASSK; the prize, a very prestigious one in Japan, is the equivalent of the *Pulitzer Prize*.

⁴¹ See ‘Japanese Daily Helps Suu Kyi’s Mass’ by *The Associated Press*, 1996, <http://www.burmalibrary.org/reg.burma/archives/199612/msg00289.html>. Retrieved: October, 2011.

⁴² It is the previous name of Rangoon, which was the capital of the State of Burma until 2005. Since the end of 2005, the ruling junta has preferred the city of Naypyidaw to the original capital.

inability to give consistently to the writing of the series the time and attention that it truly deserves.⁴³

As we shall see in Chapter 3, Mr Nagai's intention when asking ASSK to keep a weekly column was not stimulated by the curiosity to know her personal vicissitudes, but mainly by the wish to provide his readers with a deeper knowledge on Burma: 'Many journalists' – he asserts – 'rushed to Myanmar to cover what Aung San Suu Kyi had to say after the junta unexpectedly freed her after six years of house arrest, but I wanted to know more about the political, social and cultural background of Myanmar' (Water, 1996). More precisely, the principal objective of Nagai's project was to get to know the situation in Burma from a Burmese's view and not from that of Japanese correspondents. As a matter of fact, according to Mr Nagai, it was necessary to debunk a typically Japanese cultural stereotype, centred on the idea

that developing countries like Myanmar need a strong leadership. As these countries have no traditional democracy and are economically underdeveloped, the Japanese think economic development should precede democratization. [...] What I wanted to present to the Japanese public was from the Myanmar people's point of view, not from the Japanese point of view (Associated Press, 1996).

Indeed, ASSK's *Letters* provide the readers with a wide range of information on Burmese ordinary life and culture, without exclusively addressing politics. Social, cultural, historical and religious issues are just a few of the topics she deals with in her letters. As she explains:

As one deeply involved in the movement for democracy in Burma, it was always my intention to concentrate on the political aspect of life in the country. However, politics is about people and I have sought to bring out the human face of our political struggle. I have written of the effect on ordinary people of such official requirements as the compulsory reporting of overnight visitors to the authorities concerned. I have discussed what inflation means at the common, everyday level of an ordinary breakfast. I have written about friends and colleagues, about the activities of my party, the National League for Democracy, and about the trials, in more than one sense of the word, of political

⁴³ A. S. Suu Kyi, 'Mainichi Wins Award for Burma Column', *Mainichi Daily News*, September 5th, 1996.

prisoners. I have described traditional festivals and Buddhist ceremonies which are an integral part of life in Burma. I have tried to present politics as multifaceted and indissolubly linked to social and economic issues (Letter 52, 1997: 207).

In this passage, ASSK clearly summarises the topics of her *Letters* while stressing the inner ties between politics and people: telling people's stories is a strategic way of addressing political, social and economic issues.

Finally, ASSK considered that the weekly column was an important 'opportunity to bring the Burmese situation to the attention of the world outside Burma' (1997: 207). By depicting and analysing the complexity of Burmese socio-political reality to Japanese readers, ASSK manages to use her freedom of speech as a powerful means for attacking the military regime (see the analysis of Letter 22, Chapter 3).

2.2.1 *The Letter: a Powerful Literary Means*

The "letter" is a very ancient form of writing and, in its most original sense, it allows one to communicate ideas to physically absent addressees. An ancient example can be traced back to the literary world of Ancient Greece, in Homer's *Iliad* (IX century B.C.). In Book VI, we find that king Proetus sends Bellerophon, who was falsely charged by his wife Stheneboea (or Antia) with trying to seduce her, to Iobate, king of Lycia and his father-in-law, with sealed 'lying letters of introduction, written on a folded/tablet, and containing much ill against the bearer'.⁴⁴ The letter-form was later increasingly used and adapted to various authors' intentions and consequently distinguished between a "private" and a "public" one. It has also been considered as a form of dialogue, "half of a dialogue" (De Pretis, 2003: 134): its style might be colloquial to the point of eliciting the impression of a "talking voice". According to Cicero (106-43 B.C.), one of the most authoritative voices in Latin literature, the letter-form stemmed

⁴⁴ The *Iliad*, Book VI by Homer, translated by Samuel Butler (Available online: http://www.greekmythology.com/Books/Iliad/I_Book_VI/i_book_vi.html. Retrieved: July, 2011).

from the need to inform distant people on specific facts, opinions and deeds, sharing either good or bad feelings with friends, while more important subjects were faced within other genres – such as the treatise or the dialogue. Nevertheless, a question arises: “Do letters exclusively attain either to the private sphere or public subjects?”. And, what is more, “Can they be designed for other effective uses?”.

During Christian times, letters proved to be an important means of evangelisation. From this point of view, at the turn of the XX century, Adolf Deissmann, in his seminal study on St. Paul (1912), proposed a further distinction between the “letter” and the “epistle”.⁴⁵ According to him, a letter is ‘a confidential conversation in writing, individual and personal. It is just as non-literary as an exercise book, a lease, or a receipt. The public has nothing to do with it; it is and wishes to be private’ (Deissmann, 1907: 53). On the contrary, the epistle is

a form of literary art, just like the drama, the epigram, the dialogue, the oration. It has nothing in common with the letter but its form. In all else it is the opposite of the letter. Its contents are intended to interest some sort of public. General in substance and in purpose, it makes use of what is individual only to keep up the appearance of a letter. The letter is private, but the epistle is cried in the market; everyone may read it, many copies of it are published: the more readers it finds, the better its purpose is fulfilled [...]. The letter is a fragment of life, the epistle is a form and a creation of art (*Ibid.*: 54).

Therefore, while the letter can be considered as a substitute for a private conversation (the sender and receiver are usually acquainted), the epistle is compared to a public speech. Nevertheless, in Deissmann’s arguments there is no trace of any distinction between factual and fictional poles in relation to letters and epistles. In his path-breaking book *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text: Interpreting and Preaching Biblical Literature* (1988) American professor Sydney Greidanus expressed his doubts in making the above–distinction so clear. Indeed,

⁴⁵ Adolf Deissmann, *St. Paul: A Study in Social and Religious History*; translation by Lionel R. M. Strachan, Hodder and Stoughton, 1912. Available online: www.openlibrary.org. Retrieved: July, 2011. See also *The New Light on the New Testament from Records of the Graeco-Roman Period*, Edinburgh, BiblioBazaar, 2009 (originally published in 1907). Deissmann’s analysis of the differences between “letter” and “epistle” forms is to be included in the context of religious-philological studies.

he argued that since the New Testament Epistles, there has actually been a constant merging between the two: even Saint Paul's debated Letters cannot be solely regarded as private: they are actually long sermons. This brings us back to the initial question: "Is it possible to regard the 'letter' as a particularly adaptable and efficient means of communication?". If it is impossible to exactly distinguish between letters and epistles, one way of approaching them clearly depends on how they have been strategically used. For example, in the XVI century, the epistolary genre was considered as an important historical document (e.g. Pietro Aretino's *Lettere*, 1520), while during the XVII century it was increasingly used to deal with philosophical issues (Pascal's *Lettres Provinciales*, 1656) and religious ones (Locke's *Letters Concerning Tolerations*, 1689). In the XVIII century the letter was still an important vehicle for social criticism (Montesquieu's *Lettres Persanes*, 1721), as well as philosophical and scientific debates (Voltaire's *Lettres Philosophiques*, 1734). The genre reached a sort of zenith with the rise of the epistolary novel, where fictional and factual features interestingly merged. Some famous examples are Richardson's *Pamela* (1740) and *Clarissa* (1749); *Julie, ou la Nouvelle Héloïse* (1761) by Rousseau, and Laclos' *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* (1782); Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's *Die Leiden des Jungen Werther* (1774) (*The Sorrows of Young Werther*) and Friedrich Hölderlin's *Hyperion* (1797). Even the first canonical North American novel, entitled *The History of Emily Montague* (1769) by Frances Brooke, was written in an epistolary form. Undoubtedly, since the XIX century the genre has been losing its relevance but it has remained an important arena for literary, historical and political issues (see for instance Gramsci's *Lettere dal Carcere*, 1947). Even more recently, letters have been serving a variety of purposes: as a sort of literary reportage (Tiziano Terzani's *Lettere contro la Guerra*, 2002), a socio-historical survey (Karen Blixen's *Letters from Africa*, 1981, posthumous), a vehicle for important social and religious issues (Oriana Fallaci, *Lettera ad un bambino mai nato*, 1975 and Giovanni Paolo II's *Lettere*, 1978-2005). The letter also reappeared in the form of a revised epistolary novel

through such writers as Michel Butor and Bob Randal (see Altman, 1982). Not even the advent of new technologies has undermined its important role: indeed, the Net posits the letter (email) – and its synthesis (SMS) – as a particular ground for communication, rich in potentialities (Suler, 1998).

From this brief discussion we can gather that the letter-form develops its potentialities and efficiency at various levels: it may become a useful means for debates (ranging from philosophical, social to scientific fields) and, as a fictional mode, it is still regarded with some sort of fascination, while the Net capitalizes on it as an important information vehicle. Added to that is its ancient tradition and reinvention throughout history, and I believe that the letter is still a persuasive and malleable means for shortening both historical and geographical distances between authors and readers. However, by presupposing an audience who might answer, the letter establishes an important “communicative pact” to be answered for: a sense of reliability has to sustain the content of the letter itself.

Thus, when considering ASSK’s *Letters*, we realise that they do not constitute a kind of writing easy to sum up but that they reveal numerous and intersecting levels. For example, referring to the definition of Deissman mentioned before, they act as “epistles” since they are similar to a public speech (and this is not surprising, since they were designed to be published). On the other hand, ASSK uses her *Letters* to deal with topics eluding those canonically appropriate for an epistle and these dissonances aim at a modelling of the *Letters* on her own needs and aims. Indeed, as already said, although ASSK’s *Letters* are attached like a web around the military junta’s HRs violations, they constantly refer to normal – and apparently minor – events since they mainly deal with ordinary people. In the upshot, ASSK’s text first distances itself from the “letter” while echoing the “epistle” form: the *Letters* are not addressed to a specific individual⁴⁶ and do not have any standard beginnings (as *Dear readers* or similar formulae), nor conclusions (as *Hoping to hear*

⁴⁶ ASSK’s letters are written for Japanese readers, as proved by the numerous references to Japanese culture.

from you very soon, or See you soon, etc.). Nevertheless, they again depart from the “epistolary”, which often uses dialogic or polylogic dynamics: there is no changing perspective, but only the dominant and coordinating point of view of ASSK. Her letters are monologic and written in the first person – her own personal voice – without any narratological screen or employment of a fictional character.

Moreover, it should be clear that ASSK’s *Letters* cannot be labelled either as an “epistolary novel”⁴⁷ or a treatise of social criticism: we are far away from the *Persian Letters* (1721) by Montesquieu, characterized by a harsh criticism of French society from two invented foreigner characters, and closer to Karen Blixen’s *Letters from Africa* (1981, posthumous), where the author reconstructs detailed pictures of her African life, merging personal vicissitudes with African culture and her present historical situation. She sounds here like a trustworthy and emotionally involved witness of English colonization in Kenya. Furthermore, ASSK, in Letter 51 (‘A Normal Life’), declares the impossibility to use a novel-form to tell about the Burmese situation: ‘were we [ASSK and her colleagues] to write about our experiences in the form of a novel it would be criticised as too far-fetched a story, a botched Orwellian tale’ (1997: 203). One should also keep in mind that she already used the letter-form extensively with her rally audience: ‘I invited the audience to write to me about matters they would like me to discuss. The response was immediate and enthusiastic. Letters on a wide range of subjects, political, economic, social and religious, were put into the mail box we hung outside the gate for that purpose’ (ASSK, 1997: 175).

Hence, due to both the complex and various codification of the genre and to the author’s personal experience of its communicative potentialities, I believe that the letter-form offers ASSK the best literary strategy to face Burma’s military junta. As regards the target audience, the *Letters* have a double intent: firstly, they reach

⁴⁷ I would like to briefly mention Aphra Behn’s *Love-Letters Between a Nobleman and His Sister* (1684), one of the first English novels to capitalize on the complexity of the letter and epistle forms, a pioneering work in the history of English Literature.

Japanese mainstream readers and, secondly, they manage to move towards a national – maybe – global audience.⁴⁸ Needless to say, the content is based on a dependable discursive structure – her “I” is not fictitious but corresponds to the author, an unquestionable authorial voice – and consists of a present-day description of the Burmese socio-political condition, merged with her experience (a political and fragmented personal life). For example, she gives some hints on Burmese culture – as in the ‘Water festival’ letters – which she associates to her own personal experience in Burma before and under the dictatorship, thus denoting indirectly, but much more effectively, the question of HRs violations. She frames a contrasting picture between past and present situations so that “what it was” and “what it is” may appear even more distant. Also her telling about her *plaisir* in reading detective stories, in repairing the roof of her house, cooking, travelling, cultivating a religious faith, is two-folded: it embodies both her desire for some “ordinary” life (an endless source of personal strength) and her ability to face forced and unfair house arrest without any sense of self-pity. She never complains about her being forced to live apart from her children and husband and she considers herself as fortunate, since, differently from the majority of parents who are political prisoners, she managed to prevent persecutions against her family:

Throughout the years of my house arrest my family was living in a free society and I could rest assured that they were economically secure and safe from any kind of persecution. The vast majority of my colleagues who were imprisoned did not have the comfort of such an assurance. They knew well that their families were in an extremely

⁴⁸ Burmese censorship did not allow *Letters from Burma* to be published. After fifteen years since its first publication and its international echo, the text has been finally issued by the Burmese weekly journal *People's Era*, (see “Myanmar journal publishes Suu Kyi column ‘Letter from Burma’”, *The Mainichi Daily News*, September 19th, 2011). Although the recent installation of a (supposed) democracy, Burma is not completely free from the military junta’s dictatorship. For example, an article of ASSK on her trip to Bagan has been recently banned and withdrawn from publication by the authorities, (Kyaw Kha, ‘Suu Kyi article suppressed by Burma’s censorship board’, August 30th, 2011, *Mizzima*. Available online: www.mizzima.com. Retrieved: July, 2011). Even Hollywood actress Michelle Yeoh, who will play the role of Suu Kyi in a forthcoming film on her life, has been expelled from Burma (Ian Mackinnon, ‘Bond girl Michelle Yeoh deported from Burma over Aung San Suu Kyi role’, *The Telegraph*, June 28th, 2011. Available online: www.telegraph.co.uk. Retrieved: July, 2011).

vulnerable position, in constant danger of interrogation, house searches, general harassment and interference with their means of livelihood. For those prisoners with young children it was particularly difficult (Letter 6, 1997: 23).

Noticeably, in her words there is no overtone of despair and pity, nor do we detect any open accusations against the regime, responsible for refusing visas to the members of her family or menacing her with an exile sentence in case she left the country. Moreover, we are briefly confronted with ASSK's "Insein Jail" detention to potentially focus on all of the political prisoners' sufferance. This has two main implications: firstly, it gives a sense of the author's dignity and her role as a NLD (National League for Democracy) leader – as a voice among the unvoiced; secondly, it transforms the *Letters* into a mode for the reader to witness a massive HRs violation.

Referring to and adapting Boltanski's biblical work *Distant Suffering* (1997, see Chapter 3), I propose to call this way of writing a "de-spectacularization of sufferance", in that the described sufferance is not used either to morbidly move or to elicit from the reader a sense of (un-active) pity, but to create a sort of sympathetic communication between the needy and the readers, while trying to make the audience respond to the writer's calls for help.

Certainly, the *Letters* echo the journalistic report or article form. For example, they sometimes refer to facts happening at the moment of writing, as in letters from 45 to 47: the former, 'Strange Siege', published on the *Mainichi* on Monday, October 7th, 1996, reports on a night military blockade of the road to her house organised in order to hinder the programmed Burma Party Congress to be held on the 27th of September; in the following letter, 'Sequel to the Siege' (Letter 46), she briefly mentions again that blockade to meditate on the 'four normal days [...] to make arrangements for the work of the party to proceed' (ASSK, 1997: 184-185), to praise the key role of the elder NLD members in the struggle for democracy and to criticise the authorities' waste of 'time, energy and money on matters related to NLD activities' (*Ibidem*). This Letter, although included in the Penguin edition,

never arrived at the *Mainichi Shimbun*, where it was replaced by a note from the editor which informed the readers on the reasons for the missing document:

We regret to inform our readers that because of Suu Kyi's house arrest by Burma's ruling junta, the State Law and Order Restoration Council, the democratic movement leader was unable to send her award-winning column, "Letter from Burma" this week.⁴⁹

Indeed, we know that in that period ASSK was again denied a public access to her house, so that she could not continue her well-known weekend rallies. Finally, in Letter 47 ('Continuum'), she recalls the first two blockades and points out a third one, therefore stressing the absurdity of the military junta's behaviour, which continuously blocked and unblocked access to her house, while at the same time internationally declaring the alleged freedom of the author.

However, even though ASSK's *Letters* describe specific facts, they cannot be strictly defined as newspaper articles, as Saviano's story *Gomorra* cannot just be defined as a journalist document. Indeed, they lack the harsh, and sometimes dry style of the mere description of facts: there is, for example, a large use of sympathetic humour, as in the above-mentioned Letter 47, along with personal and other opinions, feelings, impressions. What emerges is not a sense of cold facts but of events which involve, and are created, by people: it is the humanity of life that is not left outside her *Letters*⁵⁰ and that potentially builds a human(itarian) bridge with

⁴⁹ Letter 46 only appears in the Penguin Books edition (1997) and not on the online version (1996), which faithfully reproduces the texts published by the Mainichi. Available online: <http://www.aappb.org/suukyi.html>. Retrieved: July, 2011.

⁵⁰ There is another text which can be compared to ASSK's *Letters*: Tiziano Terzani's *Lettere contro la Guerra* (Milano, Longanesi, 2002). There are many points of contact, as well as a few differences. Both Terzani and ASSK preach non-violence as the only possible way towards peace (Terzani) as well as democracy and human rights (for ASSK). Both the collected letters have been written for newspapers and both authors have declared their allegiance to a non-violent practice. Nevertheless, Terzani's *Lettere* are a sort of inner and philosophical voyage towards a culture of peace and an ethics of coexistence. He explores the dignity and superiority of a soul liberated from bodily and negative experiences, asserting that 'le cause della Guerra sono dentro di noi. Sono in passioni come il desiderio, la paura, l'insicurezza, l'ingordigia, l'orgoglio, la vanità/ The reasons for war are inside us. They rely on passions like desire, fear, insecurity, greed, pride, vanity' (Terzani, 2002: 180, my own translation). In this view, men and women have to liberate themselves from a material external world to explore the inner one and to understand themselves as part of the other. ASSK uses her spirituality to face the corporality of HRs violations. She can stand all the suffering the military junta imposes on her because of her strong, non-violent spirituality.

readers. As a matter of fact, the *Letters* aim at depicting “intimate” aspects of the nation of Burma, confining the person of ASSK to a secondary role. Exemplary is her purposely silencing of personal sufferance to dwell on the most peculiar aspects of her country’s life: how difficult it is to have a healthy breakfast – due to the tremendous increase in prices regarding food – how bad the Education and Health services are, and how harsh in general life conditions can be under a dictatorship. As already mentioned, her *Letters* are not pervaded by sad stories recalled with the monologic rhythm of HRs violations. Notwithstanding the tragic situation in Burma, ASSK is capable of getting us to smile or appreciate some funny details of her country (about songs, poetry, customs, festivals, jokes) and the beauty of the landscape:

There is a special charm to journeys undertaken before daybreak in hot lands: the air is soft and cool and the coming of dawn reveals a landscape fresh from the night dew. By the time it was light enough for us to see beyond the headlights of our car we had left the outskirts of Rangoon behind us. The road was bordered by fields dotted with palms and every now and then in the distance, wreathed in morning mist, could be seen the white triangle of a stupa tipped with a metal “umbrella” that glistened reddish gold in the glow of the rising sun (Letter 1, 1997: 3).

In this passage we can appreciate Burma’s landscape but also ASSK’s literary style. In another passage, she quotes short verses in which the “thabye” fruit (i.e. *Eugenia jambolana*) is described:

One of the first poems I learned, written by our great poet Min Thu Wun and known to almost every Burmese child, was about the rains: “In the months of Wahso and Wagaung

She does not need any inner voyage, and, in a sense, she embodies both the “privileged” and the “unfortunate”, that Terzani alludes to when speaking to Oriana Fallaci: ‘Siamo fortunati noi Oriana. Abbiamo poco da decidere, e, non trovandoci in mezzo ai flutti del fiume, abbiamo il privilegio di poter stare sulla riva a guardare la corrente. Ma questo ci impone anche grandi responsabilità come quella, non facile, di andare dietro alla verità e di dedicarci soprattutto a “creare campi di comprensione invece che campi di battaglia”/‘We are fortunate, Oriana. We have little to decide and, not finding ourselves in the river currents, we have the privilege to remain ashore and watch the waters. But this imposes huge responsibilities on us, like the difficult one of looking for truth and of dedicating ourselves to the creation of “comprehension fields instead of battle fields”’ (*Ibid.*: 2002: 48, my own translation). Finally, I would like to underline that for both ASSK and Terzani the cultivation of peace is crucial for future citizens, so that whenever they have to choose between fighting or preserving peace, they will find a possible guiding principle.

when the waters are high, let us go and gather the ripe /thabye/ fruit....” (Letter 29, 1997: 115).

There is another bit of poetry about thabye fruit and rain quite different from Min Thu Wun's happy evocation of small boys and girls valiantly tramping through thorny bushes and braving leeches to find a trove of delicious fruit. It is usually recited in a mournful tone in keeping with Burmese sentiment about the sadness of dripping rain:

‘The thabye is in fruit, the waters are in flood;
The toddy nuts are falling, the rain is unceasing;
Oh, Ko Datha, I long to go back to Mother;
Show me the way ...’ (*Ibid.*: 116).

However, as she explains, it was not always easy to avoid talking about politics and the current situation. Such a difficulty is quite evident especially in the latest letters, when the authorities started preventing people from getting closer to ASSK. Indeed, by the end of the year, the letters can be shown to increasingly reflect the political situation around her, as she says:

For some time I have been thinking that I should perhaps, for a change, write a letter about Burmese autumn festivals and flowers, turning my mind from political to cultural and aesthetic interests. But it would not feel right to be quoting verses about scented lotuses under pale strands of moonlight when the political scene is so very unpoetic. So I have to set aside thoughts of the beauty of the dying year and once again focus attention on the current situation in the country (Letter 49, 1997: 195).

Probably, such a positive disposition is the result of her attitude towards life, influenced by Buddhist teachings founded in love and predicating against hatred. Indeed, one of the moral lessons that can be experienced while going through ASSK's *Letters* is that they teach us how to deal with problems in a peaceful and rational way, without recurring to hate, vengeance and violence. It is no coincidence, then, that as soon as she was definitely liberated, on November 13th, 2010, she did not have bad feelings towards those who kept her in prison for almost 20 years.

2.2.2 *The Letters' Style and Structure*

We have seen that the *Letters* move through different levels of communication and are not easy to classify within a specific model. Here, I would like to analyse some of their most relevant stylistic techniques.

Usually, ASSK opens her letters with some general assertions (Letters 8, 13, 31) or describing ordinary events of life (Letters 35, 14) and, later, she switches, through her personal experience, to the socio-cultural and political situation in Burma (Letters 23 and 24). She usually closes her considerations by expressing a positive attitude towards the future.⁵¹ For example, as we will see in Chapter 3, Letter 22 opens with a “Japanese tea ceremony” lesson she attended when she was in Oxford, but then she changes the subject to consider the intrinsic contradictions of the Japanese businessmen investing in Burma, and she finally praises other people from Japan for sustaining her fight. It goes without saying that ASSK does not follow a rigid scheme but interlaces her writing with political issues according to different modes: there are letters where such issues are evident (see the above-mentioned Letters 45, 46, and 47) and others in which politics is indirectly addressed, such as Letter 1 and 2, entitled ‘Road to Tamayana’, where she tells the reader about her journey to visit an important religious man, U Vinaya, the *Hsayadam* (‘holy teacher’). In this context, among narrative details such as those about the Pajero, bucolic descriptions of nature, reflections on religion, soft allusions to the political situation occasionally come to the surface:

we saw the signboards of the National League for Democracy (NLD) gallantly displayed [...]. These signboards [...] are a symbol of the courage of people who have remained dedicated to their beliefs in the face of severe repression, whose commitment to democracy has not been shaken by the adversities they have experienced. The thought that such people are to be found all over Burma lifted my heart (Letter 1, 1997: 5).

⁵¹ In the ‘Death in Custody’ sequel there is however room not for joy but for disillusion. The letter consists of a long and detailed description of the person who died in prison – his life and how he was unjustly imprisoned. As we will see later, the long list of details, recalling one of Saviano’s literary strategies, is crucial for fully presenting the tragically heroic humanity of those who paid a high price for their involvement in the Burmese cause for democracy.

While talking about the road built and financed by the *Hsayadaw* (see also Letter 2, 1997, p. 3), she comments that '[the road] was far superior to many a highway to be found in Rangoon' (*Ibid.*, 1997: 9). This apparently insignificant remark can be interpreted as an indirect criticism to the regime for their careless ignoring of the population's needs and survival. Finally, she closes the letter with one important lesson she learnt: the relevance of the willing co-operation among those concerned with a project for democracy. Hence, echoing an important principle of humanitarian agency, ASSK adds that, for all the criticised use of '*metta* (loving-kindness) and *thissa* (truth) in [a] political context', one needs to emphasise that 'politics is about people and what we had seen in Thamanya proved that love and truth can move people more strongly than any form of coercion' (Letter 4, 1997: 17).⁵² In the wake of Gandhi's philosophy, this final assertion of hers strongly emerges as a contrastive non-violent answer to the authority's aggressions. We should also remember that she recently claimed that she was looking for a 'non-violent revolution' and that 'I don't want to see the military falling. I want to see the military rising to dignified heights of professionalism and true patriotism.' Later she explicitly said that '[w]e can't do it if just one side wants a solution and the

⁵² After her release, there were discordant opinions about her non-violent way of pursuing democracy in Burma. In *Bangkok Post News* we read that '[c]ritics of Mrs Suu Kyi also say that her repeated calls for dialogue with the regime have fallen on deaf ears because she has no stick with which to force her adversaries to come to the negotiating table. Some dissidents say that Mrs Suu Kyi does not possess the qualities that made her father, independence hero Gen Aung San, so effective in his struggle against the British. Many feel that she is not decisive enough and that she lacks the political astuteness that is needed to defeat the generals. After 22 years of non-violent struggle under Mrs Suu Kyi's leadership, the Burmese are increasingly inclined to believe that the transition to genuine democracy will be a bloody one'. (Aung Zaw, 'Will the general finally let The Lady go?', *Bangkok Post News*, October, 6th, 2010). During the last elections, some members of her party, Than Nyein and Khin Maung Swe, created a new one called the National Democratic Force (NDF). Though still considering ASSK as a leader, they disagreed, for example, on her call for an international embargo which would finally worsen ordinary people's life (Te Te, 'Movement builds to end all non-targeted sanctions', *Mizzima*, Online newspaper, January, 20th, 2011. Available: www.mizzima.com/news. Retrieved: July, 2011). Nevertheless, ASSK knew that working for her native country's democracy would not be so easy, as she says in the letter entitled 'Teachers'. Indeed, she quotes here the memorable words of a monk of Sagaing: 'You will be attacked and reviled for engaging honest politics [...] but you must persevere. Lay down an investment in dukkha [suffering] and you will gain sukha [bliss]' (Letter 40, 1997: 161).

other is not keen on it. So, what we have to do is try to persuade the military regime that national reconciliation is in everybody's interest, including theirs'.⁵³

The powerful effect of the *Letters* also relies on a sense of continuity that they manage to create in spite of their ostensible discontinuity. The *Letters* cogency also rests on a larger picture displaying how the current government is not fostering beauty and happiness but ugliness and sadness, as explicitly asserted in the almost central Letter 22.

Finally, I would like to write some words on ASSK's stylistic choices. Contrary to the results of Laqueur's analysis – according to which the first “humanitarian” texts were characterized by a palpable presence of the suffering body (see Section 0.2.2) – ASSK's *Letters* do not usually provide specific and detailed descriptions of violence and sufferance. There are only three exceptions – the series of letters entitled ‘Death in Custody’ – where limiting details would otherwise have implied limiting the power of her denunciations:⁵⁴

The death certificate of U Hla Than, NLD member of Parliament for the Coco Islands who died on Aug. 2 as a political prisoner of the present military regime of Burma, stated that he had died of “extensive Koch's lung [tuberculosis] and HIV infection”. Coincidentally on the day of his death, extracts from a report on conditions in Burmese prisons by a former student activist who had served time in the infamous Insein Jail where U Hla Than was incarcerated for nearly six years, appeared in *The Nation* newspaper of Bangkok. The report states that owing to drug abuse “there is ... a high prevalence of HIV/AIDS in prisons. When administering injections, the doctors give only half or less than half of the phial to one patient, giving the rest to another patient

⁵³ Quoted in Clifford Coonan, ‘Opposition to aid Suu Kyi's “non-violent” fight’, *The Irish Times* - Thursday, November 18th, 2010.

⁵⁴ ASSK also refers to the inadequate conditions of political prisoners in Letter 12, ‘Months and Seasons’, where she only focuses on a “minor” sufferance, if compared to the one described later: ‘[t]his is the eighth winter that I have not been able to get into bed at night without thinking of prisoners of conscience and other inmates of jails all over Burma. As I lie on a good mattress under a mosquito net, warm in my cocoon of blankets, I cannot help but remember that many of my political colleagues are lying in bleak cells on thin mats through which seeps the peculiarly unpleasant chill of a concrete floor. Both their clothing and their blankets would be quite inadequate and they would be unprotected by mosquito nets. There are not as many mosquitoes in winter as they are in summer but a net would have provided some much needed extra warmth. I wonder how many prisoners lie awake shivering through the night, how many of the older ones suffer from aching bones and cramped muscles, how many are dreaming of a hot drink and other comforts of home’ (Letter 12, 1997: 48-49).

from the same needle and syringe, almost guaranteeing that any blood-carried infections will spread” (1997: 61).

Nevertheless, ASSK’s style is again inspired by joy: merriment, poetry, and jokes can be found in the whole text. It is worthwhile reading the following excerpt from Letter 32, ‘A Dissident Life’ (2), a funny passage about using the telephone in Burma:

In Burma, one should approach the telephone with a prayer on the lips and a determination to try, try and try again. Getting through to the required number at the first attempt is such an event to greet with incredulity and an expression of thanks to all powers, seen and unseen. (1997: 127).

As regards syntax, she avoids complex constructions while proving to be a reliable witness of the events narrated. Her use of information and data is quite cogent and detailed. Exemplary are ‘Breakfast Blues’ (Letter 7), where she accurately refers to numerous food prices before and after 1990, linking present inflation to the government policies, and ‘A Baby in the Family’ (Letter 14), opening with the birth of the grandchild of some of her friends and closing with data on children and mortality rates – the highest in Asia – while referring to the small investment percentages by the military junta in health and education. ASSK’s language notably remains on a common level of communication, although she is clearly high-educated and has a deep knowledge of Burma’s history and culture. Indeed, she constantly interposes Burmese cultural traditions with historical events, such as in Letter 18, ‘A Few Introductions’, dedicated to the presentation of some relevant NLD members, and in the already mentioned Letter 14, where she describes a baby birth, distinguishing Burmese lack of prejudice against a girl baby from the patriarchal attitude of Western societies, a contrast that she frames with a literary reference (she mentions a personal opinion of the English writer Sir Pelham Grenville Wodehouse, 1881- 1975):

In societies where the birth of a girl is considered a disaster, the atmosphere of excitement and pride surrounding my friends' granddaughter would have caused astonishment. In Burma there is not prejudice against girl babies. In fact there is a general belief that daughters are more dutiful and loving than sons and many Burmese parents welcome the birth of a daughter as an assurance that they will have somebody to take care of them in their old age. [...]. It had been a long time since I had seen such a tiny baby and I was struck by its miniature perfection I do not subscribe to the Wodehousian view that all babies look like poached eggs (Letter 14, 1997: 55).

This clarity and simplicity indirectly conveys her wish to reach the common core of humanity shared by all, eluding any specialised audience. Needless to say, this way of writing has relevant implications for the decoding process of ASSK's message.

2.2.3 *A Humanitarian Analysis of Letters from Burma*

Describing in detail all the 52 *Letters* would take too much space, therefore I decided to select some of them, as telling examples of ASSK's writing, which I shall now approach from the HRs perspective I have outlined in the previous pages.

Before starting, it is important to demonstrate the appropriateness of the UDHRs as a "mirror identity" for the *Letters*. Here are a few examples of ASSK's explicit reference to the need for democracy and a HRs politics in Burma (the emphases are mine):

Journalists ask me from time to time whether it is not a great burden to be engaged in the struggle for **human rights** and **democracy** in Burma under the restrictions imposed on the movements of political parties, especially those of the NLD (Letter 15, 1997: 61).

The democracy movement of 1988 drew him [U Tin U] from a quiet, private life into the struggle to bring **justice** and **human rights** to Burma (Letter 19, 1997: 77).

They [SLORC] condemned the idea of any work aiming at removing a government in power. I explained to them that this was unacceptable to anybody who truly believed in **democracy**. In a genuine **democracy**, it is a legitimate function of opposition parties to work at removing the government through the **democratic process** [...]. To view opposition as dangerous is to misunderstand the basic concepts of **democracy**. To oppress the opposition is to assault the very foundation of **democracy** (Letter 41, 1997: 165).

[...] we talk about the struggles for **justice** and **freedom** and **human rights** that have taken place in different parts of the world (Letter 48, 1997: 192).

Many of us attending the ceremony came together eight years ago to commit ourselves to the cause of **democracy** and **human rights** and we have remained together in the face of intense adversity (Letter 50, 1997: 201).

[...] protected by institutions which will guarantee our rights, the **rights** [human rights here] that will enable us to maintain our **human dignity**, to heal long festering wounds and to allow love and courage to flourish (Letter 51, 1997: 205).

These quotations should be enough to give a clear account of ASSK's political intentions and ideas. Furthermore, I think it is possible to go beyond the general statements pro-human rights and to identify specific references – either direct or indirect – to the UDHRs. Indeed, throughout the *Letters*, HRs implicitly emerge for the stress on their absence. From this perspective, readers are transformed by the author into active witnesses of HRs violations, implying their moral and legal involvement in Burma's reality (see Chapter 3).

To record the 'presence' of HRs it is useful to go back to Cassin's pillars of the UDHRs, introduced in Section 1.1, where I had distinguished among 4 main article-sets: articles 1-11 (dealing with personal or civil rights); articles 12-17 (related to social rights); articles 18-21 (centred on political rights) and articles 22-27 (connected with economic rights).⁵⁵ What follows is a four-section scheme, introduced by these groups of articles, which are compared to ASSK's *Letters*.

Articles 1-11: Personal and Civil Rights

Article 1: All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.

Dignity, freedom and rights are often dashed by the authorities:

Agreeing to disagree is a prerogative only of those who live under a democratic system. Under an authoritarian regime, disagreeing can be seen as a crime (Letter 31, 1997: 123).

⁵⁵ For the reader's convenience, the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* is reported in Appendix 3.

In April 1991 U Hla Than [NLD political prisoner] was tried by a martial law court, accused of complicity in attempts to set up a parallel government and sentenced to twenty-five years imprisonment for high treason. Now, five years later, he is dead, a victim of a warped process of law and a barbaric penal system (Letter 37, 1997: 149).

The exact number of deaths in custody cannot be ascertained but it is not small and it is rising all the time. The price of liberty has never been cheap and in Burma it is particularly high (Letter 39, 1997: 157).

At this time six years ago, the first democratic election in thirty years was held in our country. The people of Burma went to the polls with an exemplary sense of responsibility and discipline, buoyed up by the hope that after three decades of authoritarian misrule they would at last achieve a system that ensured respect for their collective will. Their hopes were cruelly dashed. The results of the election have been ignored and Burma remains subject to the whims of a small élite (Letter 29, 1997: 117).

The spectacle of the process of law bounding away from accepted norms of justice is very ugly at all times (Letter 49, 1997: 169).

Needless to say, the supposed “spirit of brotherhood” that, according to the first article, should sustain all human relations is not compatible with the military junta’s mentality:

What a pleasure it was to listen to a well bred-man [Dr Tha Hla and U Wun] of outstanding intellect courteously exchanging views. How wonderfully reassuring to know that we had among us minds totally removed from the kind of mentality that moves along the lines of organized hooliganism [of SLORC] (Letter 17, 1997: 69).

In a country permeated by Buddhist spirituality and empathetic teachings,⁵⁶ it might be quite surprising to witness such a violence. In the letter ‘Respite’, ASSK explains that ‘[i]t is customary for Burmese Buddhist boys to spend some time as novices in a monastery that they might learn the basic tenets of Buddhism [...]’ (Letter 50, 1997: 200) and, probably, most soldiers of the military junta had a temporary stay in such spiritual monasteries, where they should have found out that dialogue, respite and peace are the fundamental pillars for social organizations and that democracy is supposed to be the political system which best paves the way

⁵⁶ For example, in the letter ‘Teachers’, she quotes a monk-mentor on the issue of the “right speech”: ‘Not only should one speak only the truth, one’s speech should lead to harmony among beings, it should be kind and pleasant and it should be beneficial’ (Letter 40, 1997: 159).

for all of them. Hence, how can all that be possible? It is the very author who provides an answer:

I have found more warmth, more wholehearted love, more tenderness, more courage and more caring concern among my people, as we hope together and struggle together, than anywhere else in the world. But those who exude hate and vindictiveness and rave about annihilating and crushing us are also Burmese, our own people (*Ibid.*: 205).

And such words can unfortunately be applied to many other countries. To all appearances, religions can carve out a space for peace and reciprocal respect essentially within the circle of those who are spiritually involved.

Article 3: Everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person.

No one feels either free or safe under Burma's dictatorship. Even host friends might be unexpectedly arrested.

Hospitality is no longer so simple [...]. Visitors must make up their minds before too late an hour if they intend to stay the night because their presence has to be reported to the local Law and Order Restoration Council (LORC) before nine o'clock in the evening. Failure to 'report the guest list' could result in a fine or a prison sentence for both the guest and the host [...]. The authorities have the right to check any time during the night to see if there are any unreported guests or if any of the members of the family are missing [...] (Letter 13, 1997: 51-52).

Form 10 is the list of all members of a family [...]. During the days of the Burma Socialist program Party (BSPP Form 10) played a central role in the daily lives of the people of Burma. In accordance with the household members listed on the form, it was decided how much a family was entitled to buy of such essentials as rice, oil, salt, chillies, onions, soap and milk powder from the government c o-operative (*Ibid.*: 51-52).

Article 4: No one shall be held in slavery or servitude; slavery and the slave trade shall be prohibited in all their forms.

Certainly, forced labour is a relevant problem often mentioned by ASSK throughout her *Letters*, as for example in the following quotation:

Perhaps they do not know of the poverty in the countryside, [...] the forced labour projects where men, women and children toil away without financial compensation under hard taskmasters in scenes reminiscent of the infamous railway of death of the Second World War (Letter 22, 1997: 88).

Article 5: No one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.

Again, when dealing with the ‘strange’ deaths of political prisoners, ASSK explains:

Many question the verdict of suicide. Friends and members of the family who saw U Maung Ko's body before burial assert that there were many marks on it to indicate that he had been badly tortured (Letter 38, 1997: 152).

And Hsaya Maung Thaw Ka struggled manfully. But his already much-eroded physical system was unable to withstand the inhuman conditions of Insein Jail for long. In June 1991, Hsaya Maung Thaw Ka, navy officer and humorist, poet and political activist, died in custody at the age of 65 (Letter 39, 1997: 155).

Article 9: No one shall be subjected to arbitrary arrest, detention or exile.

Article 10: Everyone is entitled in full equality to a fair and public hearing by an independent and impartial tribunal, in the determination of his rights and obligations and of any criminal charge against him.

The following episode, defined by ASSK herself as “tragicomic”, can be taken as evidence of the low level of fairness and justness informing law in Burma. Referring again to Letter 13 and the absurd ‘visiting rites’ requested by the authorities, she informs us:

A young man caught spending the night as an unreported guest was taken to court together with his host. The court handed down a prison sentence of six months to the guest and two weeks to the host. The host, a hospitable man with a long experience of paying fines for his unexpected and unreported guests, involuntarily clicked his tongue against his teeth in astonished disgust. The acting magistrate heard the loud click and promptly changed the sentence on the host to one month's imprisonment for contempt of court. The price of hospitality in Burma can be very high (Letter 13, 1997: 53).

Article 11: (1) Everyone charged with a penal offence has the right to be presumed innocent until proved guilty according to law in a public trial at which he has had all the guarantees necessary for his defense. (2) No one shall be held guilty of any penal offence on account of any act or omission which did not constitute a penal offence, under national or international law,

at the time when it was committed. Nor shall a heavier penalty be imposed than the one that was applicable at the time the penal offence was committed.

As emerged above, another dramatic reality in Burma concerns political prisoners and their unfair detention in the notorious *Insein Prison*. Needless to say, NLD members are under a constant attack by the authorities.

When U Win Htein asked those who had come to take him away whether they had an arrest warrant, they replied that it was not necessary as charges had already been moved against him and his sentence had been decided. So much for the concept of the law that deems a person innocent until proven guilty (Letter 42, 1997: 167-68).

Section 340 (1) of the Code of Criminal Procedure provides that ‘any person accused of an offense before a criminal court, or against whom proceedings are instituted under this code, in any such court, may of right be defended by a pleader’. This basic right to counsel is systematically denied to political prisoners in Burma. They are not even allowed to make contact with their families (*Ibid.*: 168).

In Burma those who are held to endanger state security can be arrested under a section of the law that allows detention for a maximum period of three years. And prisoners who have not been tried are not entitled to visits from their families. A number of political prisoners who were put in jail for their part in democracy movement were kept there without trial for more than two years. For this time, they did not see their families at all. (Letter 6, 1997: 23).

They [The children of political prisoners] have known what it is like to be young birds fluttering helplessly outside the cages that shut their parents away from them. They know that there will be no security for their families as long as freedom of thought and freedom of political action are not guaranteed by the law of the land (*Ibid.*: 25).

By means of the comparison drawn above between the UDHRs and the numerous pictures of the Burmese military apparatus given by ASSK, we might develop an understanding of the terrible mechanisms of a dictatorship – a political system inimical to the idea of democracy – and of the extent to which writing can be seen as performing a humanitarian function.

Articles 12-17: Social Rights

Article 12: No one shall be subjected to arbitrary interference with his privacy, family, home or correspondence, nor to attacks upon his honor and reputation. Everyone has the right to the protection of the law against such interference or attacks.

Representative of the above HR violation is still Letter 13, ‘Visiting Rites’ (for extended quotations, see pp. 14-15), where ASSK describes the incessant military controls on family members during the night. Needless to say, also the following article, on the freedom of movement, is compromised:

Article 13: (1) Everyone has the right to freedom of movement and residence within the borders of each state. (2) Everyone has the right to leave any country, including his own, and to return to his country.

Nobody may go away for the night from his own home without informing the local LORC as well as the LORC of the place where he will be staying (Letter 13, 1997: 52).

Another telling example of the government’s interference into ordinary people’s private lives is the “ambiguous” functioning of the Post Office Service:

I cannot quite make up my mind whether so many letters addressed to me fail to arrive because of the inefficiency of the post office or because of the efficiency of the Military Intelligence. My dear Japanese teacher Michiko-san sent me a little note through somebody who came to Rangoon to let me know she has been writing to me regularly through the post. None of these letters has reached me. Lately, the authorities have even prohibited courier services from delivering magazines and papers addressed to me (Letter 32, 1997: 127).

Article 16: (1) Men and women of full age, without any limitation due to race, nationality or religion, have the right to marry and to found a family. They are entitled to equal rights as to marriage, during marriage and at its dissolution. (2) Marriage shall be entered into only with the free and full consent of the intending spouses. (3) The family is the natural and fundamental group unit of society and is entitled to protection by society and the State.

Although in ASSK’s Letters there is no reference to any authorities’ interference in wedding unions, there is a strong accusation of their role in Burma’s

notoriously high infant and maternal mortality-rates, whose reasons can be traced back to:

malnutrition, lack of access to safe water and sanitation, lack of access to health services and lack of caring capacity, which includes programs for childhood development, primary education and health education (Letter 14, 1997: 56-57).

In the section above, I had already mentioned the forced separation between imprisoned parents and children and their harassment by the authorities. Here I would like to add some further considerations by focusing on the letters ‘Political Prisoners’ and ‘Misrule of Law’:

Some children [...] found that their schoolmates avoided them and that even teachers treated them with a certain reserve: it did not do to demonstrate sympathy for the offspring of a political prisoner and it was considered particularly shocking when the prisoner was a woman. Some children were never taken on visits to prison as it was thought the experience would be too traumatic for them, so for years they were totally deprived of all contact with their mothers. Some children who needed to be reassured [...] would be taken on a visit to the prison only to be deeply disturbed by the sight of their mothers looking van and strange [...] (Letter 6, 1997: 24-25).

When the parents are released from prison it is still not the end of the story (*Ibid.*: 25).

They [political prisoners] are not even allowed to make contact with their families. The authorities generally refuse to give any information on detainees who have not yet been tried (Letter 42, 1997: 168).

Article 17: a (1) Everyone has the right to own property alone as well as in association with others. (2) No one shall be arbitrarily deprived of his property.

In a country where there is a ‘rampant inflation’ that makes the number of those who cannot afford having breakfast enormously increase, it is senseless to speak about the private property right (Letter 7, 1997: 27). Moreover, in a state of ‘uncivil servants’ (Letter 43, 1997: 171) – that is of corrupted public employees – it is even paradoxical, as underlined through the following excerpt:

The corruption of the civil services is not just an urban phenomenon. Farmers have to sell a quota of their harvest to the government at stipulated prices well below the market

rate. The state employees who weight the grain at rice depots manage to put aside a substantial amount of rice for themselves. This rice they sell at the market price to those farmers who have had a bad harvest, so that they can produce the necessary government quota for which, of course, the poor farmers are paid only the state price (*Ibid.*: 173).

Articles 18-21: Political Rights

Political rights are bluntly ignored by the ruling junta. Exemplary are the constantly violated Articles 18 (freedom of thought) and 19 (freedom of association), which I would like to shed light on through the description of an NLD commemoration and the absurd outcomes of a theatre performance.

Article 18: Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.

The majority of people of Burma are Buddhist and it is traditional for us to gather together on religious occasions to renew our spiritual strength and our ties of friendship[...].The authorities accuse us of using religion for political purposes, perhaps because this is what they themselves are doing, or perhaps because they cannot recognize the multi-dimensional nature of man as a social being. Our right to freedom of worship has become threatened by the desire of the authorities to curtail the activities of our party (Letter 50, 1997: 199).

The NLD wished to commemorate the forty-eighth anniversary of Burma's Independence Day (January, 4th, 1948) and programmed a play 'whose principal theme simply underlined the importance of unity and the need to solve political problems through dialogue' (Letter 10, 1997: 39).

Nevertheless, '[the authorities] conveyed to us that our entertainment programme should not include either *dobat* [music] or a play' (*Ibidem*). Furthermore,

On the evening of 2 January a key member of my office staff was pulled by his local military intelligence unit for twenty-four hours. He was interrogated not only on such crucial matters as the policies and decision making process of our party but also on our proposed Independence Day ceremony [...]. The Independence Day ceremony started in a traditional way with two comedians coming forward to introduce the performance [...]. The comedians were determined to exercise to the full their traditional right to apply their comic and critical powers to a commentary on matters of topical interest, many of

political nature [...]. The company arrived back in Mandalay on the Morning of the seventh and later that day they were all taken away by the authorities. We are now waiting for the next act in the drama of this most courageous troupe. Come what may, we shall stand by them (*Ibid.*: 39-41).

This passage, along with Letter 17 ('An Eventful Week') and Letters 24-26 ('Water Festival'), Letters 31-32 ('A Dissident's Life'), Letter 45 ('Strange Siege'), just to mention a few, are also relevant for Article 20 (freedom of peaceful association)⁵⁷ and the first part of the following:

Article 19: Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.

The second part is clearly debated in Letter 32, 'A Dissident Life'.

Article 21: (1) Everyone has the right to take part in the government of his country, directly or through freely chosen representatives. (2) Everyone has the right of equal access to public service in his country. (3) The will of the people shall be the basis of the authority of government; this will shall be expressed in periodic and genuine elections which shall be by universal and equal suffrage and shall be held by secret vote or by equivalent free voting procedures.

Throughout the text, ASSK continuously mentions the military junta's inobservance of the 1990 elections, as in the already mentioned letter 'Rain Thoughts', and in the following:

When the military regime took over power in September 1988 it announced that it had no intention of governing the country for a long period. It would assume the responsibility of bringing genuine multi-party democracy to Burma and power would be transferred to the party that proved victorious in 'free and fair elections'. The elections of May 1990 were hailed as one of the freest and fairest ever and the NLD won 82 per cent of the seats. As this was not the result SLORC had expected it decided to forget its earlier promise [...] (Letter 31, 1997: 123).

⁵⁷ In this connection, in 'A Dissident Life', the author describes NLD's difficulties in finding a place where to meet, since the authorities did not allow them to 'operate as a genuine political organization [...]. To begin with, a landlord who rents out office space to the NLD would be told that his house or apartment could be confiscated at any time the authorities consider the activities of the party justify such a move' (Letter 31, 1997: 124).

Articles 22-27: Economic Rights

Economic Rights deal with such issues as the right to work, adequate remuneration, and rest (Articles 22-24). ASSK analyses the problem of Burma's inflation in Letters 7, 14, and 43, which have already been discussed (see *Social Rights* and *Personal and Civil Rights* sections, respectively), highlighting the widely diffused poverty among Burmese people, who cannot even afford a proper meal.

Moreover, as we already noticed, Letter 14 also denounces the military junta's subordination of health services and education, and purposely gives the official data of its expenditure in both fields:

In summary, there is a strong need in Burma for greater investment in health and education. Yet government expenditure in both sectors as proportion of the budget has been falling steadily. Education accounted for 5.9 percent of the budget in 1992-93, 5.2 percent in 1993-94 and 5 percent in 1994-95. Similarly government spending on health care has dropped from 2.6 percent in 1992-93 to 1.8 percent in 1993-94 and 1.6 percent in 1994-95 (Letter 14, 1997: 56).

Some of the best indicators of a country developing along the right lines are healthy mothers giving birth to healthy children who are assured of good care and a sound education that will enable them to face the challenges of a changing world. Our dreams for the future of the children of Burma have to be woven firmly around a commitment to better health care and better education (*Ibid.*: 57).

Hence, the government of Burma also dissatisfies the core principles of Article 25 (right to health, and special assistance to motherhood and childhood) and Article 26 (right to education). The two latter topics – the health of the body (health system) and the health of the spirit (education system) – are usually presented as strictly connected, as we also evince from the following:

If businessmen do not care that our standards of health and education are deteriorating, they should at least be concerned that the lack of healthy, educated labour force will inevitably thwart sound economic development (Letter 22, 1997: 88).

In Burma health care is ostensibly provided free of charge by the state. But in recent years, the contributions expected from the community have risen to such an extent that it is no longer possible to think of health care as 'free' [...]. While nothing can excuse callousness in those who should be giving succour to the ill and dying, it cannot be

ignored that the deterioration in state of health care is largely the result of maladministration [...]. In recent years, the emergence of a private sector has made health care at expensive clinics and nursing home available to those who are well off [...] (Letter 44, 1997: 175-176).

Even more than letters about the unsavoury conditions in our hospitals, I receive letters about the disgraceful state of our education system. Education, like health care, is ostensibly free in Burma but again, as with health care, the contribution exacted from the community is getting higher by the day (*Ibid.*: 176).

Examinations provide teachers as well as employees of the education department with opportunities for lucrative business. Examination questions, advance information on grades achieved and the marking up of low grades can all be obtained for price (*Ibid.*: 176-177).

The last three articles of the UDHRs deal with personal freedom and participation to a political order that should lay the foundation for the rest of the articles (Article 28); with the importance of pursuing personal goals without limiting those of others (Article 29) and a final open condemnation of either political organizations or groups of people that would try to use the *Declaration* for actually limiting and annihilating human beings and their rights (Article 30). As regards the first two, it has been extensively proved that in Burma there was a complete absence of democracy (*Letters of Burma* promotes its possible coming into being), while the last article could not be practically dealt with, since only this year has an allegedly democratic parliament been installed. Nevertheless, as we saw, the work of ASSK and her colleagues awaits further developments: '[i]t is not yet time for the triumphant dance of the peacock' (1997: 21).⁵⁸

⁵⁸ The "peacock" stands for the national students' movement which finally led to Burma's independence.

2.3 A General Overview of Roberto Saviano's *Gomorra: Viaggio nell'impero economico e nel sogno di dominio della camorra*

Non son certo sia fondamentale osservare ed esserci per conoscere le cose ma è fondamentale esserci perché le cose ti conoscano.

Roberto Saviano

As specified in the subtitle of his work, Roberto Saviano's *Gomorra* (2006)⁵⁹ consists of a (dated and directly witnessed) journey through the roots, mechanisms and political apparatus of the Camorra, currently known as the *Sistema*.⁶⁰ In a metaliterary sense, *Gomorra* might be also analyzed as an inner voyage of the author towards the definition and logical demonstration of his literary practice. Indeed, the text depicts both the world of the *Sistema* and the author's intentions and objectives. The former is discussed in its complex and obscure apparatus – fields of actions, strategies, mentality – within an accurate investigation that becomes inseparable from Saviano's intimate and instinctive desire to see the *Sistema* collapsed. As a matter of fact, knowing also means fuelling an efficient and effective (personal) struggle which might consequently affect the readers' behavior.

⁵⁹ *Gomorra: Viaggio nell'impero economico e nel sogno di dominio della camorra*, Milano, Mondadori, 2006. Some theorists believe that the title of the text comes from a co-authored discourse of Don Diana – an unknown hero of the fight against Camorra – that is reported at pp. 264-5 and the homophony between “Camorra” and “Gomorra” is only accidental (Dal Lago: 2010).

⁶⁰ Italian magistrate Giovanni Falcone said that ‘la camorra napoletana e la ‘ndrangheta calabrese, spesso anch’esse definite mafia, non hanno la struttura unitaria gerarchizzata e a compartimenti stagni di Cosa Nostra. Entrambe hanno un’organizzazione per così dire orizzontale. Fino a quando manterranno una struttura orizzontale, sarà un poco meno difficile combatterle’ (G. Falcone, quoted in ‘I campani’ giovedì 14 ottobre. Available online: <http://www.liberamondragone.blogspot.com>. Retrieved: December, 2011). Hence, Camorra is not organized as Sicilian Mafia – that is, there is not any inner structure (the so called “Cupola”) but many and independent criminal organizations. If this is the case, why does the Camorra still remain a huge and undefeated Gomorra? Does that definition reflect Saviano's analyses? Since the very first pages of *Gomorra*, there emerges a different definition of the *Sistema*: indeed, there is a clear clans' and structured economy that is surreptitiously supported by ordinary people's indifference.

Saviano provides the reader with a precise account of the inhumanity of the Italian Camorra, crossing its inviolable boundaries, to actually elicit a collective reaction.

In this connection, Italian scholar Angelo Guglielmi considers the text as relevant evidence of a diffused desire among contemporary writers to leave a specific “model reader” in order to find back wide audiences. According to Guglielmi, the author ‘vuole tornare ad essere comprensibile, dico leggibile’ (Guglielmi, 2010: 20). Hence, it is no surprise that in his *La Bellezza e l’Inferno*, Roberto Saviano clearly asserts that ‘[l]o scrittore [...] ha un’immensa responsabilità: la responsabilità di far sentire quello che racconta, le storie che sceglie di raccontare, non come storie distanti, lontane’ (Saviano, 2009: 200). Saviano, therefore, postulates his “Io so e ho le prove” theorem, a sort of “literary manifesto”. Starting from an incurable sense of nausea – a symptom of both his desire to react to the *Sistema* and the perception of a compelling truth – he manages to translate into words both visual and non-visual (feelings, smells, bodily reactions) images of all the atrocities committed by the Camorra that he has been witnessing. That is, Saviano’s personal experience finally proves to be an effective way to draw a detailed picture of the *Sistema*’s apparatus. Is that theorem embedded in a paradox? Saviano’s answer sounds adamant. It is not possible to understand what the *Sistema* is from a neutral distance: ‘[a]vevo deciso di seguire quello che stava per accadere a Secondigliano [...]. E comprendere significava almeno farne parte. Non c’è scelta, e non credo vi fosse altro modo di capire le cose’ (Saviano, 2006: 86). Hence, the ‘Io so e ho le prove’ theorem is much more than a moral (meditative) imperative: it is a concrete and urgent need: ‘Sapere, capire diviene una necessità. L’unica possibile per considerarsi ancora uomini degni di respirare’ (*Ibid.*: 331). In his successive books, the above mentioned *La Bellezza e l’Inferno* (2009) and

La Parola contro la Camorra (2010), Saviano shall leave out any novelistic aspects to focus on the definition of his literary weapon: the word's (anti)power.⁶¹

Finally, to understand the extent of Saviano's re-action we need to know what it does mean to deal with the *Sistema* for those who are not associated with it but live in the same context. Throughout the text Saviano sets out to openly denounce common people's indifference and biases that finally reinforce the very *Sistema*.⁶² Such behaviour seems for that matter to preserve one's life: as though under a dictatorship, those who remain silently subjected are actually indirect sustainers of the very "government" that ignores their HRs. Unquestionably, opposing the *Sistema* often implies paying with one's own life or being savagely beaten and injured.⁶³ Don Diana's story is an emblem of that kind of reaction: a young priest who dared, alone, to openly fight against *Gomorra* and who was eventually killed in his very parish church (Saviano, 2006: 241-246). Hence, a question inevitably comes across the author's (and the reader's) mind: "Which 'path' should one pave in one's own life?" After his brief involvement with ambiguous Chinese traffic,⁶⁴ Saviano could not but listen to his conscience and use his authorial insight to take the reader into the first "productive infernal circle" of the *Sistema*: fabrics and clothing productions. Although the author knows that even minor actions against the *Sistema* will result in its repressive reactions, he feels he

⁶¹ Starting from two main functions of speech, to tell the truth and to cover it (delegitimizing it), Saviano clearly defines what I call a *humanitarian literary practice*. First of all: making others know about atrocities scares those who commit evil because words can transform 'some stories' into our stories, or, to be more clear, they can eliminate the distance between readers and authors: the strength of words appears to go beyond any kind of abstract empathy in the sense that they transform readers into characters. There is virtually no more distinction between the needy and the readers. This does not result from any epiphanic identification but from an almost corporeal experience of that sufferance.

⁶² As regards that, throughout the text Saviano denounces many times ordinary people's biases and ambiguous silence, such as in the following episodes: Emanuele's funeral (p. 32 and following); Gelsomina Verde's murder (p. 96), the first time Saviano saw a man who had just been murdered (p. 113), Giulio Ruggiero's, Attilio Romanò's, and Dario Scherillo's murderings (pp. 129-130, 132-133, 133-134).

⁶³ We know that even Saviano's father was wildly beaten because he rescued a young wounded man with his ambulance (instead he should have allowed the Camorristi to kill their victim); the author also mentions a young teacher that lost her dignity because she witnessed a murdering and denounced the killer. Other similar episodes will be discussed later.

⁶⁴ He explains that it was for "curiosity" that he accepted to participate in that goods' smuggling (Saviano, 2006: 23).

must set up his own fight for democracy, making his sense of the “human being” alive. Non-action means to anesthetize oneself, to renounce one’s very life. Hence, one may paradoxically win over a state of death-in-life by openly risking life through challenge and fight, since the crucial question that arises concerns whether “to be human or not to be human”.

2.3.1 *Fictional vs. non-fictional?*

As regards the literary genre to which *Gomorra* belongs, Saviano conceives it along the lines of Truman Capote’s *non-fiction novel* (2009: 200).⁶⁵ Nevertheless, since its publication, *Gomorra*’s genre has been highly debated and scholars do not yet agree on a specific and clear category. According to University of Pisa professor Carla Benedetti, the *querelle* resulted from the actual impossibility to file the text under the two most diffused textual categories: “fiction” and “non-fiction” (Benedetti, 2008). Indeed, both categories seem to be reductive ways of approaching *Gomorra* since the former – marked by the impossibility to deal with the ‘real’ – stands in straight opposition to the latter – the category of truth par excellence. “Fiction” and “non-fiction” are too much encoded categories. Hence, she establishes a first link between *Gomorra* and the reportage-investigation because of its journalistic traits, although the narrator’s personal involvement in the reported facts makes her see the text as more similar to the testimony form, that is

⁶⁵ Broadly speaking, the genre is defined as a way ‘to communicate information, just like a reporter, but to shape it in a way that reads like fiction’ (Gutkind 2007: XI). As we will see later, Raffaele Donnarumma, finding out incommensurable differences between Truman Capote’s *In Cold Blood* (1966) and *Gomorra*, prefers to define the latter from a divergent perspective (for further details see Raffaele Donnarumma’s article ‘Angosce di derealizzazione’, 2009). Nevertheless, I believe that they somehow share the same presuppositions. In one of his interviews, Truman Capote asserted that he purposely decided to write on a journalistic subject – and crime was chosen incidentally – using a fictional technique since he wanted ‘to explore the unexplored literary medium’ (Video, 1966. *Retro: Truman Capote Writes*, <http://video.google.com/videoplay?docid=-7111397200984613874>. Retrieved: December, 2011). Indeed, ‘if you want to master a subject – he explained – you can move in and out a character as you were in a novel’ (*Ibid.*). According to Capote, the great difference between journalism and fiction is that while the former does not move down in its narration, that is, a reportage has an horizontal narration, the latter allows for a vertical analysis, going deeper than a superficial telling.

to autobiographical narratives that deal with HRs violations: ‘più vicino, per intendersi, a *Se questo è un uomo* di Primo Levi che non a *L’odore dei soldi* di Gomez-Travaglio’ (*Ibid.*: 173). Another University of Pisa scholar, Raffaele Donnarumma, although recognizing the specifically Italian (problematic) approach to “fiction” and “non-fiction”, defines *Gomorra* as an eminent example of ‘post-literature’ – that is, a kind of literature emerging from the postmodern wave which denies any possibility to catch the objective truth since it recognizes that all discourses entail a fictional level, as on a more popular ground that which has been demonstrated by the reality shows of the Nineties (where there is a deliberate confusion between what is usually considered “fiction” and what “non-fiction” is). Therefore, nowadays, writers seem to know only too well that such worlds are actually interrelated and *Gomorra* is not a ‘puro reportage, e come tale non è astretto a un dovere filologico di dichiarazioni bibliografiche, né un romanzo, e perciò non rivendica affatto il diritto di inventare. Tutto passa attraverso lo sguardo di Roberto, che si nomina nel libro e che mette costantemente in scena il suo rapporto diretto con il mondo di cui racconta’ (Donnarumma, 2009: 21).

From a different perspective, Guglielmi explains that *Gomorra* is actually structured on a two-folded module: on the one hand, it can be approached as a “visionary novel” – because of the incredible number of pieces of information on the *Sistema* apparatus; on the other, it can be defined as an “investigation novel” – since it deals with reality. It should be clear that Guglielmi assumes *Gomorra* to be a “novel”: indeed, since contemporary news is no more trustworthy (as a result of the emergence of visual culture and the net of economical interest, especially in Western culture), the novel, reactivating its original function of telling real facts, best fulfils Saviano’s intentions of telling the unsaid (Guglielmi, 2010: 374).

Finally, I would like to mention professor Alessandro Dal Lago’s view, who, by accepting Wu Ming’s broad definition of contemporary Italian literary style – called the *New Italian Epic* (Ming, 2008) – depicts *Gomorra* as a ‘docu/fiction, ovvero

narrazione “a piega”, in cui finzione letteraria e funzione documentaria si implicano [...] ad ogni riga’ (Dal Lago, 2010: 36). That is, he blurs the reality value of the text by reading it as a popular expression of both noir and graphic novels.⁶⁶

Let us summarize the above-mentioned definitions of *Gomorra*. From a genre perspective, the text proves to be hard to classify since it merges characteristics of a variety of literary forms. Although that stratification finally gives rise to two critical trends – the sustainers (Benedetti, Donnarumma, Gugliemi) and the detractors (Dal Lago) – *Gomorra* has an undoubtedly peculiar effect on literary decoding: since it does not properly chime in with any genre, it is generally best definable in negative terms (such as: it is neither a “fiction” nor a “non-fiction” novel, it does not reflect the testimony form, nor the reportage, etc.). As a consequence, its analyses might call for other perspectives to establish its structure in relation to the writer’s intentions.

Thus, in the following paragraphs, I will try to propose a different approach to *Gomorra*, based on the humanitarian framework developed in Chapter 1. According to my definition, a text is humanitarian when its main objective is to promote, defend, establish and generally fight against the violation of HRs. Many humanitarian texts are characterized by an uncertain ‘identity’ concerning literary genre (i.e. fiction and non-fiction). However, the distinctive feature of “humanitarian literature” lies in its illocutionary and perlocutionary force, namely in the possibility to produce tangible effects on the real world, in terms of HRs. Later, in Chapter 3, I will point out the deep power relations between Saviano’s words and HRs, here mainly understood in their function of restoring human beings’ dignity, which has been degraded by the rules of the *Sistema*.

⁶⁶ On the contrary, Benedetti asserts that *Gomorra* is not only outside the *noir* genre, but it has clearly crossed both postmodern and the new Italian realism borders (Benedetti, 2011: 117).

2.3.2 Gomorra: *Style and Structure*

To illustrate Saviano's style, it is useful to remember a famous definition of fiction given by Virginia Woolf in *A Room of One's Own* (1929), who compared it to a spider's web, attached ever so lightly perhaps, but still attached to life at all four corners. That is, fiction cannot escape reality and it is indissolubly linked to human beings. From that perspective, it is no surprise that Saviano should eclectically merge a variety of techniques – the journalistic style (phone tapping, police investigation and Camorra trials report), the testimony approach (first-hand stories along with his own direct experience) and autobiographical elements – in order to make all know what the *Sistema* is. Indeed, as discussed so far, *Gomorra* deals with a specific (inter)national reality from a 'bodily' perspective: the writer makes a long list of names and dates which he then ties up with the description of "detailed" murders committed by the *Sistema*, his personal life and testimony, other dependable witnesses' stories. The framework of all this is Naples, its city satellites and culture. Hence the narrator, who promptly introduces the reader to the *Sistema*, cannot but coincide with Saviano's voice: he wants to map its monstrous mechanisms, since knowing shall be leading to reacting.

As we said earlier, Saviano was involved, almost by chance, with illegal Chinese commerce and this experience allowed him to understand the links between the *Sistema* and the Italian world of fashion. As though following a long tradition of bodily-experiencing-and-then-denouncing⁶⁷ (ranging from Xenophon to politician Giustino Fortunato and philosopher Simone Weil), the author

⁶⁷ In this connection, he explicitly refers to Xenophon's understanding of the subjectivity of one's view and the necessity of a physical knowledge to become a connoisseur of a particular subject (Saviano, 2009: 173). In *Gomorra* Saviano had already reported the story of Fortunato, a senator-to-be, who, at the beginning of the XX century, visited on foot the whole South to understand the "Questione Meridionale" (Saviano, 2006: 262-263). On purpose, I added another important example of bodily *savoir*: Simone Weil's experience as a factory worker at Renault, Alsthom, and Forges de Basse-Indres factories in Paris (1934-35) and her consequently detailed analyses and denunciation of the workers' conditions (posthumously collected in *La Condition Ouvrière*, 1951).

experienced the terrible conditions of illegal work and the builders' unscrupulous indifference that notoriously distinguishes a *Sistema's* building-site:

Il potere dei clan rimaneva il potere del cemento. Era sui cantieri che sentivo fisicamente, nelle budella, tutta la loro Potenza. Per diverse estati ero andato a lavorare nei cantieri [...]. Un lavoro bestiale [...]. Lavorare in ogni condizione climatica, con il passamontagna in viso così come in mutande. Avvicinarmi al cemento, con le mani e col naso, è stato l'unico modo di capire su cosa si fondava il potere, quello vero (Saviano, 2006: 231-232).

Needless to say, Saviano cannot experience the whole *Sistema's* fields. Hence, he presents reliable and real characters that are deeply familiar with the subject he is going to present. We should again make clear that they are not invented “personae” dubbing Saviano's voice. On the contrary, they emerge as authorial witnesses of the *Sistema's* functioning, just like Saviano. Moreover, using direct speech, the author wishes to re-create the original “interview space”, so that the reader can virtually listen and make his own opinion about the situation. He does not aim at creating the fictional atmosphere of an ideal conversation, but at generating the right responsive mood in the reader, to whom he explains that:

Io so e ho le prove. Io so come hanno origine le economie e dove prendono l'odore. L'odore dell'affermazione e della vittoria. Io so come trasuda il profitto. Io so. E la verità della parola non fa prigionieri perché tutto divora e di tutto fa prova. E non deve trascinare controprove e imbastire istruttorie. Osserva, soppesa, guarda, ascolta. Non condanna in nessun gabbio e i testimoni non ritrattano. Nessuno si pente. Io so e ho le prove [...]. Non ho video compromettenti [...]. Né possiedo documenti ciclostilati dei servizi segreti. Le prove sono inconfutabili perché parziali, riprese con le iridi, raccontate con le parole e raccontate con le emozioni rimbalzate su ferri e legni [...]. La verità è parziale, in fondo se fosse riducibile a formula oggettiva sarebbe chimica. Io so e ho le prove e quindi racconto. Di queste verità (*Ibid.*: 234).

Some pages further on, Saviano closes the chapter by quoting again such assertions: ‘Io so qual è la vera costituzione del mio tempo, qual è la ricchezza delle imprese. Io so in che misura ogni pilastro è il sangue degli altri. *Io so e ho le prove. Non faccio prigionieri?* (*Ibid.*: 240, my own italics). As has been widely observed, Saviano does not list his sources but he prefers to rewrite them in a story-form. As regards this, Donnarumma postulates that it is then the narrator's voice who is

responsible for what he says: ‘[l]a ricostruzione [...] spetta alla voce narrante, che si assume così in prima persona la responsabilità di quanto afferma: piuttosto che citare un articolo di giornale, Saviano preferisce riscriverlo [p. es. 141]; e, più in generale, il suo compito è tramutare l’informazione e la testimonianza in racconto’ (Donnarumma, 2009: 21).⁶⁸ Notably, the scholar further explains, the role of Saviano is marginal to the story: he is not the protagonist, but a voice. It is for this reason that there are other characters supporting and tracing Saviano’s voyage: Pasquale, a talented and underpaid tailor who suddenly leaves his job because he realized that both the *Sistema* and Italian fashion industry totally ignored his HRs (Pasquale is the authorial voice for the chapter dedicated to textile national and international commerce); Mariano, a neo-laureate who eventually found a “job” in the clan and who is allowed to go and meet the inventor Kalashnikov, whose testimony is used to analyze illegal gun commerce; Matteo, one of the author’s friends, who, exhausted with the impossibility to find a regular job, decided to leave for Aberdeen (Scotland) where the clan had a legal restaurant. Matteo’s story is the starting point for delving again into *Gomorra*’s international power and its illegal and legal activities, the reasons that lead ordinary people to finally support the *Sistema*. Finally, I would like to mention Franco, an excellent student (he got his degree at Bocconi University) who becomes a “stakeholder” – a place-finder for hiding toxic wastes – for the *Sistema*. His experience is crucial to understand how illegal waste commerce functions.

Thus, exploring Camorra’s empire from different perspectives brings into being an overall sense of reliability: it is a multiple perspective that accompanies the reader and his/her personal judgment on what is narrated. *Gomorra* is not a self-

⁶⁸ This aspect has not been welcomed by Alessandro dal Lago, who, referring to the transfiguration of Annalisa Durante’s funeral, depicts *Gomorra* in harsh terms: ‘[e]siste una letteratura che trasfigura la realtà senza tradirla e una, che non esito a definire *cattiva*, che la falsifica, quali che siano le sue intenzioni. Nell’episodio in questione, si tratta, al di là dei particolari inventati, della descrizione *stereotipata* di un ambiente. E nella *fiction* (o *docu/fiction* che sia), gli stereotipi sono i pregiudizi che uno scrittore immagina soddisfare i potenziali lettori, e che quindi scodella loro in forma scritta’ (dal Lago, 2010: 60).

referential celebration of its writer (Dal Lago 2010), but it discusses the *Sistema's* apparatus by examining its specific mechanisms from ordinary people's perspectives, mapping out a detailed cartography.

Our understanding of Saviano's intentions also depends on the references to his relationship with the extraordinary figure of Don Peppino Diana. In the opening of the chapter dedicated to his life (pp. 241-265), Saviano asserts the importance of bodily remembering for his story, since it is an extraordinary *exemplum* of how words can be a powerful means of action. And, throughout the text, Saviano tries to "embody" the same feelings that had earlier connoted Don Diana's life and shaped his anti-*Sistema* practice:

Don Diana aveva compreso che doveva tenere la faccia su quella terra, attaccarla sulle schiene, sugli sguardi, non allontanarsi per poter continuare a vedere e denunciare, e capire dove e come le ricchezze delle imprese si accumulano e come si innescano le mattanze e gli arresti, le faide e i silenzi. Tenendo sulla punta della lingua lo strumento, l'unico possibile per mutare il suo tempo: la parola (Saviano, 2006: 251).

Needless to say, Saviano, as emerged in the analysis of ASSK's *Letters*, aims at addressing a wide audience, and thus he uses a common language, which is sometimes starred with local idioms that he promptly explains, either by literary definition or their usages:⁶⁹ '[g]li "ananassi" – he says – sono le bombe a mano che gli uomini delle paranze si portano al collo' (*Ibid.*: 117). Or, as in the following passage:

Pezzo era il nuovo modo per definire un omicidio. Anche Pikachu quando parlava dei morti della guerra di Secondigliano parlava dei pezzi fatti dai Di Lauro e dei pezzi fatti dagli scissionisti. "Fare un pezzo": un'espressione mutuata dal lavoro a cottimo, l'uccisione di un uomo equiparata alla fabbricazione di una cosa, non importa quale (*Ibidem*).

We should as well underscore that Saviano also shows the *Sistema's* obscure code in details: as an "expert" of the subject, he does want to explain the complex

⁶⁹ Although Saviano's cultural background is different from ASSK's, they both share intents and objectives that reach through a specific use and potentiality of the written word.

uses of its symbols to the reader. He strongly believes that presenting the whole *Sistema's* apparatus would also imply a different reaction among common people. In a certain sense, his *Gomorra* distantiates itself from the commercial field and its consumers' conceptions to lead the addressee into sharing the authentic experience of the narrator. Thus, no room should remain for any misunderstandings:

Un giorno vidi un gruppetto di persone non lontano da dove era stato ritrovato il corpo di Edoardo La Monica. Un ragazzo cominciò a indicare il proprio anulare e poi toccandosi la testa muoveva le labbra, senza emettere un suono. Mi venne in mente subito, come un cerino acceso davanti alle palpebre, il gesto di Vincenzo di Lauro nell'aula di tribunale, quel gesto strano, insolito, quel chieder come prima cosa, dopo anni che non vedeva il padre, dell'anello. L'anello, in napoletano "aniello". Un messaggio per indicare Aniello e l'anulare come fede. Quindi la fedeltà tradita, come stesse segnalando il ceppo familiare del tradimento. Da dove era arrivata la responsabilità dell'arresto. Chi aveva parlato (Saviano, 2006: 110).

Aniello La Monica era il patriarca della famiglia, per anni nel quartiere hanno chiamato i La Monica gli "anielli" [...] (*Ibid.*: 148).

Needless to say, the main rhetorical devices that Saviano experiments upon are personifications, metaphors and similes, which add up to the feeling that the *Sistema* is anchored to common people's reality. A case in point is the opening chapter, where the author describes Naples' actual port activities by means of powerful images:

[i]l porto di Napoli è una ferita. Larga. [...] Il porto di Napoli è il buco del mappamondo da dove esce quello che si produce in Cina [...]. Tutto quello che si produce in Cina viene sversato qui. Come un secchiello pieno d'acqua girato in una buca di sabbia che con il solo suo rovesciarsi, erode ancor di più, allarga, scende in profondità [...]. Il porto è staccato dalla città. Un'appendice infetta mai degenerata in peritonite, sempre conservata nell'addome della costa (*Ibid.*: 12).

And, later, he even draws on a more traditional and known allegorical language: '[b]isogna rifondare la propria immaginazione per cercare di comprendere come l'immensità della produzione cinese possa poggiare sullo scalino del porto napoletano. L'immagine evangelica sembra appropriata, la cruna dell'ago somiglia al porto e il cammello che l'attraverserà sono le navi [...]' (*Ibid.*: 16).

It is also important to note that Saviano's style is characterized by a wide employment of alliterations and synonyms, an overuse of commas and full stops, resulting in a sudden syncopated acceleration of his writing rhythm, as in the following passage:

Giravo per una Secondigliano sfiancata, calpestata da troppe persone, fotografata, ripresa, abusata. Affaticata da tutto. Riuscivo a fermarmi davanti ai murales di Felice Pignataro, davanti ai volti del sole, ai teschi ibridati coi pagliacci. Murales che regalavano al cemento armato un marchio di leggera e inaspettata bellezza (Saviano, 2006: 149).

This literary technique reaches its fullest expression in the long lists of data and names that, according to Guglielmi, brings about a “heap effect”, which is determinant for the ultimate embodiment of Saviano's thoughts and sentiments (Guglielmi, 2010: 379).

Gomorra is divided into two parts: the former deals with the definition and functioning of the *Sistema*, and the notorious clan war that took place in Secondigliano (Naples) during 2004 and 2005; the latter introduces the reader to the present and relevant business of the *Sistema* – “Cemento armato” and “terra dei fuochi” – passing through Don Peppino Diana's courageous story while cyclically referring to the above-mentioned clan war.

The text opens with a dedication to an anonymous “S.” followed by the interjection ‘maledizione’ (‘damn’) and by four quotations listed in a “pendulum movement”: they oscillate from Saviano's position (reflecting an Arendtian approach to reality) to the *Sistema*'s mentality and its cinematic symbols (from the film *Scarface*, 1983: ‘Il mondo è tuo’, [‘the world is yours’]) passing through a quotation from Machiavelli on winners' ruthlessness and a Camorrist's harsh comment on common people (from a phone tapping). The reader is suddenly ‘dipped’ into *Gomorra*'s context, objectives, data, structure and style. The very interjection makes for an intimate level of communication while betraying an initial

spirit of resignation⁷⁰ which counterbalances Saviano's final (although, this time, differently emphasized) cry 'Maledetti bastardi, sono ancora vivo!' (Saviano, 2006: 288). As regards the first quotation, it is by Hannah Arendt, an unquestionable authority in the analysis of evil mechanisms: 'Comprendere cosa significa l'atroce, non negarne l'esistenza, affrontare spregiudicatamente la realtà' (*Ibid.*:131) becomes Saviano's *motto*. It encodes the whole text and sometimes appears in the tumultuous sea of this complex story, as when he complies to his irresistible instinct to hang around ambush places: 'Di una cosa ero certo: non è importante mappare ciò che è finito, ricostruire il dramma di ciò che è accaduto [...]. Bisogna invece riuscire a capire se qualcosa è rimasto [...]. Cerco di capire cosa galleggia ancora di umano [...]' (*Ibidem*). The second quotation is a well-known aphorism by Machiavelli ('Coloro che vincono, in qualunque modo vincano, non ne portano vergogna') which perfectly fits the logics of the *Sistema*:

La logica dell'imprenditoria criminale, il pensiero dei boss coincide col più spinto neoliberalismo. Le regole dettate, le regole imposte, sono quelle degli affari, del profitto della vittoria su ogni concorrente. Il resto vale zero. Il resto non esiste. Poter decider della vita e della morte di tutti, poter promuovere un prodotto, monopolizzare una fetta di mercato, investire in settori d'avanguardia, è un potere che si paga con il carcere o con la vita. Avere potere per dieci anni, per un anno, per un'ora. Non importa la durata, vivere, comandare per davvero, questo conta [...]. Questa coscienza da samurai liberisti [...] la trovai sintetizzata in una lettera di un ragazzino rinchiuso in un carcere minorile [...]. La ricordo ancora. A memoria: 'Tutti quelli che conosce o sono morti o sono in galera. Io voglio diventare un boss. Voglio avere supermercati, negozi, fabbriche, voglio avere donne. Voglio tre macchine, voglio che quando entro in un negozio mi devono rispettare, voglio avere magazzini in tutto il mondo. E poi voglio morire. Ma come muore uno vero, uno che comanda veramente. Voglio morire ammazzato.' (*Ibid.*: 128-129).

Saviano finally defines that mentality as the 'imperativo quotidiano dell'uomo al tempo del mercato' (*Ibidem*), which he explains in terms very similar to those used by Machiavelli: 'fa' quello che devi fare per vincere, il resto non ti riguarda' (*Ibid.*: 198). The next step on the ladder towards the representation of the *Sistema*'s *motto*

⁷⁰ Such interjections are commonly followed by an exclamation mark – an indicator of strong emotions (e.g. rage or hatred). The lack of such punctuation gives the impression that the author's feelings are different from those evoked by the typical interjection form.

– its permeating authority⁷¹ – is the focalization on a Camorrist's perceptive and cultural background ('la gente sono vermi e devono rimanere vermi'), which is largely depicted in Saviano's long list of killed innocents: 'In questa Guerra le persone vengono stritolate senza colpa alcuna, vengono rubricate negli effetti collaterali o nei probabili colpevoli' (*Ibid.*: 133).

Quotations, thus, provide *Gomorra* with a first semantic structure. Noticeably, there is a continuous evoking of those initial sentences throughout the text, which again unfolds along a pendulum movement: the author merges various perspectives that function much like an attempt to depict a whole and tridimensional image of the *Sistema*, rather than a literary strategy to keep the reader's attention high. For example, let us briefly analyze the (thick) structure of the first 12 pages of the chapter dedicated to Don Peppino Diana:

- It opens with the narrator's personal experience of Don Diana's murder (he remembers what happened the day Don Diana was killed and his own feelings);
- It presents Don Diana, his life, mentality and the precise instant he understood he had to do something to contrast the tentacular *Gomorra* that was suffocating his native land;
- It reports his famous speech entitled 'Per amore del mio popolo non tacerò', which is interrupted by Saviano's analysis of the text, by Don Diana's notes on some Prophets' assertions, by the description of the Camorrist's culture (and some episodes), which are again contrasted with Don Diana's reactions;
- It zooms on the final murdering of the priest, using the reported speech while the narrator suddenly disappears leaving the reader alone to experience what the *Sistema* is;

⁷¹ Saviano asserts that '[i]l Sistema camorra è un potere che non coinvolge soltanto i corpi, né dispone soltanto della vita di tutti, ma pretende di artigliare anche la anime' (Saviano, 2006: 249).

- The final image of Don Diana's corpse surfaces together with the narrator, who this time introduces the notorious story of Renato Natale, an honest mayor of Casal di Principe, who decided to fight against the Camorra, Saviano's personal opinion, the anti-Mafia law concerning council administration;
- What follows is a long list of city governments that had been toppled for collusion with the Mafia;
- Saviano introduces Antonio Cangiano, who worked for the Municipality Council of Casapesenna and can be considered as another symbol of the struggle against the Camorra and the terrible wounding inflicted by the *Sistema*, its symbolic explanation and the consequent failure of Justice.

As shall be finally clear, such an apparently disharmonic textual structure paves the way for what usually stands unsaid, pushing to the fore for the wide audience a subject that would otherwise have been understood only by specialist readers. In one of his recent texts, Saviano clearly argues that '[l]o strumento letterario permette che le storie legate a determinati ambiti conquistino la cittadinanza universale [...] e diventino patrimonio della collettività' (Saviano, 2010: 24). Therefore, *Gomorra* is like a tapestry image whose texture is so tightly and deeply interwoven to require a connoisseur's eye, whose gaze might expand in various directions and reconstruct the mosaic of its main meaning.⁷²

2.3.3 *A Humanitarian Analysis of Gomorra*

In the previous paragraphs, we discussed ASSK's *Letters* in relation to the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, justifying that comparative analysis with the

⁷² In *La Parola contro la Camorra* (2010, DVD), Saviano asserts that readers have a crucial role as such in diffusing those words that consequently become "dangerous": a written story is thus turned into a crucial means for action.

author's explicit references to democracy and HRs throughout her text. Similarly, I would like to approach Saviano's *Gomorra* from the humanitarian lens I have described so far, with a view to further verifying if the issues that emerged – ranging from HRs violations to people's and media responsibility – really play a crucial role in shaping the literary word as a primarily democratic means for a moral awakening.

As we will see, Saviano's *Gomorra* is a ceaseless and open denunciation of the *Sistema's* violations of HRs. While going through the text, the reader meets with explicit references to treaties and institutions concerning HRs, as in the following passage about the total absence of any idea of them within the *Sistema's* war: '[n]elle guerre di Camorra la Croce Rossa non è riconosciuta, nessun clan ha firmato il trattato di Ginevra. Anche le macchine civetta dei carabinieri rischiano' (Saviano, 2006: 106). When analysing illicit weapon traffic, he also reports that:

Per valutare lo stato dei diritti umani invece gli analisti osservano il prezzo a cui viene venduto il kalashnikov. Meno costoso è il mitra, più i diritti umani sono violati, lo Stato di diritto è in cancrena, l'ossatura degli equilibri sociali è marcia e in disfacimento [...]. La camorra – gestendo una grossa fetta del mercato internazionale di armi – determinerebbe i prezzi dei kalashnikov, divenendo indirettamente il giudice dello stato di salute dei diritti dell'uomo in occidente (*Ibid.*: 199-200).

L'Italia spende in armi ventisette miliardi di dollari. Più dollari della Russia, il doppio di Israele. La classifica l'ha estesa l'istituto internazionale di Stoccolma per la ricerca sulla pace, il SIPRI. Se a questi dati dell'economia legale si aggiunge che secondo l'EURISPES tre miliardi e trecento milioni è il business delle armi in mano a camorra, 'ndrangheta, Cosa Nostra e Sacra Corona Unita, significa che seguendo l'odore delle armi che Stato e clan gestiscono si arriva ai tre quarti delle armi che circolano in mezzo al mondo (*Ibid.*: 203).

Later, Saviano describes *Spartacus*, the most complex and relevant trial against the Mafia in the late fifteen years:

Quello che sembrava una sorta di processo alla storia, come una Norimberga di una generazione di camorra, ma a differenza dei generalissimi del Reich, molti dei camorristi che erano lì continuavano a comandare, a essere i riferimenti dei loro imperi. Una Norimberga senza vincitori (Saviano, 2011: 220).

Finally, he refers to the European indexes on Mercedes Benz sales and murdering: at the end of the Nineties, both of them reached the first positions in Casal di Principe (Caserta), the capital of the business power of the *Sistema*. What might their relationship be? Saviano explains that the former is a status symbol for the Camorra, while the latter is a reminder of its power: ‘Una relazione quella tra Mercedes e morti ammazzati che potrebbe rimanere una costante d’osservazione per i territori di camorra’ (Saviano, 2006: 256).

Thus, the passages quoted above appear to disclose an appropriate ground for a humanitarian approach to *Gomorra*, and we will see if this leads to either a limited discussion or a deep analysis of the text. As happened with ASSK’s *Letters*, the study follows a four-section schema, shaped on Cassin’s HRs groupings. To avoid repetition, I have only reported some of the crucial articles (see Appendix 3 for details).

Articles 1-11: Personal and Civil Rights

The first article defines a human being according to three coordinates: freedom, dignity and rights. According to Joseph R Slaughter, the UDHRs notion of “person” is the legal vehicle of human dignity’ (Slaughter, 2009: 18) and, tautologically, its drafters took it for granted that their subject was the human being. “*Gomorra*’s opening pages sound like Dante’s famous warning before entering Hell’s first circle. Naples is a contemporary wasteland where HRs cannot prosper:

Il container dondolava mentre la gru lo spostava sulla nave. [...] I portelloni mal chiusi si aprirono di scatto e iniziarono a piovere decine di corpi. Sembravano manichini. Ma a terra le teste si spaccavano come fossero crani veri. Ed erano crani. Uscivano dal container uomini e donne. Anche qualche ragazzo. Morti. Congelati, tutti raccolti, l’uno sull’altro. In fila stipati come aringhe in scatola. Erano i Cinesi che non muoiono mai. [...]. Ne cadevano a decine dal container, con il nome appuntato su un cartellino annodato a un laccetto intorno al collo. Avevano tutti messo da parte i soldi per farsi seppellire nelle loro città in Cina (Saviano, 2006: 11).

Within the *Sistema* mentality, those who are considered outside its borders are “worms” (cf. the opening epigraph) and, inevitably, their lives have no value apart from a utilitarian function:

Anche qui i clan di Secondigliano sono in anticipo su tutti e il vantaggio è prezioso. Qui ci sono i Visitors [...] li usano come cavie, cavie umane, per poter sperimentare i tagli [...]. Dopo un po' il ragazzo iniziò a barcollare, schiumò appena all'angolo della bocca e cadde [...]. Il tizio vestito di bianco iniziò a telefonare al cellulare “A me pare morto [...] sì, vabbé, mo gli faccio il massaggio [...]”. Iniziò a pestare con lo stivaletto il petto del ragazzo [...]. Il massaggio cardiaco lo faceva con i calci. Un Visitors morto a Secondigliano è solo un ennesimo disperato su cui nessuno farà indagini [...]. Altrove ci sarebbero analisi, ricerche, congetture sulla morte. Qui solo overdose (*Ibid.*: 82-85).

According to *Article 2*, everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in the Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, color, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or any other status.

Furthermore, no distinction is allowed to be made on the basis of the *political, jurisdictional or international status of the country or territory to which a person belongs, whether it be independent, trust, non-self-governing or under any other limitation of sovereignty* (my own italics).

Saviano describes on the contrary a territory which is dramatically blind to HRs:

Parco Verde a Caviano. Prima c'era una cappella. Grande, bianca. Un vero e proprio mausoleo dedicato a un ragazzo, Emanuele, morto sul lavoro. Un lavoro che in certe zone è persino peggio del lavoro nero in fabbrica. Ma è un mestiere. Emanuele faceva rapine [...]. Lo ammazzarono con undici colpi sparati in pochi secondi. Sparare undici colpi a bruciapelo significa avere la pistola puntata ed essere pronti al minimo segnale a sparare [...]. Emanuele era incartocciato su se stesso, aveva in mano una pistola finta [...]. Emanuele era un ragazzo in questo angolo di territorio dove onore e rispetto non ti sono dati da pochi spiccioli, ma da come li ottieni [...]. Crepare a quindici anni in questa periferia sembra scontare una condanna a morte piuttosto che essere privati della vita (Saviano, 2006: 28-32).

At Emanuele's funeral, padre Mauro clearly asserts: 'I figli delle famiglie che nascono in altre parti d'Italia a quell'età vanno in piscina, a fare scuola di ballo. Qui non è così.' (Saviano, 2006: 33).

Describing another funeral of an innocent young girl, Saviano emphasizes the condemnation of being born in Naples:

Qui non esiste un attimo in cui il mestiere di vivere non appaia una condanna all'ergastolo, una pena da scontare attraverso un'esistenza brada, identica, veloce, feroce. Annalisa è colpevole di essere nata a Napoli. Nulla di più, nulla di meno (*Ibid.*: 173).

Paradoxically, the equality claimed by Article 1 is not the result of the recognition of humanity's inalienable rights, but of the Kalashnikov's leveling brutality: 'Nessuno, dopo l'invenzione del Kalashnikov, può dire di essere stato sconfitto perchè non poteva accedere alle armi. Ha svolto un'operazione di uguaglianza: armi per tutti, massacro per ognuno' (*Ibid.*: 197).

Article 11 focuses on the right to be judged through a public trial and fairly defended before the law. Without considering the huge amount of affiliates who are throughout the text reciprocally "put on trial", "sentenced" and executed by adversary clans, the reader meets with innocent people killed for futile reasons and whose death is even censored by media and political invisibility:

Sono i clan che decidono chi sei, quale parte occupi nel risico del conflitto. Le parti sono determinate indipendentemente dalle volontà. [...] In quell'istante, quel negozio dove lavorava Attilio era espressione di un'economia legata al gruppo degli spagnoli e quell'economia andava sconfitta. Natalia, Nata come la chiamava Attilio, è una ragazza stordita dalla tragedia. Si era sposata appena quattro mesi prima, ma non viene consolata, al funerale non c'è Presidente della repubblica, ministro, sindaco che le tiene la mano. Meglio così, forse, si risparmia la messa in scena istituzionale. Ma ciò che aleggia sulla morte di Attilio è un'ingiusta diffidenza. E la diffidenza è l'assenso silenzioso che le viene concesso all'ordine della camorra (*Ibid.*: 133).

Obviously, the passage quoted above also contrasts with Article 3, stating that: ‘Everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person’ (United Nations, 1948).

Apart from the already mentioned episodes of Emanuele’s life and death and Don Peppino Diana’s story, it is worth mentioning: the whole chapter of ‘La Guerra di Secondigliano’ (pp. 71-150, a long list of killed camorristi, whose memory is counterbalanced by that of the innocent people who were murdered as well: it is relevant to remember the story of young lovers Anna and Francesco and the notorious death of Gelsomina Verde); the feminine equivalent of ‘La Guerra di Secondigliano’, that is the Chapter entitled ‘Donne’ (pp. 151-173, where the tragic story of the fourteen-year old Annalisa Durante stands in the foreground); the case history of senator Lorenzo Diana (pp. 222-223), who lives under protection because he decided to fight against the Camorra’s power.

Articles 12-17: Social Rights

Article 12 deals with the private life of individuals and their right to protect honor and reputation.

As soon as Saviano describes and witnesses the murdering of an innocent person, he always puts his finger on people’s diffidence and prejudices: the one who is killed by the Camorra is necessarily involved in its mechanism: ‘[...] dopo ogni agguato il sospetto grava su tutti. Troppo perfetta è la macchina dei clan. Non c’è errore. C’è punizione’ (Saviano, 2006: 133).

Article 16 variously focuses on the right to start a sentimental relationship without external interferences. Nevertheless, the *Sistema’s* mentality has no ethics and brutally kills *fiancées* of young Camorristi. Two cases in point are Gelsomina and Anna’ stories: both of them are external to the *Sistema’s* apparatus, but guilty of having some relationships with affiliates. Saviano explains that ‘[i]n guerra non è

possibile più avere rapporti d'amore, legami, relazioni, tutto può divenire elemento di debolezza' (Saviano, 2006: 99).

Article 17 defends the right to property, which, again, is annihilated by the *Sistema's* apparatus. In the last chapter, the territories of Campania are imbued with apocalyptic colours:

L'agricoltura di questi luoghi, che esportava verdura fino in Scandinavia, crolla a picco. I frutti spuntano malati, le terre divengono infertili. Ma la rabbia dei contadini e lo sfacelo diventano ennesimo elemento di vantaggio, poiché i proprietari terrieri disperati svendono le proprie coltivazioni, e i clan acquistano nuove terre, nuove discariche a basso, bassissimo costo (*Ibid.*: 325-6).

Articles 21-26: Economic Rights

Article 21 highlights the importance of both democratic vote and social and individual participation to the government of a country. The above-mentioned stories of Renato Natale and Antonio Cangiano are exemplary of the extent to which the *Sistema* ignores free elections and popular will: Renato Natale was allowed to work only for four months as an incorruptible mayor of Casal di Principe, while Antonio Cangiano, trying to hinder the Camorra, was seriously wounded and, semi-paralysed, he was condemned to a painful life on a wheel-chair (*Ibid.*: 251-253). Needless to say, *Article 22* (guaranteeing social security) is constantly given the lie. As we have seen, within the *Sistema's* zoning no one can feel safe.

Article 23 deals with the “right to work” and its additional rights, such as “no discrimination”, “equal pay”, “just and favourable remuneration”, etc.

Throughout the text, Saviano constantly denounces how the *Sistema* transforms the very notion of work, adapting it to its own uses:

Parco Verde è una miniera per la manovalanza camorristica. Divengono spacciatori con stipendi senza percentuali sulle vendite. E poi autisti e pali, a presidiare territori anche a chilometri di distanza da casa loro. E pur di lavorare non chiedono il rimborso della benzina. Ragazzi fidati, scrupolosi nel loro mestiere. A volte finiscono nell'eroina. La

droga dei miserabili. Qualcuno si salva, si arruola, entra nell'esercito e va lontano, qualche ragazza riesce ad andare via per non mettere più piede in questi posti (Saviano, 2006: 30).

The contradiction between the right to work, with its supposed 'global' applicability, and the *Sistema's* local control is particularly evident in the fashion field:

Le fabbriche si ammonticchiano nei sottoscala, al piano terra delle villette a schiera. Nei capannoni alla periferia di questi paesi in periferia. Si lavora cucendo, tagliando pelle, assemblando scarpe. In fila. La schiena del collega davanti agli occhi e la propria dinanzi agli occhi di chi ti è dietro. Un operaio del settore tessile lavora circa dieci ore al giorno. Gli stipendi variano da cinquecento a novecento euro [...]. Qui le fabbriche formalmente non esistono e non esistono nemmeno i lavoratori. Se lo stesso lavoro di alta qualità fosse inquadrato, i prezzi lieviterebbero e non ci sarebbe più mercato [...] Non c'è contratto, non c'è burocrazia [...]. Non c'è rete di protezione. Diritti, giuste cause, permessi, ferie. Il diritto te lo costruisci. Le ferie le implori. Non c'è da lagnarsi [...]. Qui c'è un solo corpo, un'abilità, una macchina e uno stipendio. Non si conoscono dati precisi su quanti siano i lavoratori in nero in queste zone. Né quanto invece siano regolarizzati, ma costretti ogni mese a firmare buste paga che indicano somme mai percepite (*Ibid.*: 35-6).

Ma a crepare non sono solo i mafiosi. Fuori dalla fabbrica c'era una foto appesa su una porta. La foto di una ragazza piccola [...]. Era una ragazza incinta uccisa e gettata in un pozzo qualche anno fa. Lei lavorava qui. Un meccanico di queste zone l'aveva adocchiata; lei passava davanti alla sua officina, a lui era piaciuta e questo credeva fosse condizione sufficiente per averla. I cinesi lavorano come bestie, strisciano come bisce, sono più silenziosi dei sordomuti, non possono avere forme di resistenza e di volontà [...]. Era cinese, ogni gesto di visibilità è negato (*Ibid.*: 42-3).

Pasquale aveva una rabbia, ma una rabbia impossibile da cacciare fuori. Eppure la soddisfazione è un diritto, se esiste un merito questo dev'essere riconosciuto. Sentiva in fondo [...] di aver fatto un ottimo lavoro [...]. Ma non gli era stato detto niente [...]. Non poteva dire "Questo vestito l'ho fatto io" [...]. La notte degli Oscar, Angelina Jolie indossa un vestito fatto ad Arzano, da Pasquale. Il massimo e il minimo. Milioni di dollari e seicento euro al mese [...]. Ma in quel momento, quando ha visto quel vestito, si è sentito solo [...]. Il lavoro quando serve solo a galleggiare, a sopravvivere, solo a se stessi, allora è la peggiore delle solitudini (*Ibid.*: 44-5).

La manodopera in qualsiasi altro luogo avrebbe avuto un costo elevatissimo. Qui la totale assenza di lavoro, l'impossibilità di trovare altra soluzione di vita che non sia l'emigrazione, rende i salari bassi, bassissimi (*Ibid.*: 81).

Non lavorare per anni ti trasforma, essere trattati come mezze merde dai propri superiori, niente contratto, niente rispetto, niente danaro, ti uccide. O divieni un animale o sei sull'orlo della fine (Saviano, 2006: 99).

The first part of Article 25 deals with the right to health. Let us read the following passage on the ‘Terra dei Fuochi’, that is the territory overwhelmed with toxic waste that is promptly fired by Rom children:

Intanto si crepa di tumore continuamente. Un massacro silenzioso, lento, difficile da monitorare, poiché c’è un esodo verso gli ospedali del nord per quelli che cercano di vivere il più possibile. L’istituto Superiore della Sanità ha segnalato che la mortalità di cancro in Campania, nelle città dei grandi smaltimenti di rifiuti tossici, è aumentata negli ultimi anni del 21 per cento (*Ibid.*: 327).

The second part of Article 25 deals with the right to care and assistance for motherhood and childhood. Article 26 is about the right to education.

Gomorra has undoubtedly a powerful effect when establishing an equivalence between (usually) Third-world baby-soldiers and children coming from Southern Italy. This somehow changes the very received idea of Western teenager-hood and, crossing the national boundaries, it finally joins ranks with Piasecki’s description of the young’s daily experience of war.⁷³ Saviano thus projects the reader into a supposedly far-away and negative reality: baby-soldiers are in Italy, one of the European Union members States:

E’ guerra. Nessuno comprende come si combatterà, ma tutti sanno con certezza che sarà terribile e lunga [...]. La strategia è nuova. Prendere nella guerra ragazzini, elevarli a rango di soldato [...] (*Ibid.*: 91-2).

Li arruolano appena diventano capaci di essere fedeli al clan. Hanno dai dodici ai diciassette anni, molti sono figli o fratelli di affiliati, molti invece provengono da famiglie di precari. Sono il nuovo esercito dei clan di camorra napoletana [...] per numero sono un vero e proprio esercito [...]. Le mansioni sono diverse e di diversa responsabilità. Si inizia con lo spaccio di droga leggera, hashish soprattutto [...]. I gruppi di baby spacciatori sono fondamentali nell’economia flessibile dello spaccio perché danno meno nell’occhio, vendono droga tra un tiro di pallone e una corsa in motorino e spesso vanno direttamente al domicilio del cliente [...]. Spesso i ragazzini affiliati dopo i primi mesi di lavoro vanno in giro armati, un modo per difendersi e farsi valere [...]. Pistole automatiche e

⁷³ Saviano himself confesses that he was only thirteen when he firstly saw a murdered person (2006: 112). See also Saviano’s *La Parola contro la Camorra* (2010), section II, ‘Il racconto delle immagini’: here one can find images of murder scenes with children looking at them, as though it were just an everyday occurrence.

semiautomatiche che imparano a usare nelle discariche di spazzatura della provincia o nelle caverne della Napoli sotterranea (*Ibid.*: 80).

I clan per scoprire se i cantieri subappaltano i lavori a ditte “esterne” hanno bisogno di un monitoraggio continuo e insospettabile. Il lavoro è affidato ai ragazzini che osservano, controllano, portano voce ai capizona e da questi prendono ordini su come agire in caso il cantiere abbia “sgarrato” [...]. Capizona bambini, boss giovanissimi divengono interlocutori giovanissimi e spietati che seguono nuove logiche, impedendo a forze dell’ordine e antimafia di comprenderne le dinamiche (*Ibid.*: 119-120).

Is there any difference between these passages and Piasecki’s descriptions of baby-soldiers? Certainly, one could argue that the young people of Southern Italy might have more chances to move away in comparison to the total lack of freedom of Marie, her mates and family. Nevertheless, Saviano clearly draws a complex picture where impasse predominates. We might say that in the end there is a slight difference, which is however not based on a diverse “degree” of violence, but on the national reality and culture associated with that violence: ‘Nascere in certi luoghi’ – he asserts – ‘significa essere come il cucciolo del cane da caccia che nasce con l’odore di lepre nel naso. Contro ogni volontà, dietro la lepre ci corri lo stesso: anche se poi, dopo averla raggiunta puoi lasciarla scappare serrando i canini’ (*Ibid.*: 308).

Finally, I would briefly add that *Gomorra* or the Camorra does not allow for any form of freedom: one is bluntly confronted with the possibility to either become subjugated or affiliated to it. It also does not seem to contemplate other forms of being, apart from subordination and death. The Camorra defiantly writes down its own perverted “counterdiscourse” to the Italian democratic government that should regulate its territory as well.

The last article of the UDHRs (i.e. Article 30) sounds like a total utopia, if applied to the Italian underworld: ‘Nothing in this Declaration may be interpreted as implying for any State, group or person any right to engage in any activity or to

perform any act aimed at the destruction of any of the rights and freedoms set forth herein' (United Nations, 1948).

How should we define any sort of institutional paralysis that finally makes way for the atrocities described? How is it possible for a criminal organization to become a parallel (and in some way legitimate!) government? Is the Camorra so developed and rooted in our territory to become essentially invincible? So far, we have clearly heard Saviano's voice asserting that there is a possible reaction to Gomorra, although it is not so easy to spell it out:

Devi trovare qualcosa che ti carburì lo stomaco dell'anima per andare avanti, Cristo, Buddha, l'impegno civile, la morale, il marxismo, l'orgoglio, l'anarchismo, la lotta al crimine, la pulizia, la rabbia costante e perenne, il meridionalismo. Qualcosa. Non un gancio a cui appendersi. Piuttosto una radice sotto terra, inattaccabile. Nell'inutile battaglia in cui sei certo di ricoprire il ruolo di sconfitto, c'è qualcosa che devi preservare e sapere. Devi essere certo che si rafforzerà grazie allo spreco del tuo impegno che ha il sapore della follia e dell'ossessione. Quella radice a fittone che si incunea nel terreno ho imparato a riconoscerla negli sguardi di chi ha deciso di fissare in volto certi poteri (Saviano, 2006: 254).

Is that 'uncontaminated root' a first step on the ladder leading to an opposition to the *Sistema*? Is it really possible to practice HRs within a Camorra context? And, last but not least, has the "word" got so effective a power on reality? In the following chapter we will suggest some answers.

2.4 A General Overview of Jerry Piasecki's *Marie in the Shadow of the Lion*

To me, a humanitarian novel is one designed to assist those in need, the goal is not to make money but to assist to make a difference.

Jerry Piasecki

Text: *Marie in the Shadow of the Lion* was written by Jerry Piasecki⁷⁴ and published by UN's organisation in 2000. On the front cover, together with the title, one may read an indication regarding genre: 'A *humanitarian* novel' (my own italics). That is, *Marie* is explicitly connoted within a humanitarian perspective which contributes to legitimize and encourage my notion and understanding of the "humanitarian" literature discussed so far. It is also defined in terms of a novel, that is as a fictional narrative. At the same time, the Foreword by the ex-Secretary General of the *United Nations* Kofi Annan specifies that '[t]he book you are about to read is a work of fiction but the story it tells is true' (Annan, in Piasecki, 2000: III).

Form and Audience: the text is an illustrated book mainly addressed to young, Western readers between the ages of 12 and 15 years. The text started to circulate in digital format, but it is now available for purchase also from popular Internet booksellers.⁷⁵

⁷⁴ As regards the author's bio and the summary of the story, see Appendix 3.

⁷⁵ The text is freely downloadable from the following web address: <http://cyberschoolbus.un.org/childsoldiers/whatsgoingon/Marie.pdf>. Retrieved: December, 2011.

Structure: *Marie* is organised into four parts: a Forward; the main body containing Marie's story, divided into 13 short chapters (from 1400 to 2500 words approx.); an epilogue and a final section entitled 'Your Turn'.

As already mentioned, in the opening section there is a signed letter addressed to the reader and written by Kofi A. Annan. He and the publisher, the United Nations, stand as the guarantors for the text's reliability and they aim at fostering a sense of collective responsibility in the readers since they are defined as 'the leaders of tomorrow' (Annan, in Piasecki, 2000: III). Reminding us of Saviano's uncontrollable rage and nausea – a sort of "explosive evidence" of his deeply-felt reaction against the *Sistema* –, Annan suggests to use 'our sense of outrage to stop them [brutal things] happening' (*Ibidem*). As we extensively saw for ASSK, the letter-form implies both a virtual presence of the interlocutors, and the writer's expectation to receive an answer from the reader. Moreover, Annan aims at creating an intimate "communication space" when using 'Dear friend' as an opening formula (*Ibidem*). He therefore appears to speak to the reader as a wise father and, through a *crescendo* movement (from a protective attitude, passing through an emphatic *we* to a responsible *you*), he finally assures that '[t]he choice will be yours. I hope that your generation will be the first to stand united against evil, injustice, hatred and indifference and say in one voice: no more and never again' (*Ibidem*).

What follows is an anonymous African mother's story illustrating the relevance of facing problems while they are still little, before they escape our control. Preceding the opening section of the story, her words sound like a terrible omen rather than a wise piece of advice. The message can thus be compared and contrasted with the one-page tragic epilogue, quoting a dialogue between two workers of a missionary centre where a girl, evidently shocked, managed to arrive: "Poor child, she must have gone through hell" "Or worse" – they say. "Well, [...] At least she is alive" (Piasecki, 2000: 106). Marie (the narrator has finally revealed

her identity) gives her answer in a whispering voice – while tragically evoking the words of Isabelle and Joseph: “‘Don’t you understand? They already did [killed me]’” (*Ibidem*).⁷⁶ One is thus bound to realize that the African mother’s advice has not been followed: “‘[i]f you don’t deal with the holes the rats make, soon you have holes big enough for snakes, who will take your life’”. However, as I shall point out in Chapter 3 there is also another, more optimistic, way to interpret the African’s mother advice, which corresponds to that of the UN in publishing the book.

Similarly, Annan’s letter is echoed by the one included in the final section, where the author argues that ‘So far, no generation has been able to stop these terrible things from happening. We hope that maybe, just maybe, yours will be the first. [...]. Remember, if you want to help – you can. If you want to change the world – you will’ (*Ibid.*: 108, 110). Notably, Piasecki states again that the narrated facts are not invented but true, evoking Annan’s initial words: ‘the book you are about to read is a work of fiction but the story it tells is true. What happens to Marie happens to far too many young people’ (*Ibid.*: III). Nevertheless, the final letter does not show Annan’s rhetorical devices and seems to catalyze the reader’s empathy in a more immediate fashion. It opens with an effective statement: ‘[i]f you want to, you can change the world’ (*Ibidem*), to explain then how the book came about – with references to the UN’s organization and intentions as well as data analyses – and the relevant role of the reader to ‘make a difference’ (he lists six simple possible actions, which I will discuss in Chapter 3).

Content: the story is about a young African girl experiencing “hell” (due to a terrific civil war) on the eve of her 13th birthday (the total amount of the chapters

⁷⁶ This final image might echo Saviano’s description of those people who finally gave up fighting the Camorra since they lost all that had been giving them the strength to go on: ‘Chiudersi, diventare silenzioso, quasi muto, una volontà di scappare dentro di sé e smettere di sapere, di capire, di fare. Smettere di resistere, una scelta di eremitaggio o resa un momento prima di sciogliersi nei compromessi dell’esistente.’ (Saviano, 2006: 263).

echoes thus her young age). The events described occur in the span of three weeks, as we evince from a comparison of the initial and final dates.

Scope: the text is clearly intended for didactic purposes: in the final section, we are told that the book comes from an honourable UN project of world peace and freedom (Piasecki, 2000: 111). In that section there are also indications regarding the discussed themes and the text style. One is also told that there is an intentional combination of literary inventions and educational purposes: the book is structured and designed for secondary-school teenagers and teachers, who are provided with a guide to the text itself. As explained by Piasecki, the form of the novel was chosen because it best suited the interests of teachers and students: ‘A novel is of more substance than a short story to most teachers. Also, it is over 100 pages long, so it equals the size of other novels for young readers. I am also the author of young reader books outside the UN, and all are about the same length.’ (Piasecki, 2009). Therefore, the text form is functional to its recipients and to its use in school education. Hence, the final goal of *Marie* is to educate, motivate and activate young people in the field of humanitarian issues and turn them into “peace ambassadors”.

Style: As the text is didactic and for young readers, it is written in a simple way. Syntactical arabesques and rhetorical devices are reduced to a minimum standard. Piasecki uses the same expressions for characters who slowly become similar, introducing a repetition strategy that should help readers to easily interpret the text. Moreover, as Saviano and ASSK, Piasecki uses details to exclusively support the reliability of his story, while restraining from a spectacularization of sufferance. “Strong images” have been purposefully avoided by the author, as we are reminded in the final section of the book: ‘everything you just read, *and much worse*, has happened’ (Piasecki, 2000: 108, my own italics). Nevertheless, the story is

far from being light and easy. As pointed out by Annan, the story may be upsetting and alarming to young readers. However, there is no intent to misuse the other's sufferance. Annan wants to create both a humanitarian space of presence, by exploiting one's own feeling of outrage, and a sense of possible actions to be taken to stop bad things from happening.

2.4.1 *A Humanitarian Analysis of Marie*

The text is mainly centred on the UDHRs' articles dealing with family and children (articles 16, 25 and 26). Indeed, *Marie's* story denounces the agony of children and families caught in combat, and how their life can suddenly change. Particularly relevant is chapter 1, which plays an important role in both developing the story and anticipating themes and events, in a *crescendo* of violence which will finally lead to the *climax* (Marie's going to be raped by the Colonel in chapter 12) and the tragic ending (Joseph dying for Marie's survival in chapter 13). Moreover, the first and last chapter are circularly linked to each other since they both remind the reader about Marie's birthday (a day that for a teenager should be particularly happy). More specifically, the former begins with 'Marie Ngonga was almost 13 years old. Her birthday was only a month away' (Piasecki, 2000: 2); while the latter ends with an effective white page, where the touching lines of a sad poem appear in the middle:

Marie Ngonga
was almost
13 years old
Her birthday
was only a week away (*Ibid.*: 107)

Let us briefly analyze both chapters.

The story opens with the description of a hilarious school break: a group of African teenagers – including the main characters, Marie and Joseph – are having fun in the yard outside the school, like most of the supposed Western young readers are used to doing (e.g. pulling the teacher's leg). In this way, the author creates a 'common ground' of life experience between African kids and readers. Nevertheless, some doubts on such a parallel soon arise. Although these children's interests, attitudes and mentality are much like the readers' (they like having fun, playing soccer and making plans for future, they start feeling for the other sex),

there are signals of an abnormal difference – which we can visualize as the top of a huge iceberg of HRs abuses. In other words, the author makes us experience the terrible turning of an “ordinary” life into the nightmare of a civil war.

It is thus no coincidence that the narrator abruptly introduces Marie’s notion and experience of “school”:

[that] small cinderblock building that served as her school, and when needed a shelter for villagers when rockets or sounds of artillery fell nearby. She could tell the difference between the two sounds they made before they landed and exploded. All her friends could (Piasecki, 2000: 2).

That is, the school is apparently a shelter capable of protecting Marie and her mates from violence. Yet, it is not such a safe place: Mr. Alazzar, their teacher, even uses his ‘learning stick’ to convey his own authority to the students and that ‘painful lashing’ is still an ordeal for Joseph (*Ibid.*: 4). Someway, violence permeates Marie and her friends’ lives, although there are some exceptions, like her mate Robert, who joyfully embodies a non-violent philosophy: ‘He was one of the smaller boys of the village, and got out of trouble with other boys by making them laugh rather than getting into a fight’ (*Ibid.*: 8).

Marie is presented as an extraordinarily beautiful and talented girl who wishes to achieve a complete ‘personal freedom’ and ‘realization’ (*Ibid.*: 6), as declared in the first two UDHRs articles. As opposed to this, from the very first pages, some notorious cultural prejudices against women come to the fore: they are allowed to go to school only as far as a basic level of learning is concerned, and they are supposed to be better employed at home after a brief upbringing in literacy. Usually, their life goal boils down to ‘catch a husband’ (*Ibid.*: 12) – as happens with Marie’s elder sisters. Mr. Alazzar himself does not trust girl teenagers who continue studying (Piasecki, 2000: 7).

Finally, I would also like to note that Marie’s and Joseph’s houses could not be properly defined in such terms from a HRs perspective: they are in fact small,

built with metal, without a proper floor and with no running water. Thus also Article 25 is unquestionably disappointed. Nevertheless, the description of Marie's regular routine – her helping to clean the kitchen and doing her homework before going out to play with her friends – makes way for an ordinary space between characters and readers. This linking point lasts only for a moment, since the first chapter's closure finally introduces us to a dark voyage toward “hell”, where no HR can shed light: ‘But, when shadows began to appear, and twilight approached, all games and playing stopped. Marie had to be home before dark. Everyone had to be home before dark’ (*Ibid.*: 12).

The final chapter thus deflates all the hopes that fed the opening one: there is a total absence of humanity, a complete blotting out of the UDHRs. It zooms on Marie, savagely beaten by the Colonel, leader of the rebels who also wants to rape her. Shifting to Article 5 of the UDHRs, that image stands in terrible opposition to what the Declaration itself states: ‘[n]o one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment’ (United Nations, 1948). Within this overwhelming sufferance, she remembers her parents’ sweet voices (we know that they were cruelly killed and burned) encouraging her to react, although ‘[s]he only wanted to rest, to sleep, to die’ (Piasecki, 2000: 101). She also thinks of Joseph, her friend and mate, with whom she enjoyed running – a sort of “love ritual” (Marie's parents did the same before falling in love, Chapter 1). Yet, there is no room left for joy. Running now implies a different meaning: it is the only way to escape from other atrocities and within that absolute ‘heart of darkness’ – it is no coincidence that even the atmosphere progressively loses light and meaning – love is completely annihilated. That is, Marie – like her *alter ego* Isabelle and then Joseph before her – has been finally denied the essential tenets of the UDHRs: she has neither dignity nor personality any more. We had previously seen her crawling into a corner like a beast (Piasecki, 2000: 97) while now, covered with blood and anesthetized by violence, she tries to ‘run away from the rising sun’ (*Ibid.*: 104).

Unfortunately, the last erasure of HRs must still occur: Joseph is running with her, but we know that Marie is faster. He does not want them to kill her too, and therefore prefers to stop and let her go:

‘Good morning, my friends’ Joseph shouted, trying to sound drunk. [...]. ‘Where is she? Where’s Marie?’ Paul screamed and waved his machete in front of Joseph [...]. ‘You helped Marie escape [...]. Now you’re going to pay’ [...]. ‘Paul, Paul, Paul,’ Joseph shook his head. ‘I don’t know what you’re...’. The first machete hit Joseph just under the cheekbone, splintering his jaw. The second came down in the middle of his forehead, splitting open his skull. The rest didn’t matter (*Ibid.*: 104).

Apart from the cruelty of the execution, which, as pointed out above, is meant to provoke the reader at the emotional level, what strikes us most is the fact that Paul was one of the schoolchildren turned into a baby soldier by the rebels. This, of course, clashes with the right to social protection for all children (article 25).

Finally, I would underline that Joseph’s sacrifice does not hinder the murdering of Marie: she has no hopes any more. She has lost every chance to achieve happiness.

As should be clear, Marie’s story serves to paradoxically illustrate the impotence of a written document (namely the UDHRs) to exorcise by itself such horrible situations.

According to Slaughter, ‘international humanitarian human rights law has little formal immediacy, lacking administrative formations, social structures, and enforcement instruments comparable to those of the modern nation-state’ (Slaughter, 2007: 25). The starting point consists in addressing the readers as those who can really choose their future. This is what Piasecki makes clear: ‘we can’t wait for treaties to be signed or laws to be obeyed. We have to save lives now’ (Piasecki, 2000: 109). In other terms, he suggests that the humanitarian word, a novel, can

trigger consciences more promptly than any appealing for the UDHRs articles.⁷⁷ That chart is useless without a global support. It is better to educate potentially new leaders on the values of peace and HRs than try to confront them once they have grown up under the dark sky of violence. In the next chapter we will try to verify this hypothesis.

⁷⁷ In Chapter 3, the paradigmatic question of how literature might create “structures of thought” shall be approached from a humanitarian point of view (Hunt, 2007; Benedetti, 2011).

2.5 A General Overview of Nadine Gordimer's *The Ultimate Safari*

What is the purpose of writing? For me personally, it is really to explain the mystery of life, and the mystery of life includes, of course, the personal, the political, the forces that make us what we are while there's another force from inside battling to make us something else.

Nadine Gordimer

Nadine Gordimer's short story *The Ultimate Safari*, first published by British *Granta* in 1989, and later included in her 1991 collection, *Jump and Other Stories*, reconstructs the misadventures of an unnamed Mozambican narrator and part of her family fleeing guerrilla violence to go to a refugee camp across the border in South Africa. In an unrecorded talk she gave at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg in 1991, Gordimer claimed that the germination of this story came to her through her visiting a camp for Mozambican refugees in the late 80's, along with a BBC team.⁷⁸ In the London *Observer*, she later read a travel advertisement which described African adventure as the ultimate safari: 'I thought – she commented – what I've just seen is the ultimate safari'.⁷⁹

The so-called "bandits" alluded to by the story's main character and first-person narrator are, presumably, members of RENAMO, the National Resistance of Mozambique that was first led by the Rhodesian army with the clandestine support of South Africa, to overthrow Mozambique's Marxist government. By the time the events of this story take place, liberation movements in countries across Africa had long since swept whites from power, with South Africa being the single

⁷⁸ Available online: www.encyclopedia.com. Retrieved: October 4th, 2011.

⁷⁹ Anshika Misra, 'Gordimer on her Ultimate Safari', *Daily News and Analysis*, November 10th, 2008, available online: www.dnaindia.com. Retrieved: October 4th, 2011.

exception. Throughout the 1970's and 1980's, in an attempt to protect itself and its white power structure, the South African government supported the destabilization efforts of counter-rebels in its black-controlled, neighbouring countries by financing armed incursions and raids, such as the ones that the narrator describes in the story.

Text: *The Ultimate Safari* was originally published in Great Britain (1989) and later included in *Jump and Other Stories* (1991). What is significant for our approach here, is that it was also included in *Telling Tales* (2004), an anthology co-authored and edited by Nadine Gordimer (published by Bloomsbury). All the profits of this work were aimed at funding *Treatment Action Campaign* (TAC) operations. That NGO responds to African AIDS emergency.

Among the short stories collected here, there are texts by Chinua Achebe, Margaret Atwood, Günter Grass, Salman Rushdie and Susan Sontag.

Form and audience: It is a “short story”⁸⁰ whose ideal audience consists of national and international readers, teenagers included. Although the narrator is a child, whose gaze is typically ingenuous, the text cannot be considered as an example of children's literature for both its content and semantic/communicative levels.⁸¹

⁸⁰ In *Selecting my Stories*, Gordimer asserts that ‘[t]o write one [short story] is to express from a situation in the exterior or interior world the live-giving-drop – sweat, tear, semen, saliva – that will spread in intensity on the page; burn a hole in it’ (Gordimer, 1975: 117).

⁸¹ According to Johan U. Jacobs, the opening of ‘Once Upon a Time’ – another short story of *Jump of the Other Stories* – ‘provides a metafictional comment on the entire collection. Speaking in the voice of a novelist, the narrator begins by reflecting on the space she occupies in the “house of fiction”: she does not write either children's stories or on someone's demand’ (Jacobs, 2001: 201).

Structure: The 12 page-text is provided with an epigraph quoted from a “Travel Advertisement”⁸² (*Observer*, London, November, 27th, 1988) regarding typical African expeditions by Western people whose light-hearted sense of adventure stands in opposition to the terrible reality experienced by Gordimer’s characters throughout their flight across South African “Kruger Park”. According to British scholar Dominic Head, ‘[t]he story epigraph [...] makes quite explicit the point about how power and the control and representation of space are inextricably linked’ (Head, 1994: 177).

The text is divided into two parts: the former deals with the departure of the narrator’s and others’ family members from their village in Mozambique to a refugee camp in South Africa, passing across the above-mentioned Kruger Park; the latter describes their two-year and one-month long sojourn in a refugee tent. The two parts are visually divided by a typographic blank space.

Content/Themes: The short story deals with the nine-year-old narrator’s family (her grandparents and elder and younger brothers) who are escaping from the Mozambique civil war. Presumably, both parents are dead, as claimed in the opening lines: ‘[t]hat night our mother went to the shop and she didn’t come back. Ever. What happened? I don’t know. My father also had gone away one day and never come back; but he was fighting in the war’ (Gordimer, 2004 [1989]: 269). Hence, the narrator’s family appear to start their safari-journey towards an idealized place where ‘there was no bandits and there was food’ (*Ibid.*: 171). Yet, awaiting them are other shocking events, all adding to a pervasive feeling of fear: the bandits’ retaliations (*Ibid.*: 269-271) are replaced by the animals’ terrible ferocity of

⁸² Here is the entire passage, which sounds as antiphrastic and imbued with bitter irony, when related to Gordimer’s story: “The African Adventure Lives On...You can do it!/ The ultimate safari or expedition/ With leaders who know Africa’ (Gordimer, 2004 [1989]: 269).

Kruger Park (*Ibid.*: 271-277, last paragraph) and are somehow called back by the poor conditions of the refugee camp (*Ibid.*: 277-282).⁸³

Scope: Gordimer aims at highlighting the story-telling potentialities – an ancient and mythologized mode of knowing and fostering reactions as she openly states in her “Introduction” to the collection:

Their stories capture the range of emotions and situations of *our* human universe: tragedy, comedy, fantasy, satire, dramas of sexual love and of war, in different continents and cultures. The reader learns about others – and about oneself, revealed as only fiction, the ancient art of story-telling can do and always has done. Along with making music, the art is the oldest form of enchantment as entertainment. [...]. All [these writers] have come together to bring the joy of reading to whoever takes up this unusual and remarkable collection of creative talent. [...]. Musicians have given their talent to jazz, pop, and classical concerts for the benefits of the 40 million worldwide men, women, and children infected with HIV/AIDS, two thirds of whom are in Africa. We decided that we too should wish to give something of our ability, as imaginative writers, to contribute in our way to the fight against this disease from which no country, no individual, is safely isolated (*Ibid.*: IX-X, my italics).

At the same time, her tale of “history from the inside” opens a door on silenced realities. Indeed, the villagers’ escape is a window on both the consequences of Mozambican civil war and those fundamental socio-historical aspects of Africa which are extensively hidden to the Western gaze. Similarly to Truman Capote’s understanding of journalism and fiction, Gordimer explains in her essay ‘The Essential Gesture’ that the journalistic account is basically superficial while the writer’s ‘*transformation of experience*’ manages to ‘reveal its full meaning and significance’ (Gordimer, 1984: 298). Despite the everlasting *querelle* on the nature of “fiction” and “non-fiction”, she does not label her works under any category but

⁸³ According to Jacobs, this story – as the others of the *Jump* collection – is mainly ‘concerned with subjects who live “border lives” which lead to unhomeliness. The experience is also potentially productive as space opens up for new identities to be negotiated out of the conflictual texts of their lives. For the child in the “Ultimate Safari”, this takes place in the vast tent for Mozambican refugees’ (Jacobs, 2001: 203). Nevertheless, I believe that the tent can be interpreted as an illusion of a transition, since it actually stands for a liminal space leading nowhere, an objectified interregnum that provides terrain for the same dynamics from which the protagonists escape.

explicitly devotes her talent to the truth.⁸⁴ She knows that – where there is no democracy – the ‘pen [...] is a weapon not mightier than the sword’ (*Ibid.*: 288). The author is thus aware that the detailed description of the narrator’s feelings and experience increasingly allows her to move from a general level of dramatic representation to an intimate dialogue with the reader. She embodies her view of writing as the writer’s *essential gesture* to society: ‘the urge to *make* with words as social being belongs, in fact, to a context of responsibilities’ (*Ibid.*: 285). She feels the imperative of Camus’ being ‘more than a writer’ (*Ibid.*: 288).

In this changing perspective, the initial idea of a safari as a Western “extreme” sport is deconstructed by that of a physical and metaphorical hunting where people figure out as preys. As a result, the exciting invitation we can read on the Kruger Park website, ‘enjoy thrilling game drives and walking safaris – find out what it is like to be close to a pride of Lion, feel the excitement and intensity of a South African safari in Kruger National Park’,⁸⁵ acquires ironic meanings. Indeed, it can be shown to find even a literal correspondence in the scene where the escaping villagers and our narrator are almost torn apart by ‘pride lions’ (Gordimer, 2004 [1989]: 275). Moreover, the symbol of Kruger Park gives Gordimer the chance for an open denunciation of the apartheid system. This time it is significantly the grandmother who, from her experienced and wise point of view, leaves no doubt regarding interpretation. The child is surprised by the fact that in the South African school where she is allowed to go they should speak her language. Thus, the old woman proceeds to explain: ‘[L]ong ago, in the time of our fathers, there was no fence that kills you, there was no Kruger Park between them and us, we were the same people under our own king, right from our village we left to this place we’ve come to’ (*Ibid.*: 280).

⁸⁴ In ‘Living in the Interregnum’ she explains that ‘I remain a writer, not a public speaker: nothing I say here will be as true as my fiction’ (Gordimer, 1988[1982]: 264).

⁸⁵ From the park homepage. Available online: www.krugerpark.co.za. Retrieved: September 30th, 2011.

Kruger Park's animals are also symbols of the white man's ferocity, instead of an embodiment of "healthy" instinctual forces.⁸⁶ They are a sort of terrible dictators in a 'country of animals'⁸⁷ surrounded by deadly electric fences. This land is clearly artificial and stands in a compelling opposition to the narrator's understanding of her own country: '[t]here was a man in our village without legs – a crocodile took them off, in our river; but all the same our country is a country of people, not animals' (*Ibid.*: 272).

In order to go across Kruger Park they have somehow to leave their *humanitas* behind and become like other animals: '[h]e said we must move like animals among animals, away from the roads, away from the white people's camps' (*Ibid.*: 273). They even eat baboon food, and although it is evidently 'hard to be like the animals' (*Ibidem*), the narrator finally exclaims: 'I wanted to lie down like the lions' (*Ibid.*: 274). When they are later attacked by real lions, it is an "animal shout" from the man leading the fugitive group that manages to warn them away (*Ibid.*: 275). This slow metamorphosis paves the way for the epilogue, characterized by another climax.

After the threatening tension created by the presence of bandits and animals, the story probes into the inadequacy of white humanitarian operations. The refugee camp is another artificial land where the protagonists go on experiencing a phantom reality: they have to sojourn there for a long time and are constantly controlled. While adults are not allowed to work (*Ibid.*: 280), children may attend school – a "concession" which is given for their original belonging to the same ethnic group. Their inner dignity of human beings is then slowly denied. Apart from their names, there is no difference between Kruger Park and the refugee

⁸⁶ Gordimer's allegorical use of animals is also illustrated by Dominic Head in his analysis of a 'parallel plots' technique in her *Something out There* (Head, 1994: 177-179).

⁸⁷ The term "animal" implies a wider connotation since it implicitly refers, as we shall see, to the becoming-animals of the fugitives. It is also tied back to the previous "bandits" and anticipates the white man's apartheid mentality and biases.

camp: '[e]very time my eyes dropped closed I thought I was walking, the grass was long, I saw the elephants, I didn't know we were away' (*Ibid.*: 279).

In a sense, they become the "new pets" for the white woman journalist's "safari" (*Ibid.*: 281).⁸⁸ Here, follows the passage where this meeting is described:

A white woman squeezed into our space [...]. How long have you been living like this? She means here? Our grandmother said. In this tent, two years and one month. And what do you hope for the future? Nothing. I'm here. But for your children? I want them to learn so that they can get good jobs and money. Do you hope to go back to Mozambique – to your own Country? I will not go back. But when the war is over – you won't be allowed to stay here? Don't you want to go home? I didn't think our grandmother wanted to speak again. I didn't think she was going to answer the white woman. The white woman put her head on one side and smiled at us. Our grandmother looked away from her and spoke – There is nothing. No home (Gordimer, 2004: 281).

Moreover, the dullness and total lack of empathy of this stereotyped interviewer presented in the final lines of the story are meant to awaken readers to the superficiality and expectancies of much of Western information. The epilogue can be read in this perspective. Counterbalancing it are however two different and contrasting points of view: the former is embodied by the grandmother's lack of future hopes: like Piasecki's Marie, she has already been "killed". The latter is provided by the narrator's voice, both innocent and prophetic:

Why does our grandmother say that? Why? I'll go back. I'll go back through that Kruger Park. After the war, if there are no bandits any more, our mother may be waiting for us. And maybe when we left our grandfather, he was only left behind, he found his way somehow, slowly, through the Kruger Park, and I'll be there. They'll be home, and I'll remember them (*Ibid.*: 281- 282).

The reader cannot but suspend his/her judgment.

⁸⁸ According to Professor of English Rita Barnard, Gordimer presents the journalists as a new sort of safari-goers: "Through this autobiographical figure, she inscribes in her text a curiously self-deconstructing element, a warning against the very real possibility that the hunger of Africa's people, no less than the feeding habits of its wildlife, may provide fodder for the naturalizing and spectacularizing operations of myth – literary or otherwise" (Barnard, 1998).

Style: The point of view is that of an unnamed and scarcely educated first-person narrator, a black ten-year old girl. She relates the events she is experiencing during her escape from Mozambique. Although the narrator's perspective may be limited, her grandmother's opinions, behaviour and perceptions compensate and amplify her account. In a certain sense, the child's "naiveté" and impossibility to interpret all the signs and facts she accurately describes transform her voice into a neutral and witnessing instrument. Indeed, she implicitly gives readers more freedom to form their own ideas on characters and events, because a more mature narrator might have been tempted to turn into a spokesperson for a political view.⁸⁹ Let's see the child's description of the alleged death of her grandfather. As he disappeared in the grass, 'insects were singing in our ears and we couldn't hear him moving through the grass' (*Ibid.*: 275) and 'ugly birds with hooked beaks and plucked necks flying round and round above us' (*Ibid.*: 276). The young narrator then looks at her silent grandmother, who is watching the condors too. Other people set out to leave and she 'looked at us, me, my first born brother, and my little brother on her lap' (*Ibid.*: 276-277). It would thus seem that the narrator suddenly realises her grandmother's concern: '[t]ears came out of my eyes and nose onto my hands but our grandmother took no notice' (*Ibid.*: 277).⁹⁰ The reader goes then through connotative juxtapositions allegorizing the characters' sufferance. Stephen Clingman argues that Gordimer is an extraordinary observer, whose style is pervaded with details – relating to colours, form, smell, sounds – which make her able to paint images of life (Clingman, 1993). Exemplary is the following passage where the fugitives are attacked by lions:

⁸⁹ Gordimer uses Flaubert's assumption in connection with the impartiality of great art to further define the writer's 'essential gesture', mainly founded on his/her social responsibility bond (Gordimer, 1984).

⁹⁰ According to Dominic Head, Gordimer's writing of the Eighties and Nineties aimed at creating convincing black narrators in order to forge a 'new national literature for South Africa' (Head, 1994: 174), beyond the whites and divisions. As regards the author's voice, during a public speech Gordimer claimed: '[f]orget about this old woman talking to you. Hear a story from a 10-year-old Mozambique girl' (Anshika Misra, 2008, www.dnaindia.com. Retrieved, October 4th, 2011).

I don't know which night it was – because we were walking, walking any time, all the time – we heard the lions very near. Not groaning loudly the way they did far off. Panting, like we do when we run, but it's a different kind of panting: you can hear they are not running, they are waiting, somewhere near. We all rolled closer together, on top of each other, the ones on the edge fighting to get into the middle. I was squashed against a woman who smelled bad because she was afraid but I was glad to hold tight to her. I prayed to God to make the lions take someone on the edge and go (Gordimer, 2004: 274-275).

Language and syntax are very simple, and sometimes incorrect, as it is a story allegedly told by a young girl. Punctuation is not precise (e.g. there are no brackets for direct speech) and there is a large use of full stops and repetitions. As a consequence, the narration rhythm is syncopated, although the overall narration – as far as information and events are concerned – proceeds fast. Let's us take the following excerpt as an example:

My little brother does not play. Our grandmother takes him to the clinic when the doctor comes on Mondays. Sister says there's something wrong with his head, she thinks it's because we didn't have enough food at home. Because of the war. Because our father wasn't there. And then because he was so hungry in the Kruger Park (*Ibid.*: 278).

Editorial Success: As Gordimer asserted, in 2005 *Telling Tales* was translated into fifteen languages and 50,000 copies had been sold.⁹¹ Within the same year she managed to donate 1,5 million dollars to Treatment Action Campaign (TAC), as reported on the organization website.⁹²

⁹¹ Mohamed Salmawy, "The Laureates' Colloquy", Al-Arham, 3-9 February 2005, Issue 728.

⁹² www.tac.org.za, last accessed on October, 4th, 2011.

2.5.1 *A Humanitarian Analysis of The Ultimate Safari*

The Ultimate Safari deals with all the four main pillars of the UDHRs. The very first article is constantly addressed throughout the text: the narrator's family and other fugitives have clearly lost their human "dignity" and "rights", without considering the lack of "brotherhood" between them and those who work in the Kruger Park. As regards the first two key terms, we have already noticed that the fugitives were firstly abused by bandits, to be then considered like animals during their passage through the park and still without the total recognition of their *humanitas* in the refugee camp. Their dignity and rights are constantly annihilated. The very notion of "brotherhood" is completely different from the one that we can evince from the UDHRs – based on human and disinterested solidarity. Let us see the following quotation:

The man who led us had told us that we must keep out of the way of our people who worked at the Kruger Park; if they helped us they would lose their work. If they saw us, all they could do was pretend we were not there; they had seen only animals (Gordimer 2004: 274).

Moreover, as we saw in the previous paragraph, the narrator and her eldest brother were allowed to join the school of the near South African village exclusively because their ancestors had been part of that ethnic group (Gordimer 2004: 280). Hence, their being offered a shelter is neither due to a general feeling of brotherhood (Article 1), nor is it compliant with Article 14, first part, which asserts that *'Everyone has the right to seek and to enjoy in other countries asylum from persecution'* (United Nations, 1948).

Articles 2 and 3, dealing with the rights reserved to all human beings without any distinction, along with the right to life, liberty and security of person, are evidently denied. The narrator's parents have been killed – the father joined the army and the mother went for food but never came back. The bandits used to sack

the narrator's village: '[t]wice they came in our village and we ran and hid in the bush and when they'd gone we came back and found taken everything; [...]. We were frightened to go out [...]. We heard screaming and running. We were afraid even to run' (*Ibid.*: 270). They dare not go out, since, as previously said, '[i]f you meet them [bandits] they will kill you' (*Ibid.*: 269-270).

The sense of insecurity still impends on them when they go through the Kruger Park. As we noticed above, they were on the point of being torn apart by lions.⁹³ Moreover, although the refugee camp is potentially the land free from perils and giving food, it is presented, in a Foucauldian perspective, as a synecdoche for bio-power control. The white and blue tent where they are housed fully regulates the refugees' life, ranging from their health, meals, clothing, to schooling and working. Presumably, they are kept in the dark about news and events relating to Mozambique, and outside the tent people plant small vegetable gardens surrounded by fences, mirroring both the very inner structure of the tent and of the Kruger Park. In a sense, they have metabolized the idea of separation supported by the apartheid system.⁹⁴

The standard of living that should be guaranteed to immigrants – according to Article 25 – is paradoxically denied within the very humanitarian space: there are more than two hundred people squeezed in the tent where, 'instead of houses each family has a little place closed off with sacks or cardboard from boxes [...] to show other families it's yours' (*Ibid.*: 277). They sleep on grass mats and, when it rains,

⁹³ As regards this point, well known African artist Penny Siopis, describing the genesis of her video *Pray I* (2007), said that: 'the text is shaped from lines from *The Ultimate Safari*, a short story by Nadine Gordimer. [...] I heard Gordimer read this story in 1992 and it has stayed with me since. This might be because the story is such a powerful evocation of the trials and ordeals of forced migration generally. Indeed the group of Mozambicans in Gordimer's story could be Zimbabweans today. But this could be almost anywhere, and the lions could mutate into any number of mortal threats. I also have another association with this story that has helped keep it alive for me as an emblem of vulnerability. Not long after I heard Gordimer read *The Ultimate Safari* I discovered a lion had been killed in the Kruger Park, and in its stomach was a little leather purse. The purse was empty.' (www.stevenson.info/exhibitions/siopis/index2007.htm. Retrieved: October, 2011).

⁹⁴ The refugee tent is not properly a house, a definition that did not fit the one in the village either, which was 'without a roof' (Gordimer, 2004: 270).

water comes in and children play in the mud. The health and food assistance finally proves to be very poor: it consists of constant blood analyses, milk powder and meal provision, while the narrator's young brother is still not specifically cured for his long malnutrition. After more than two years, the narrator, her other brother and grandmother have not grown accustomed to the artificiality of a refugee life. Proud of her brand new shoes, she significantly observes that '[n]o other children in the tent have *real* shoes. When we three look at them it's as if we are in a *real* house again, with no war, no away' (*Ibid.*: 281, my own italics). Of course, the shoes were not provided by the clinic but it was her grandmother who managed to buy them thanks to her black work earnings.

As regards Article 17, on the right of property, it should be clear enough that such a right is completely erased by plundering:

Twice they came to our village and [...] when they'd gone we came back and found they had taken everything; but the third time they came back there was nothing to take, no oil, no food, so they burned the thatch and roofs of houses fell in (*Ibid.*: 270).

Our grandfather used to have three sheep and a cow and a vegetable garden but the bandits had long ago taken the sheep and the cow, because they were hungry, too (*Ibid.*: 271).

This condition is also fostered by the clinic's statute, which does not formally allow adults to get a proper job, thus implicitly denying their right to work – dealt with in Article 23 – in order to earn money and, as a consequence, to buy whatever they need.

Finally I would add that, if on one hand those who should promote and defend human inalienable rights finally prove to be inadequate, on the other hand the 'old but still strong' grandmother manages to protect those of her grandchildren. She looks after them as if she were their mother and, as we already noticed, she works to buy them proper food (sugar, tea, milk and even soap) and school shoes. Indeed, she knows the importance of literacy for their (hopefully different) life and everyday she gets them to do their homework before it gets dark.

As regards the UDHRs, on the UN website one can read that: ‘[t]hese rights belong to you. They are your rights [...]. Help to promote and defend them for yourself as well as for your fellow human beings’ (United Nations, 1948). Although the grandmother of Gordimer’s short story has clearly lost all her hopes for the future (Gordimer, 2004: 281) and, thus, does not care anymore about her rights, she defends with all her strength – and ‘strong’ is attributed to her at least three times – those of her grandchildren. She, and not the humanitarians, appears to estimate the invaluable worth of *humanitas*.

**CHAPTER 3 - The
Political and Social
Impact of
Humanitarian
Narrative Practice**

3.0 Introduction

Every line of serious work that I have written since 1936 has been written, directly or indirectly, against totalitarianism and for democratic Socialism, as I understand it. It seems to me nonsense, in a period like our own, to think that one can avoid writing of such subjects. It is simply a question of which side one takes and what approach one follows.
George Orwell

In the essay 'Why I Write', George Orwell maintains that there are four great motives for writing prose, which coexist in every writer and still vary from person to person and time to time (Orwell, 1946). The motives are: "sheer egotism", which comes from the wish to become famous and considered clever by people. The second motive is "aesthetic enthusiasm", namely the pleasure that comes from arranging words, sounds and images in a beautiful way inside a story and sharing such an elating feeling with other people. The third Orwell calls the "historical impulse", that is, the desire to find out and transmit true facts to posterity. The final motive is the "political purpose", which consists of using the word 'to push the world in a certain direction, to alter other people's idea of the kind of society that they should strive after' (*Ibid.*).

The narrative texts analysed in this thesis fall within the fourth motive described by Orwell. As we shall see later in this chapter, they are designed to bring about changes in their respective political and social contexts. According to Orwell, the predominance of one motive over the other strongly depends on the "atmosphere": 'in a peaceful age I might have written *ornata* or merely descriptive books, and might have remained almost unaware of my political loyalties. As it is, I have been forced into becoming a sort of pamphleteer' (*Ibidem.*). The time frame or ideological context in which a writer lives is fundamental for shaping his/her

writings. Indeed, Saviano, ASSK, Gordimer and Piasecki are, either directly or indirectly, experiencing a socio-political context characterised by injustice, violence, and despair, that is, they all “bodily” know some given spaces marked by the violations of HRs. Humanitarian narrative, thus, can be seen as a response to human suffering.

The idea of a *humanitarian narrative* conceived as an effective tool for enhancing and socially rooting HRs – that is, a narrative that has the same potential of common humanitarian practices (see Chap. 1) – implies demonstrating the ways in which it succeeds in generating a fertile terrain for HRs with a view to changing our social conceptions.

Undoubtedly, it would be inappropriate and naive to label a particular typology of contemporary HRs literature as *humanitarian narrative* exclusively because of its content, namely HRs – though, as seen in Chapter 2, the reference to HRs is a fundamental mark. Neither does humanitarian texts sudden increase in sales necessarily mean that they have a relevant role in promoting HRs (as cultural signifiers) within democratically weak contexts. Hence, in this Chapter, I will attempt to illustrate how writing a *humanitarian text* can actually prove to be a positive strategy for the promotion of and respect for HRs.

As we discussed in Chapter 1, there is a wide range of practices that can be considered as responding to humanitarian principles and I proposed a personal definition of humanitarian practices as those that attempt to bring forth HRs’ implementation. Taking into account such a definition, I thus related *humanitarian narrative* to *written stories, told in order to improve people’s life by protecting, promoting, ensuring respect and preventing the violation of Human Rights*. Hence, in Chapter 2, I analysed some *humanitarian texts*, emphasizing the presence of specific references to a *HRs discourse* – which basically consists in the author’s intentions to denounce HRs

violations while asserting and promoting their formative role for the edification of different societies.

Therefore, in this chapter I will attempt to demonstrate how the texts that I label as *humanitarian* can effectively implement HRs. This means pointing out the role played by (contemporary) *humanitarian literature* in protecting, promoting, preserving, respecting HRs and preventing their violations. It goes without saying that the main difficulty in undertaking this task is the lack of evident and immediately tangible evidence. To explore and demonstrate the relationships existing between the humanitarian written word and specifically connected socio-political behaviour – that is, the actualization of the authors' *humanitarian object* – I will analyse the cultural influences activated by the reading and diffusion of the humanitarian sample texts referred to in this thesis.

As already discussed, the humanitarian written word is apparently at a distance from the immediately evident and soon tangible results of common humanitarian practices and operations (like those of *ICRC* or *Emergency*). At the same time, the humanitarian texts based on fictional or factual stories do not possess the legal value of other humanitarian texts, which are not based on stories, such as the UDHRs or the sentences and resolutions declared by the legal authorities recognized at international level, such as the United Nations or the International Court of Justice. The most effective way to fulfil my task is then to present clear-cut illustrations of a cause-effect relationship between (authors') words and (readers') actions: it is thus important to address, firstly, the question of the readers' reactions (positive and negative) and, secondly, how these words may become central to a country's politics – international (for Aung San Suu Kyi, Nadine Gordimer and Jerry Piasecki) and national (for Roberto Saviano). Thirdly, we should consider their agency in relation to their “dangerous” power.⁹⁵ Finally, I

⁹⁵ I have used the word “dangerous”, and not “evil” or “harmful”, on purpose. I have chosen that word both to endow the term with a more positive signification – using Butler's strategy for changing

would distinguish two phases within the written word's operation: initially, one notices a quick and manifest reaction by the reader to the publication and diffusion of such works, while successively it takes much more for the humanitarian word to convince people of its own truthfulness and of the necessity to act.

According to Luc Boltanski: 'Compared with paying, the principal drawback of speech is that it seems to be detached from action and, without further clarification, does not reveal what it costs. It is not enough by itself to reveal the existence and significance of the sacrifice' (Boltanski, 1999: 19). Boltanski then points out that 'for speech to reduce the unfortunate's suffering, and for it to be regarded thereby as a form of action, in the sense that "speaking is acting", a different kind of instrument is needed: public opinion engaging directly with political institutions' (*Ibid.*: 18).⁹⁶ In other words, the presence of a democratic system is necessary for words to be uttered without constraints and public opinion to influence political decisions.⁹⁷ Needless to say, the respect for basic human rights and a democratic political system are the necessary pre-requisites for any peaceful political and social changes. However, as we have seen in Saviano's *Gomorra*, even

language effects (Butler, 2001 [1997]: 33-35) – and to avoid taking a moral stance against or in favour of some books. Indeed, although I am aware that the term "dangerous" might be biased, I would like to avoid any moral judgment linked to its potentially negative meaning. For example: *The Origin of the Species* (1859) by Charles Darwin was deemed a dangerous book by many Christians as much as the *Bible* or the *Koran*, which might be labelled as "dangerous" by other believers or atheists. Nevertheless, we should keep in mind that when some books are believed to be "dangerous" because of their ideas, this implicitly presupposes that they are taking a stance against somebody or something. The very existence of censorship and the different ways in which it was used against books, novels, plays, poetry etc. during the course of history, prove that words, written or oral, whether fiction or facts, can be considered dangerous.

⁹⁶ 'To take the claim that speech is effective seriously, that is to say speech which, whatever the status of the person uttering it and the place or form of its expression, can be causally connected to the actions of others whose effect is felt at a distance [...] we need the support of the complicated political construction of the City.' (Boltanski, 1999: 18).

⁹⁷ In her landmark essay 'The Essential Gesture', Nadine Gordimer claims that '[t]he creative act is not pure. History evidences it. Ideology demands it. Society exacts it. [...] The writer is held responsible; and the verbal phrase is ominously accurate, for the writer not only has laid upon him responsibility for various interpretations of the consequences of his work, he is "held" before he begins by the claims of different concepts of morality – artistic, linguistic, ideological, national, political, religious – asserted upon him.' (Gordimer, 1984 [1988]: 285-6). Later, referring to the ideological role of the writer in South Africa – where the "Index on censorship" hides 'the rags of suppressed literature [...]; broken cries of real exiles' (*Ibid.*: 288) – she explains that: 'the white writer's task as "cultural worker" is to raise the consciousness of white people, who, unlike himself, have not woken up.' (*Ibid.*: 293).

in democratic countries human rights are violated and a discourse aiming at changing illegal cultural and social practices may be violently repressed.

The invention of writing (dated around 3100 BC) also calls forth the “birth” of the reader and reading as a solitary activity: the relationships between the (absent) writer and the reader is completely different from that social act originally shared by the storyteller and his listeners. Over time, the distinction between writer and reader has somehow become representational of the fragmentation of (Western) culture, together with its logocentrism and dichotomies. This still reflects much of the XX century’s debates about writing and its potentially infinite decodings, including the deconstructionist tenet relating to the impossibility of an intentional communication and understanding between the writer (or author) and the reader. Hence the well-known “Death of Author” declared by Roland Barthes in 1968, which seemed to finally erase the existence of any ties between writer and reader (Barthes, 1977 [1968]),⁹⁸ drastically turning the former to less than an ephemeral materiality while elevating the latter to a solitary decoder of the text. Barthes’s studies influenced much of the contemporary approaches to literary criticism and one of his followers, theorist Jacques Derrida, went even further by asserting both a temporal and spatial *différance* between writer and reader, signifier and signified: reading does not only imply the “absence” of the author, but it also creates a distance from what the writer deals with and thus maintains a reciprocal structural distance by definition (Derrida, 1978: 75).

⁹⁸ Finally Barthes contends that the reader – and not its author – is actually the main producer of the meaning of a text and that ‘the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author’ (Barthes, 1977 [1968]). To demonstrate his theory, nevertheless, he also refers to the linguistic philosophy of J. L. Austin, and asserts that ‘writing can no longer designate an operation of recording, notation, representation, “depiction” (as the Classics would say); rather, it designates exactly what linguists, referring to Oxford philosophy, call a performative, a rare verbal form (exclusively given in the first person and in the present tense), in which the enunciation has no other content (contains no other proposition) than the act by which it is uttered – something like the I declare of kings or the I sing of very ancient poets’ (Barthes, 1977 [1968]). At the centre of the debate on the writer’s and reader’s role in the “making” of a text remains, thus, a fundamental question: Is it somehow possible to recognize the writer’s intentions? Is “performativity” a key term for defining a different writer’s profile?

Nevertheless, drawing on linguistic theories, I think it is possible to delineate a different cartography of the interrelations between writer and reader: is it utopian to change concepts and/or their meanings with the hope to bring about a coherent effect? And, from my specific humanitarian perspective, are writers and readers so intimate to give humanitarian words a political power? In 1955, John Langshaw Austin first defined language in terms of action – he famously asserted that ‘speaking means doing’ – merging fields that were historically separated, namely linguistics and physical agency. Later, one of his followers, John Searle, clearly mapped out the *Speech Act Theory* (1969), listing the complex processes that regulated communication (e.g. locution and its force) while introducing a behavioural aspect of speaking, that is, he linked linguistic actions to the appropriation of social rules. However, neither of them finally considered communication as a “body act”, that is a corporeal expression that could categorize “communication” itself under the umbrella term of “body concreteness”. It was Judith Butler who, in her study entitled *Excitable Speech. A Politics of the Performative* (1997), finally argued that speaking is primarily corporal and that any performative speech – in particular the one intended to fuel hate – transcending the specific space and time axe of its enunciation, aims at reinforcing and anticipating historical events (“violence” in her study). That is, it is not only impossible to confine language within linguistics borders, but the need for a political intervention surfaces in which we should use words to construct and diffuse “different” meanings and, consequently, change people.

Therefore, taking a cue from Austin and Searle’s theory (which underlines the consequences of words in a context shared among speakers) and its discussion by post-structuralist philosopher Judith Butler mentioned above, I propose to approach (humanitarian) written words by highlighting their illocutionary and perlocutionary force and focusing on the reactions of both readers and public opinion. One of the central tenets for the evaluation of HRs implementation also considers

negative reactions to written words, like the *delegitimation* of authors, which Saviano calls the “macchina del fango” – the *mud machine* (Saviano, 2011).

The text, then, becomes the new “image” of the context⁹⁹ shared by both authors and readers: the former’s intentions can be thought to be so clearly traced in the written words to become a means of fostering democracy by relying on the latter’s active role – as decipherers, responsible subjects and defenders of the author’s legitimacy. To say it another way, before becoming political, the humanitarian word is personal.¹⁰⁰

The written word, thus, develops perspectives that seemed precluded to its initially limited potential. Importantly, as discussed in Chapter 1, the advent of visual media has destabilised the boundaries between written and spoken contexts: the notion of “presence” and “absence” is blurred by the Web, the categories of “author” and “reader” are reciprocally present, and the text is no more a “distant” voice but a dynamic *agora* – much more similar to the storytelling existing before the advent of writing.

⁹⁹ The definition of a context through its spatial and temporal *hic et nunc* had already been commented on by Austin’s observations on the ritual or ceremonial acts that found their illocutionary force not only in a specific moment but in relation to the past and future of that specific assertion (Austin, 2005 [1962]).

¹⁰⁰ The personal and political aspect of the humanitarian word echoes the second wave of feminist criticism, where the notion of practice – as political and social doing – was not only a kind of pillar but was further developed throughout a self-conscious analysis towards an empathetic dialogue with the others. Briefly, ‘personal is politics’ was a feminist key slogan that underlined and showed the links between personal and supposedly private behaviours and the complexity of society. Changing relations between one specific woman and those who surrounded her meant changing the social life of that very woman. According to cultural theorist Chris Weedon, ‘feminism is a politics. It is a politics directed at changing existing power relations between women and men in society’ (Weedon, 1997 [1987]: 1).

3.1 “Fearing” Literature

In this section, I will try to provide an overview of how literature has been considered as a powerful tool for political and social change by looking at some milestones associated to its various theories.

In the following passage, Umberto Eco points out how literature can have a spiritual and illuminating function, sometimes stronger than a material apparatus of power (in this light, it might even be considered as something to be afraid of):

Racconta la leggenda, e se non è vera è ben trovata, che una volta Stalin abbia domandato quante divisioni avesse il Papa. Quello che è successo nei decenni successivi ci ha dimostrato che le divisioni sono certo importanti in date circostanze, ma non sono tutto. Ci sono dei poteri immateriali, non valutabili a peso, che in qualche modo pesano. E tra questi poteri annovererei anche quello della tradizione letteraria, vale a dire del complesso di testi che l'umanità ha prodotto e produce non per fini pratici (come tenere registri, annotare leggi e formule scientifiche, verbalizzare sedute o provvedere orari ferroviari) ma piuttosto *gratia sui*, per amore di se stessi - e che si leggono per diletto, elevazione spirituale, allargamento delle conoscenze, magari per puro passatempo, senza che nessuno ci obblighi a farlo (se si prescinde dagli obblighi scolastici) (Eco, 2002: 7).

But one might still ask: where does the power of literature come from? According to Eco, the first important function of literature in the social and individual life of a person relates to its keeping language alive. Consequently, by contributing to shape language, it is also responsible for the creation of the sense of identity and community.

Furthermore, Eco points out a second way in which literature can be important: to acquaint us with the idea of Destiny or, in a more general sense, with the existence of teleological trajectories:

Jurij Lotman, ne *La cultura e l'esplosione* riprende la famosa raccomandazione di Cechov, per cui se in un racconto o in un dramma viene mostrato all'inizio un fucile appeso alla parete, prima della fine quel fucile dovrà sparare. Lotman ci lascia capire che il vero problema non è se poi il fucile sparerà davvero. Proprio il non sapere se sparerà o no, conferisce significatività all'intreccio. Leggere un racconto vuole anche dire essere presi da una tensione, da uno spasimo. Scoprire alla fine che il fucile ha sparato, o meno, non

assume il semplice valore di una notizia. È la scoperta che le cose sono andate, e per sempre, in un certo modo, al di là dei desideri del lettore. Il lettore deve accettare questa frustrazione, e attraverso di essa provare il brivido del Destino. Se si potesse decidere del destino dei personaggi, sarebbe come andare al banco di una agenzia di viaggi: «Allora dove vuole trovare la Balena, alle Samoa o alle Aleutine? E quando? E vuole ucciderla lei, o lascia fare a Quiqueg?» La vera lezione di Moby Dick è che la Balena va dove vuole (*Ibid.*: 20-21).

Again, and this time sceptically taking into account modern ways of storytelling, such as hypertexts, he maintains:

Questo ci dicono tutte le grandi storie, caso mai sostituendo a Dio il fato, o le leggi inesorabili della vita. La funzione dei racconti «immodificabili» è proprio questa: contro ogni nostro desiderio di cambiare il destino, ci fanno toccar con mano l'impossibilità di cambiarlo. E così facendo, qualsiasi vicenda raccontino, raccontano anche la nostra, e per questo li leggiamo e li amiamo. Della loro severa lezione «repressiva» abbiamo bisogno. La narrativa ipertestuale ci può educare alla libertà e alla creatività. È bene, ma non è tutto. I racconti «già fatti» ci insegnano anche a morire (*Ibid.*: 22).

As humanitarian narratives are based on stories (fictional or non-fictional ones), they can be said to share all the important functions highlighted by Eco. However, he makes clear that he is not referring to pragmatic texts, while humanitarian texts have undoubtedly practical goals. Moreover, they are less fatalistic and appear to cross the borders of semiotically impregnable worlds in order to change “Destiny” itself, to open our eyes on a changeable world.

In my opinion, it is in the following passage that the power of literature, including the humanitarian one, may be really seen to manifest itself. In fact, Eco, in a subsequent passage, points out how literature can cross the border that separates “the world of the book” from “the world of the reader”. Literature is among us. Not just because we read books and we get to know plots or characters, but because of what he calls ‘migrations’ from texts to life. The characters, objects and situations of books may actually affect our existence:

Dovremo ben trovare uno spazio dell'universo dove questi personaggi vivono e determinano i nostri comportamenti, così che li eleggiamo a modello di vita, nostra e altrui, e ci comprendiamo benissimo quando diciamo che qualcuno ha il complesso di

Edipo, un appetito gargantuesco, un comportamento donchisciottesco, ha la gelosia di un Otello, un dubbio amletico, è un dongiovanni inguaribile, una perpetua. E questo, in letteratura, non accade solo coi personaggi, ma anche con le situazioni, e gli oggetti. Perché le donne che vanno e vengono per la stanza parlando di Michelangelo, i cocci aguzzi di bottiglia infissi nella muraglia, nel sole che abbaglia, le buone cose di pessimo gusto, la paura che ci viene mostrata in un pugno di polvere, la siepe, le chiare, fresche e dolci acque, il fiero pasto, diventano *metafore ossessive*, pronte a ripeterci a ogni istante chi siamo, cosa vogliamo, dove andiamo, oppure ciò che non siamo e ciò che non vogliamo? (*Ibid.* 17-18, my own emphasis).

The last sentence is very relevant for my comments on humanitarian literature: literary characters, objects and situations become “obsessive metaphors” which help us make decisions and shape our lives. Accordingly, when we speak nowadays about Burma, many people – probably the same who would understand Eco’s reference to a Hamlet-like doubt and so forth – would link Burma to ASSK and her non-violent fight for Human Rights or when talking about the Camorra, one might as well say *Gomorra*, referring to Saviano’s text. The same “linking mechanism” activates when we think of Kruger Park, after facing *The Ultimate Safari* by Gordimer.¹⁰¹ In other words, I would argue that, after reading the works by Saviano, Gordimer, Aung San Suu Kyi, Piasecki and those by other humanitarian writers, our habits and ways of making sense of the many things happening in the world are bound to change. The difference between the stories mentioned by Eco and those that are told within the realm of humanitarian literature is that, in the latter, characters, objects and situations do not stand out as the creations of some exceptional minds, as archetypal figures or symbols, but they are basically taken from real life.

Crossing the border between “the world of the book” and “the world of the reader” by prompting people to act has been among the functions and goals of literature since ancient times. According to Cicero, the forms of speech can be classified according to the “idea” or function they perform. In his *Orator*, he

¹⁰¹ The prevalence of visual (image) culture over the written one has brought about the diffusion of more icons with respect to literary expressions such as analogies or symbols: i.e. the image of Aung San Suu Kyi prevails over her famous literary expression “freedom from fear” (Suu Kyi, 1995[1991]).

distinguished among three main *functions*: to prove, to please and to persuade.¹⁰² Endorsing a different view, six centuries later Saint Augustine asserted that the ends of discourse were to teach the truth; to move to action and to delight.¹⁰³ In both Cicero and S. Augustine's ideas on the functions of literature, it is possible to find clear goals that can have the power to bring about social and political changes (i.e. "to prove", "to persuade" and "to move to action"). As we shall see in the next section, the main tenet of humanitarian narrative consists in moving readers towards action. Such an objective is mainly accomplished by two means: narrative texts that can be figured as "illocutionary" acts, where the word itself produces actions, or as "perlocutionary" acts, where words produce actions through the reader.

Everybody is certainly familiar with Plato's idea of poetry as a somewhat misleading and morally suspect activity because it was limited to the representation of mere "appearances". Nowadays, however, many theorists agree on seeing literature as a powerful way to come to terms with the world and to transmit moral values. For instance, according to American philosopher Martha Nussbaum, narrative favours the development and increase of a 'moral sense' because it allows people to experience the world in a way that our experience would not. More precisely, according to her

literature is an extension of life not only horizontally, bringing the reader into contact with events or locations or persons or problems he or she has not otherwise met, but also, so to speak, vertically, giving the reader an experience that is deeper, sharper, and more precise than much of what takes place in life (Nussbaum, 1990: 48).

In this sense, Nussbaum argues that "good" literature can turn readers into "judicious spectators" and consequently better citizens: 'the novel presents itself as a metaphor. See the world in this way, and not in that, it suggests. Look at things as

¹⁰² 'Probare necessitatis est, delectare suavitatis, flectere victoriae', Cicero, *Rethorica*, Orator, 21. Available online: <http://www.latin.it/autore/cicerone/rhetorica/orator/21.lat> (Retrieved: October, 2011).

¹⁰³ Saint Augustine, *On Christian Teaching*, trans. J.J. Show, Didireads.com Publishing, (*De doctrina Christiana*, 397-426). I have used the digital version available online in Google Books.

if they were like this story, and not in other ways recommended by social science' (*Ibid.*).

For her part, Hunt thinks that the novels of the XVII and XVIII centuries have played a fundamental role in paving the way for the setting up of Human Rights:

although biology provides an essential predisposition, each culture shakes the expression of empathy in its own particular fashion. Empathy only develops through social interaction; therefore, the forms of that interaction configure empathy in important ways. In the eighteenth century, 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. As a consequence, they came to see others – people they did not know personally, - as like them, as having the same kinds of inner emotions. Without this learning process, “equality” could have no deep meaning and in particular no political consequence. The equality of souls in heaven is not the same thing as equal rights here on earth. Before the eighteenth century, Christians readily accepted the former without granting the latter (Hunt, 2007: 40).

However, I recognize with Nobel Laureate Herta Muller that ‘literature that saves lives is a daring concept [...] I believe that in some uneasy situations books can provide us with tents’ (Muller, 2009). She then adds that no book can save us from such menaces as a dictatorship:

During the Nazi period did the books by Goethe and Schiller save German people from renouncing to the sense of culture and civilization? Thanks to literature, German people could have understood Hitler’s madness. There are moments in history in which culture is excluded and does not play any role. Why this happens and how, it is difficult to understand and is very sad (*Ibidem*).

This is actually true. Nevertheless, it is worth stressing again that humanitarian narrative is a direct response to a humanitarian emergency. Furthermore, the authors of humanitarian stories are often the subjects or, at least, they are directly implicated in the stories told. It is, therefore, more likely that they can trigger some kind of response against the violations of HRs.

According to French writer and philosopher George Bataille, literature harbours evil. Among the reasons for such a statement is that literature very often

deals with tragic or cruel situations, which – according to Bataille – are devised by authors in order to avoid boring the reader (Bataille, 1958). However, thanks to such a characteristic, literature can represent human conditions better than any other medium and provide us with means to overcome the horrors that it represents. Bataille’s argument points out again how for some people the power of literature mainly consists in a sort of “psychological therapy” for the benefit of the reader. I have already pointed out that, on the contrary, humanitarian literature should be considered as a “bridge to action”.

Bataille’s considerations also allow me to point out a drawback inherent in all the stories based on the portrayal of violence and sufferance, what I have already referred to as the “spectacle of sufferance”, by using Boltanski’s definition. In other words, the effects of literature linked to the portrayal of sufferance and violence, when not mastered properly and in the wrong hands, are likely to increase moral corruption, instead of getting people to do good. As regards this, Hunt points out that:

Late eighteenth-century campaigners against slavery, legal torture, and cruel punishment all highlighted cruelty in their emotionally wrenching narratives. They intended to provoke revulsion, but the arousal of sensations through reading and viewing explicit engravings of suffering could not always be carefully channelled. Similarly, the novel that drew intense attention to the travails of ordinary girls took on other, more sinister forms by the end of the eighteenth century (Hunt, 2007: 211).

According to Hunt, in some Gothic novels, such as *The Monk* by Matthew Lewis (1796), the depiction of rapes, incests, tortures and murders ‘increasingly seemed to be the point of the exercise rather than the study of interior feelings or moral outcomes’ (*Ibid.*: 211). Through Marquis de Sade, Hunt goes on, Gothic novels reached the level of a sort of “pornography of pain”, ‘deliberately reducing to their sexual core the long, drawn-out seduction scenes of earlier novels like Richardson’s *Clarissa*. Sade aimed to reveal the hidden meanings of previous novels:

sex, domination, pain, and power rather than love, empathy, and benevolence' (*Ibid.*: 212).

Taking a long leap forward, recent theories regarding literary reception underline that narrative can be compared to a "threshold experience" between external reality and our own minds. Drawing on the theories of child psychiatrist Donald W. Winnicott (*Playing and Reality*, 1971), Janet H. Murray, Professor of Literature, Communication, and Culture, compares the function of stories to other "transitional objects" like a teddy bear or children's play:

A good story serves the same purpose for adults, giving us something safely outside ourselves (because it is made up by someone else) upon which we can project our feelings. Stories evoke our deepest fears and desires because they inhabit this magical borderland [...]. In order to sustain such powerful immersive trances, then, we have to do something inherently paradoxical: we have to keep the virtual world "real" by keeping it "not there" (Murray, 1997: 100).

The active role of the reader is therefore necessary to create this kind of make-believe. In poetical terms, this psychological condition reminds us of the Coleridgean willing suspension of disbelief. We know it is not true, but we keep on suffering and enjoying it as if it were real. A great deal of fictional storytelling works in this way.

Within humanitarian narrative something different happens, because we know, since the beginning, that we cannot keep the stories safely outside ourselves. Even if fictional, and even if a long distance separates Western readers from the African world, as in *Marie in the Shadow of the Lion* and *The Ultimate Safari*, the ever-present link with reality (Laqueur's 'details of truth')¹⁰⁴ prevents us from keeping these stories "virtual" and "not there". Moreover, going back again to Laqueur's arguments, in reading humanitarian texts we feel somehow implicated in the events told, we experience a sort of involvement, which is due either to a feeling of "moral

¹⁰⁴ As far as Gordimer's text is concerned, Kruger Park is a real place and such are also the stories about the people killed by wild animals. As to Piasecki's *Marie*, we are told at its very start that the story is based on real facts.

responsibility” for what has happened or to an “empathetic relation” with the suffering people, which in the end pushes the reader to do something. Indeed, after reading *Marie*, *Gomorra*, *The Ultimate Safari* or the *Letters from Burma*, we might well react by contemplating the possibility of a donation, of joining a defiance campaign or a boycotting.

In conclusion, when compared to a parallel stream of literary productions tailored to court the reader’s escapist longing, humanitarian literature can be said to deal with the needy (Burmese people and all the victims of totalitarian regimes, the many “Maries” or refugees living around the world, the people oppressed by the Camorra, Mafia and other criminal organizations). Its primary intended effect on the reader is to prompt him/her to do something. In other words, humanitarian texts are meant neither to lull our imagination, nor to “purify” our souls with a cathartic effect, but they tend to overflow into practice.

3.2 An Approach to the Idea of “Doing with Words”

The comparison between texts (or discourse) and linguistic acts was initially suggested, among others, by philosopher Tzvetan Todorov:

Un discorso non è costituito da frasi, ma da frasi enunciate o, più brevemente, da enunciati. Ora, l'interpretazione dell'enunciato è determinata, da un lato, dalla frase che si enuncia, dall'altro, dalla sua enunciazione stessa. Questa enunciazione include un locutore che enuncia, un allocutore cui si rivolge, un tempo e luogo, un discorso che precede e che segue; in breve, un contesto di enunciazione. In altri termini ancora, un discorso è sempre necessariamente un atto linguistico (Todorov, 2002 [1978]: 48).

The title of this section is however a clear reference to philosopher of language Austin and his lectures published under the title of ‘How to Do Things with Words’ (I will discuss Austin and Searle’s theories later in this chapter).¹⁰⁵ At first sight, the sentence “doing with words” might sound like a sort of sorcery or calling for a divine power while, as a matter of fact, it aims at describing an event that takes place every time we speak, as demonstrated by Austin’s theories. Besides this modern academic tradition, one should also be reminded that words have been thought to possess a sort of “magical power” since immemorial times.

To get an idea of the existence of such a link between words and doing, one should first turn to religion. In this connection, social anthropologist Stanley Jeyaraja Tambiah points out:

No book on religion or the origins of language fails to refer to this ancient belief in the creative power of the word. It would be possible to confirm this belief in classical literature. The Vedic hymns speculated on *vāc* (the word) and asserted that the gods ruled the world through magical formulae; the Parsi religion states that in the battle between good and evil it was through the spoken word that chaos was transformed into cosmos; ancient Egypt believed in a God of the Word; the Semites and the Sumerians have held that the world and its objects were created by the word of God; and the Greek doctrine

¹⁰⁵ J.L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words. The Willian James Lectures delivered at Harvard University in 1955*, Second Edition, Edited by J.O. Urmson and Marina Sbisa, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1962.

of logos postulated that the soul or real essence of things resided in their names (Tambiah, 1968: 182-183).

Within Christian tradition, all believers are told that God created the world by means of his divine Word: 'Let there be light!' (Genesis 1:3) and again: 'So shall my word be that goeth forth out of my mouth: it shall not return unto me void, but, it shall accomplish that which I please, and it shall prosper in the thing whereto I send it (Isaiah, 55, II, quoted in Tambiah, 1968: 183). Writing, when conceived as a transposition of spoken words, appears to give a trans-historical substance to speech and thus pave the way for such holy texts, such as the Bible, the Koran or the Talmud (*Ibidem*).

By investigating the relations between mystic and pragmatic languages, Tambiah also argues that words have given human beings a sense of power on the environment; the tenet 'that to know the name of a thing is to get a hold on it is thus empirically true' (Tambiah, 1968: 186). The creative and pragmatic power of words can be taken to derive from early childhood experiences:

A baby reacts to bodily discomfort with cries which attract the mother's attention, and later the child learns that the utterance is the essence of welfare and that it acts upon to satisfy its needs. Here lies the early magical attitude to words, that a name sufficiently often repeated can materialize the thing (*Ibid.*: 186).

Finally, the magical power of words can be seen as originating from the fact that:

There is a sense in which it is true to say that language is outside us and given to us as a part of our cultural and historical heritage; at the same time language is within us, it moves us and we generate it as active agents. Since words exist and are in a sense agents in themselves which establish connections and relations between both man and man, and man and the world, and are capable of 'acting' upon them, they are one of the most realistic representations we have of the concept of force which is either not directly observable or is a metaphysical notion which we find necessary to use (*Ibid.*: 184).

Going forth to Austin and his theories, we must keep in mind that in his lectures held at Harvard in 1955, he distinguished between "constative" acts, which

are merely descriptive (e.g. the “Earth is round”) and “performative” ones, that is acts that, by describing an action, perform it as well (e.g. “I beg your pardon for disturbing you”). Contrary to constative acts, which can be true or false, performative ones, according to Austin, can be “felicitous” or “infelicitous”, depending on the effects they succeed in bringing about. However, Austin subsequently maintained that also constative acts, if slightly modified, can become (or be) performative (e.g. “I affirm that the Earth is round”). He therefore singled out three categories through which linguistic acts can be classified: “locutionary” acts are ‘roughly equivalent to uttering a certain sentence with a certain “meaning” in the traditional sense’ (Austin, 1962: 109), “illocutionary” acts, ‘such as informing, ordering, warning, undertaking, are utterances which have a certain (conventional) force’ (*Ibid.*) and “perlocutionary” acts are namely ‘what we bring about or achieve by saying something, such as convincing, persuading, deterring, and even, say, surprising or misleading’ (*Ibid.*). In other words, we can come across the act of saying something, the act performed in saying something, and finally an act performed by saying something. As also explained by Butler (2010), illocutionary acts are those in which saying something at the same time performs something. For example, in the case of the jury who says “I condemn you”, the act does neither announce the intention of doing something, nor describe it. Austin speculated that illocutionary acts are supported by linguistic as well as social conventions. As we shall see, in our case, humanitarian texts illocutionary force is allegedly supported by the moral and (partially) legal obligations stated in the UDHRs.

Perlocutionary acts are those aimed at obtaining something by means of saying it, although a certain time lapse might occur. As Bulter points out, ‘while illocutionary acts imply conventions, perlocutionary ones imply consequences’ (Butler, 2010: 25). Within the range of illocutionary acts there is no time delay, since they “say” and “perform” at the same time.

Drawing on the studies by Austin on locutions, utterances or sentences, we propose to apply his categories to narrative texts as well, adding a performative dimension to their already existent and inherent traits. In so doing, it is possible to argue that humanitarian stories are performative ones. In other words, they are not just meant to describe something (i.e. to tell a story and enjoy it), but to stimulate (re)actions. As happens with an illocutionary act, the circumstances and the authority of the person telling the story have a strategic importance. For ASSK, the political situation and her well-known position as a leader of the NLD party are what makes her *Letters from Burma* performative (as perlocutionary acts), namely actions against the regime. Concluding with a comment on the ‘call for action’, I would like to quote some reflections by Laqueur:

Beginning in the Eighteenth century, a new cluster of narratives came to speak in extraordinarily detailed fashion about the pains and deaths of ordinary people in such a way as to make apparent the causal chains that might connect the actions of its readers with the suffering of its subjects (Laqueur, 1989: 176-177).

Such a point is clearly visible in the four texts analyzed in this thesis. In other words, the works by Saviano, ASSK, Gordimer and Piasecki point out the ways in which the reader’s actions can help suffering subjects. In the case of ASSK, we will see how readers did re-act and implement her words so as to generate real effects and consequences, not just at the local but at an international level.

3.3 The Role of Empathy

Although “empathy” is a recent word, its semantic potential is rooted in religious tenets: for example, the Catholic Bible considers ‘Love your neighbour as yourself’ – where “love” subsumes an empathetic perception of similarities among subjects and their mutual identification – as one of the two greatest commandments (Matthew 22: 38), which along with the Hebrew Bible celebrates the sanctity of life. As far as they are concerned, Indian religions (Hinduism, Jainism and Buddhism) profess *ahimsa*, a sort of empathetic and non-violent attitude, as their core principle.¹⁰⁶

Nowadays, *empathy* is usually mixed up with *compassion*, *pity* and *sympathy* since they all rely on the aptitude to share others’ feelings, particularly their sorrow. Although they are differently denoted – for example *sympathy* has a more general meaning with respect to the others – in the *WordNet* dictionary, empathy is simply defined as ‘understanding and entering into another’s feelings’ (WordNet, 2010).

In order to avoid misunderstandings, I shall draw my personal definition of empathy from the well-known follower of Edmund Husserl, German philosopher Edith Stein (Breslavia, 1891; Auschwitz 1942), since she firstly and clearly defined the term which was bound to widely circulate in various field studies. In her famous PhD dissertation, originally entitled *Das Einfühlungsproblem in seiner historischen Entwicklung und in phänomenologischer Betrachtung* (1985 [1917]), Stein conceived an idea of *empathy* as a way of seizing and knowing the other’s experience

¹⁰⁶ Indian spiritual teacher Swami Sivanda explains that the ‘[p]ractice of Ahimsa develops love. Ahimsa is another name for truth or love. Ahimsa is universal love. It is pure love. It is divine Prem. Where there is love, there you will find Ahimsa. Where there is Ahimsa, there you will find love and selfless service. They all go together’, Bliss Divine. Sivananda Nagar, *A Book of Spiritual Essays on the Lofly Purpose of Human Life and the Means to its Achievement*, Yoga-Vedanta Forest Academy. Internet Edition: (1965) 2005. Available Online: www.divinelifesociety.org. Retrieved: October, 2011.

– ‘coscienza estranea’/‘a foreign conscience’, my own translation (*Ibid.*: 79) – and distinguished it from other perceptive acts like: “external perception”, “knowing about external perception”, “sympathizing” and “one-way feeling”. Indeed, all of them exclude a personal understanding of the other’s feeling. On the contrary, *empathy* (*Ein-Fühlung*) implies the transformation of such a feeling into a datum, which is consequently perceived as one’s own experience. By underlying the fact that the “empathetic act” presupposes two separate subjects, who are evidently similar (that is, empathy also depends on bodily resemblance), Stein claims that ‘noi perveniamo per mezzo dell’empatia ad una specie di esperienza sui generis’/ ‘we go through a *sui generis* experience by way of empathy’ (*Ibidem*, my translation), so that we manage to experience someone else’s life events without actually living them. Hence, referring again to the *WordNet*’s definition, *empathy* does not simply mean sharing the other’s sentiments through an identification process, as presupposed by the one-feeling Lippsonian theory, but feeling the very same sentiment (a shared “we”) while remaining separated bodies – an “empathizing I” and an “empathized I” (Stein, 1985 [1917]: 87, 89) – and, consequently, familiarizing with an external conscience that will inevitably affect our own.

Indeed, it goes without saying that every seizing of other people’s conscience (and values) becomes a way of comparing, understanding and evaluating ours. In this sense, *empathy* fuels a kind of feeling that goes across physicality to move towards the world of values:

Con ciò è dato al tempo stesso, oltre all’autoconoscenza, un importante aiuto per l’autovalutazione. Il fatto di vivere un valore è fondante rispetto al valore. In tal modo, con i nuovi valori acquisiti per mezzo dell’empatia, lo sguardo si dischiude simultaneamente sui valori sconosciuti della propria persona. Mentre, empatizzando, c’imbattiamo in sfere di valore a noi precluse, ci rendiamo coscienti di un proprio difetto o disvalore (Stein, 1985 [1917]: 228).¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁷ ‘One can find in all this an important tool for both self-knowledge and self-evaluation. Experiencing a value also means providing it with a foundation. Hence, with the new values obtained

Analyzing the Eighteenth-century debate on the emergent notion of a “community” based on the individual’s rights, Hunt explains that *sympathy* was widely used to define an ethics deriving from reason and not from the Divine Scriptures. Nevertheless, in her work she prefers to substitute it with *empathy* since ‘it better captures the active will to identify with others’ (Hunt, 2007: 65), while *sympathy* ‘now often signifies pity, which can imply condescension, a feeling incompatible with a true feeling of equality’ (*Ibidem*). Some pages earlier, she drew attention to the empathy or compassion triggered by Richardson’s and Rousseau’s novels, asserting that *empathy* is based on identification – although it clearly maintains the subjects separated – and that such a process is imbued with ethical connotations. Hunt finally concludes that

[h]uman rights grew out of the seedbed sowed by these feelings. Human rights could only flourish when people learned to think of others as their equals, as like them in some fundamental fashion. They learned this equality, at least in part, by experiencing identification with ordinary characters who seemed dramatically present and familiar, even if ultimately fictional (*Ibid.*: 54-55-58).¹⁰⁸

As a first conclusion, empathy can be defined as:

- A feeling and understanding based on the reciprocal recognition of each other’s humanity.
- A way for different individuals to feel and penetrate consciences while maintaining their own respective differences.

Turning now our attention to the necessity for the recognition of a shared humanity as a springboard for *empathy*, we should underscore that philosopher

through empathy, our gaze can simultaneously focus on our own unknown values. While, through empathy, we happen to meet with value echelons so far precluded and become aware of our personal faults or disvalue’ (my translation).

¹⁰⁸ Recently, American President Barack Obama has underlined the need for empathetic judges and has commissioned an “empathy test” for the Supreme Court. According to him, empathy is essential for the creation of a national and world discourse that might overcome divisions and war mentality since it stresses the importance of understanding. Timothy Shriver, ‘Sotomayor and the Empathy Test’, Available online: <http://newsweek.washingtonpost.com/onfaith/religionfromtheheart>, June 2nd, 2009. Retrieved: July, 2011.

Zygmunt Bauman (2001) connects the weaknesses of our contemporaries to an understanding of others as “alien” and not as “similar”. This perception of difference sounds even more perplexing when we think about some recent outcomes in neuroscience research. I am referring to the discovery of *mirror neurons* in the late 1980s – which might imply the existence of a biological base for empathy.¹⁰⁹ Laura Boella, Professor of Philosophy at the University of Milan and an expert in automatic-empathy mechanisms, argues that “mirror neurons” might turn out to be relevant for contemporary studies on empathy, which are currently in a stalemate situation.¹¹⁰ According to her, on the one hand Husserl and his followers proposed a clear definition of “empathy” in contrast to a myriad of fragmented and nebulous meanings related to it, while, on the other, their studies produced a shift within the field of empathy studies, which moved from a (fundamental) physical basis to an exclusive spiritual concern. Thus, although it has been fully demonstrated that *empathy* is an autonomous experience, distinguished from such “moral feelings” as “sympathy” or “piety”,¹¹¹ and that it necessarily presupposes what Boella calls the ‘scoperta dell’altro’/‘the discovery of the other’ to generate solidarity feelings, the idea of the biological roots of empathy still remains without a proper scientific answer (Lavazza, 2009, my translation).

In this sense, thus, might *mirror-neuron studies* be powerful research tools for understanding the functioning of the empathy process? Or, on the contrary, is there a risk of reducing empathy to an unconscious visual-stimulation of neurons?

¹⁰⁹ G. Rizzolatti, L. Craighero, “The Mirror-Neuron System”, *Annual Review of Neuroscience*. 2004; 27:169-92.

¹¹⁰ An interview to Laura Boella, by Andrea Lavazza. Available online: http://www.aitasam.it/ricerca/mirror-neurons/interview_laura_boella.html. Retrieved: October, 2011.

¹¹¹ In her famous essay entitled ‘On Revolution’ (1990 [1961]) Arendt linked the failure of the French Revolution to an excessive focalization on a politics of pity and compassion (both of them characterised by a separation between those who suffer and those who do not, their natural distance being further broadened through inactive observation). Differently from the American Revolution, it did not stress the relevance of liberty and an appropriate politics that was to support it. Echoing Arendt’s work, Boltansky calls that kind of politics a “politics of justice” (Boltanski, 1999: 3). Is that kind of politics, recognising individuals’ rights for a democratic polis, based on the implicit recognition of the relevance of empathy for human communities?

From this lens, empathy might then be seen as a reflection of some mental state. The attention is clearly on the body and its physiological drives and not on the alchemy of feelings that create a complex tie between two subjects. Other questions thus arise: Is it legitimate to speak about the individual's embodiment of empathy (such as by *humanitarians*)? How to evaluate the works of scholars who suggested a specifically situated socio-historical expression of empathy?

Undoubtedly, the ideas mentioned above bring to the fore not only the complex meaning of *empathy*, but the necessary involvement of different fields of knowledge to explain its mechanisms. Hence, my final understanding of *empathy* tries to merge such different perspectives within the humanitarian discourse. Here are listed four main characteristics of *empathy*:

1. It is a feeling that emphasizes the equality (and dignity) of human rights.
2. It follows that – apart from personal states of mind that could interfere with it – empathy allows for a co-penetration of subjects which should trigger both a personal understanding of who we are (a sort of reciprocal dialogue) and the development of a need for action ‘in a spirit of brotherhood’ (Article 1 of the UDHRs). Moreover, from that perspective, since empathy relies on the similarity between two subjects, it should also entail the acknowledgement of the other’s “physical presence” and “life”. It traces a visible space for (contemporary) humanitarianism to succeed in its intent to create a proximity and a responsible co-existence among human beings.
3. Its being developed during some particular social and historical conditions, showing an interdependence between *empathy*, *individual responsibility* towards the needy and the *birth of Humanitarianism* (e.g. the European narrative in the XVIII and XIX centuries). Yet, empathy is not specifically linked to some cultural cartography but to the inner “humanity” of people, as is shown by its being the central tenet of a world-wide *humanitarian* politics.

4. It involves a focus on both instinctive compulsions – reacting to the other’s sufferance¹¹² – and other factors bearing weight on the individual, such as his/her sentiments, sense of “justice” and the acknowledgement that the other’s sufferance directly or indirectly affects us. It thus develops the idea of a community which is inevitably *collectively* organized.¹¹³

Undoubtedly, *humanitarianism* – translating the notion of *empathy* into a variety of practices – and the *HRs* discourse – aiming at further developing humanitarian actions (by both fostering humanitarian operations and educating future citizens on the “empathetic ability”) – represent two relevant responses for the final actualization of a community without a distinction between *de iure* and *de facto* individuals.

¹¹² Empathy re-creates those interpersonal ties that, according to Zygmunt Bauman, have been denied by industrial capitalism and whose apex is dated – not casually – at the beginning of the last century. During the same period some philanthropists tried to fuel a sense of “community” through villages based on the worker’s ethical values (Bauman, 2001). Moreover, he asserts that today’s Western communities are culturally characterised by a ‘cool’ and distancing sentiment. A distance that implies a “voluntary exile” from one’s own sentiments and, as a consequence, the total absence of responsibility towards the other (Bauman, 2001: 51).

¹¹³ Bauman argues that the present age of globalization has inevitably tied up each one of us to the other and, consequently, the need for a proper community is particularly evident and necessary: ‘[s]e mai può esistere una comunità nel mondo degli individui, può essere (ed è necessario che sia) soltanto una comunità intessuta di comune e reciproco interesse; una comunità responsabile, volta a garantire il pari diritto di essere considerati esseri umani e la pari capacità di agire in base a tale diritto’. / [i]f ever a community might exist in the world of individuals, it can and must be only a community based on a common and a reciprocal interest; a responsible community, which aims to guarantee the same right to be considered as human beings with an equal ability to act in the name of that right’ (Bauman, 2001: 10, my own translation). In other words, empathy and its emphasis on reciprocity and responsibility suggest a possible way out of present suffering.

3.4 The Power of Words in Aung San Suu Kyi's *Letters from Burma*

Please use your liberty to promote ours
Aung San Suu Kyi

La speranza è che un cambiamento venga da fuori. “Il mondo non può dimenticarci”, mi son sentito dire varie volte durante questo viaggio. Il triste è che il mondo sembra avere troppe tragedie per le mani per occuparsi anche di quella, lontanissima, di 42 milioni di abitanti d'uno strano Paese ora chiamato Myanmar.
Tiziano Terzani

To illustrate the *Letters'* practical effects, I will firstly identify their author's main intentions, addressees and socio-historical context, and secondly, I will discuss them in relation to the potential implementation of HRs.

3.4.1 *The Making of Letters from Burma*

As regards the making of *Letters from Burma*, we might single out two main “core reasons”, referring to the intentions of both author and editor, respectively.

As noted in Chapter 2, ASSK believed that dealing with a weekly column for the *Mainichi's* newspaper was a way ‘to bring the Burmese situation to the attention of the world outside Burma’ (Suu Kyi, 1996: 207). Indeed, the author strongly believes that the rest of the world either ignores or has just a vague idea of what is happening in Burma.¹¹⁴ ASSK's premise is that if the world knew, it *could do*

¹¹⁴ This concern is strengthened by the following remark made by Tiziano Terzani, who comments on such an unheard HRs emergency: ‘In qualche modo la tragedia birmana non è entrata nella coscienza del mondo. Difficile spiegare perché. Un migliaio di morti nel centro di Pechino scosse l'opinione pubblica internazionale e grava ancora sull'immagine della Cina. Due, tre, forse 4000 morti ammazzati in Birmania su una popolazione di appena 42 milioni non hanno pesato altrettanto. Per

something,¹¹⁵ and this is confirmed in a subsequent speech given by her to the *Mainichi* readers, after the newspaper won a national journalism award for publishing her *Letters from Burma*:

It [writing on the newspaper] has enabled me to reach out to many peoples of the world, to try to make them understand what is really happening in our beautiful land where injustice and cruelty, fear and poverty, [*sic*] behind a facade of rich golden vistas and friendly, smiling people.¹¹⁶

Hence, in foregrounding the Burmese situation, ASSK is evidently trying to elicit a reply from the addressees of her letters and this is carefully reinforced by the very *letter* format she chose for her text: her *Letters* doubly imply a response – and a contribution – to her request for help. What kind of action does she expect? Differently from Piasecki, she does not list a range of possible behaviours, apart from Letter 22, where she asks readers to economically boycott Burma: she is aware that they are an “explosive” mass force. Nevertheless, I think it is possible to outline the set of responses she is willing to receive: political actions (strongly condemning Burma’s dictatorship); economic actions (either sustaining an embargo or boycotting international companies working in Burma) and moral ones (prompting international media to focus their attention on Burma). Inevitably, all of these responses are interrelated and bound to be effective if involving an increasing number of people and countries.

Turning our attention to the *Mainichi* editor, Mr. Hiroshi Nagai, he thought that ASSK’s *Letters* were important ‘to know more about the political, social and

confondere la memoria del mondo i generali di Rangoon hanno ribattezzato il loro Paese e, chiamandolo Myanmar, hanno come spazzato via dal ricordo la Birmania e il suo massacro’ (Terzani, 1998: 34).

¹¹⁵ Certainly, *Real Politik* teaches us that the lack of information can simply be an excuse for governments to justify their non-intervention politics. Nevertheless, it seems strange that an intelligent and highly educated person like ASSK should not be aware of that political strategy. I rather tend to consider ASSK’s words as actually rhetorical, aiming to re-iterate a call for help against Burmese dictatorship.

¹¹⁶ ASSK, ‘Message to Mainichi Readers’, *Mainichi Daily News*, Thursday, September 5th, 1996. Available online <http://www.burmalibrary.org/reg.burma/archives/199609/msg00026.html>. Retrieved: September, 2011.

cultural background of Myanmar¹¹⁷ and, thus, that they would contribute to debunk the Japanese common understanding of a country's progress as being proportionally related to its leadership's strong personality. Moreover, according to Mr. Nagai, in Asia, especially Japan, there is a widespread attitude that legitimates totalitarian regimes governing poor countries, such as Burma:

Japan has a stereotype theory that developing countries like Myanmar need a strong leadership. As these countries have no traditional democracy and are economically underdeveloped, the Japanese think economic development should precede democratization.¹¹⁸

Indeed, as we shall point out in the next section, between Asian countries and Burma there are strong economical relationships.

Undoubtedly, the *Letters* project their readers into present-life conditions in Burma: the widespread poverty (inflation raised because of the collapsed economy, and there was a failure in health and educational systems) and the regime's daily HRs violation within the framework of the Burmese landscape and culture. Nevertheless, there arises an important question: Is it possible to assess the *Letters'* role in finally debunking the above mentioned stereotype? In other words, do poor countries need a strong leadership?

3.4.2 *The Socio-Historical Background*

During the years in which ASSK kept her weekly column on the Japanese *Mainichi* newspaper (1995-1996) and until the turning of the last century, Japan represented Burma's most important commercial partner.¹¹⁹

Throughout history, Japan and Burma had good relations, as proved by Japan's financial support to Burma's economy. For example, between 1972 and

¹¹⁷ Zaw Win Maung, 'Japanese Daily Helps Suu Kyi's Messages', *The Associated Press*, Tokyo, Dec. 27th, 1996.

¹¹⁸ Mr. Hiroshi Nagai, quoted in Zaw Win Maung, *Ibidem*.

¹¹⁹ Because of its increasing economic power, China has nowadays replaced the relevant and influent role of Japan.

1988, Japan was the largest donor of Burma, which was given about 2 billion U.S. \$ as part of the *Overseas Development Assistance* (ODA) funding program. However, according to the *ICG Asia Report*,¹²⁰ since 1988, with the coming to power of the military regime, Japan has cut off ODA loans while the political dynamics between the two countries has radically changed.

Moreover, the two years during which ASSK kept her weekly column are generally linked by historians to a period when Japanese foreign policy towards Burma proved to be “ambiguous”, characterized by a “soft policy”. Indeed, on the one hand, the Japanese government was ready to condemn Burma’s HRs violations and, consequently, to stop economic funding; on the other, Japanese politicians, aware that the junta allowed ASSK to write (before arresting her again), responded to such a (small) act of benevolence by restoring some economic aids. In a report on Burma by the International Crisis Group, we read that:

The Japanese, in other words, are engaging the military leaders as equals; they offer experience and expertise, but do not tell them what to do (and do not push for immediate or major change). The generals, not surprisingly, appreciate this and at the same time probably calculate that Japan remains the most likely source of increased bilateral aid and other support. They have been careful not to criticise Japan for the ODA suspension, although this is one of the most damaging measures taken by any country and has had serious economic consequences.¹²¹

When comparing and contrasting Japan and USA’s foreign policies, we can’t help noticing how “soft” the former was in respect of the latter, whose government decided to create “political barriers” until a solution in favour of democracy was reached. Hence, in autumn 1995, a few months after ASSK’s release, Japan continued to support Burma’s economy, as reported in the *Los Angeles Times*: ‘After announcing the possible resumption of economic aid to Burma, Japan releases a

¹²⁰ ‘Myanmar: The Military Regime’s View of the World’, December, 7th, 2001, *ICG Asia Report* N° 28 Bangkok/Brussels. Available Online <http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/asia/south-east-asia/burma-myanmar/Myanmar%20The%20Military%20Regimes%20View%20of%20the%20World.pdf>. Retrieved: October, 2011.

¹²¹ *Ibidem*.

\$16 million grant to Burma, as part of Overseas Development Assistance funds, which had been cut off in 1988' (*Los Angeles Times*, January, 8th, 1996).¹²²

Four years later, expert of Burmese culture and anthropologist Gustaaf Houtman claimed that:

It is unclear whether those involved are actually conscious of their actions, but it is an undeniable fact that Japan plays the leading role in providing funds for the regime and generally co-operates with the regime towards the formulation of a new vision of Burma within the framework of both ASEN and Asia (Houtman, 1999: 155).

On the contrary, on July 10th, 1995, USA took a completely different position:

After six years, the military junta releases jailed dissident Suu Kyi from house arrest. According to a Western diplomat, "The external pressure got to them at last". The decision comes one day before the Congress was to debate the banning of all economic contacts with Burma. The United States and other Western governments praise the move, but refuse to lift economic sanctions until the regime makes further strides toward restoring democracy. Human rights organizations charge that more than 3,000 political prisoners remain in detention.¹²³

It is thus very difficult to assess both the alleged influence of ASSK's letters on Japanese foreign policy towards Burma and the presence of movements pro-ASSK inside Japanese public opinion. Nevertheless, the unexpected editorial success of the *Letters* is an initial mark of a different cultural perception of what was happening in Burma. That is, ASSK's text has demonstrated its potentiality as a means of conveying and activating humanitarian meanings since its first instalment. Nevertheless, Japanese foreign policy was strongly modelled on other categories – such as the above-mentioned "tolerance" of Burma's regime – that finally influenced even international organizations, such as the United Nations. It is the

¹²² Case Studies in Sanctions and Terrorism. The Peterson Institute for International Economics is a private, nonprofit, nonpartisan research institution devoted to the study of international economic policy. Available online: <http://www.iie.com/research/topics/sanctions/myanmar.cfm>. Retrieved: September, 2011.

¹²³ Mia Saw Shin, Alison Krupnick, and Tom Wilson, 'Burma or Myanmar?', in *US Policy at the Crossroads*. Seattle: National Bureau of Asian Research, 1995, p. 13.

Italian reporter Tiziano Terzani who emphasizes the submerged contradictions of some relevant UN decisions: in October 1990, the UN Japanese representative blocked a resolution that condemned the military junta and, as a result, UN continued to send money for assistance to Burmese economy, notwithstanding the evidence of its HRs violations:

Le Nazioni Unite non hanno sospeso i loro programmi di aiuto. A Pagan, la città delle diecimila pagode, l'intera popolazione che viveva entro le vecchie mura è stata deportata nel giro di tre giorni. Le Nazioni Unite continuano a pagare per il restauro delle pagode (Terzani, 1998: 54).¹²⁴

Finally, it is also important to keep in mind that ASSK is an authorial voice for both the international community and Burma. Indeed, she is a Nobel Peace Prize Laureate and the political leader of the Democratic Party that by great majority won the free election in May 1990.¹²⁵ Moreover, she is considered as an over-legitimate leader due to her efforts to attain democracy through peaceful negotiations and her everlasting empathy towards all Burmese people, and to the fact that she was born under a special aura, being the daughter of a national hero. Within this context, ASSK's description of HRs violations (see Chapter 2) becomes an evidently public and international denouncement. Indeed, with Saviano, ASSK shares the conviction that it is right to say what usually remains unsaid, recounting facts in details and supporting them by dates and names. Their words are in this sense 'true documents', which aspire to be taken into consideration by UN in order

¹²⁴ Of his 1991 journey to Burma, Terzani recalls a shocking episode: 'Veniamo massacrati. La prego, informi le Nazioni Unite', trovo scritto in inglese in un biglietto che un uomo mi lascia accanto sulla panchina di un parco. Un gesto patetico. Un'illusione. Le Nazioni Unite hanno poco da dire. Un tentativo fatto a Ottobre di far passare all'Assemblea generale una risoluzione che condannasse il governo di Rangoon è stato bocciato ai primi passi su insistenza della delegazione giapponese. Tokyo ha in Birmania enormi interessi economici da difendere. Le Nazioni Unite continuano con i loro programmi di assistenza e milioni di dollari continuano ad arrivare nelle casse del Paese. La dittatura ne approfitta senza alcuna reticenza e continua a violare i più basilari principi su cui l'organizzazione internazionale si fonda' (Terzani, 1998 [1991]).

¹²⁵ She had already been awarded for her constant struggle towards the establishment of democracy in Burma. She is in fact an honorary fellow of St Hugh's College (Oxford) and received the Thorolf Rafto Prize for HRs (Norway) and Sakharov Prize for the Freedom of Thought (European Community).

to declare a humanitarian emergency or start further investigations. At least, these are ASSK's expectations.

3.4.3 *The Author's "Humanitarian Literary Machine"*

Aung San Suu Kyi clearly writes her *Letters* to attack (dangerous) SLORC by means of (unarmed) written words. Throughout the whole text, there is a longing – either explicit or implicit – to see her country as a terrain for HRs promotion and respect. Exemplary is her appeal to enlightened businessmen (Letter 22) or the descriptions of numerous violations (e.g. Letters 10, 21, 53, 37, 38, 39). Moreover, ASSK loads her words with illocutionary and perlocutionary force: while denouncing Burma's specific situation, she looks back on history and forward onto contemporary dictatorships who deliberately ignore such kind of crimes. This two-folded "word power" also addresses a juridical and moral level: the former is activated by Suu Kyi's explicit asking for democratic countries' help,¹²⁶ while the latter is reached by a sense of "can do" that the readers feel throughout the book.

We could noticeably say that "debunking a stereotype" is a perlocutionary act. Indeed, if Japanese people stop thinking of dictatorships as legitimate, they may stop supporting their foreign policy, which, consequently, is bound to model its choices accordingly. It follows that, without the support of Japanese mass opinion, probably Burma will lose a fundamental economic supporter.

The point is that humanitarian words – like ASSK's – bring to the fore a powerful strategy, which gives rise to a structure of actions aiming at producing extraordinary effects: a dictatorship undermined by one single woman's words. I call that particular kind of power the *humanitarian literary machine*. The following schema should explain better what I mean while referring to ASSK's illocutionary and perlocutionary speech acts:

¹²⁶ Since her *Letters* can be read as a "call for help", they can be considered like any other help request, such as the S.O.S., within a wide and generalised range of perlocutionary speech acts.

The Humanitarian Literary Machine:

Denouncing HRs violations:

- At International Communities level → “I denounce the violations of HRs by the military junta ruling the country”

SPEECH ACT:

- ILLOCUTIONARY: She is launching (and repeating) an open *call for help* to the world.
- PERLOCUTIONARY: She is waiting for a political answer (e.g. declaring an economical embargo or overtaxing companies working in Burma).

- At mass and industry levels → “I denounce the military junta’s abuses”

SPEECH ACT:

- ILLOCUTIONARY: She is launching a call for help to individuals and industries, capitalizing on their ethical (and economical) values.
- PERLOCUTIONARY: She is waiting for some sort of mass and industry’s actions (e.g. boycotting products coming from Burma, refusing to invest in the territory).

Dismantling a stereotype¹²⁷

- Mass level → “Stop believing that we need a strong leadership!: we want a democracy!”

¹²⁷ As to the role of stereotypes in a social political formation, see also Nelson Mandela’s speech entitled ‘I am prepared to die’: ‘The lack of human dignity experienced by Africans is the direct result of the policy of white supremacy. White supremacy implies black inferiority. Legislation designed to preserve white supremacy entrenches this notion. Menial tasks in South Africa are inevitably performed by Africans. When anything has to be carried or cleaned the white man will look around for the African to do it for him, whether the African is employed by him or not. Because of this sort of attitude, whites tend to regard Africans as a separate breed. They do not look upon them as people with families of their own; they do not realize that they have emotions – that they fall in love like white people do; that they want to be with their wives and children like white people want to be with theirs; that they want to earn enough money to support their family properly, to feed and clothe them and send them to school’ (Mandela, 2011 [1964]: 80).

SPEECH ACT:

- ILLOCUTIONARY. She is declaring the absurdity of such a stereotype.
- PERLOCUTIONARY: She wants people to change their opinion and influence politicians along the path of a more ethical attitude towards Burma.

Undoubtedly, *Letters from Burma* represents one of the author's non-violent practices (the literary strategy) that she adopted to bring democracy and HRs into being in Burma. Indeed ASSK has embodied a most effective answer to Burmese dictatorship: by refusing any form of violence to contrast violence itself, she indissolubly ties up her *persona* to the ethics of peace and HRs sentiments, while providing an alternative model of political agency. To put it another way, she replies to dictatorship body violence with non-violent (and "dangerous") words, implicitly claiming that her writing and other common humanitarian and practical actions are not different, since they share an oppositional meaning to the abuse of violence while creating and disseminating messages relating to HRs. Hence, *Letters from Burma* – as we will see later – are both a "literary attack" on the SLORC regime and a "literary humanitarian operation" aiming at making the situation in Burma present to all readers and hindering the persistence of violations.

3.4.5 *The Objectives of the Text*

Considering this epistolary text as a "literary attack", it is possible to identify two main "shots": firstly, there is a constant denunciation of SLORC's violation of HRs; secondly, there is the intent to destabilize Burmese economy by asking foreign countries to boycott business activities in that region. These two literary "shots" are clearly identifiable in ASSK's letters and represent her main strategies to destabilize the SLORC regime in favour of democracy and HRs.

As a “literary humanitarian operation”, *Letters from Burma* reaches both moral and political levels through three axes, challenging the ingrained limits of writing: *the geographical axe* (initially addressed to Japan, the text is actually conceived to speak to the international community); *the private-and-public axe* (the letters are firstly addressed to a single, imaginary receiver and then to readers as a national community, a public mass force which is able to influence its country’s economic and political decisions); *the democratic governments axe* (the text tries to directly reach a democratic country’s political institutions).

Let us consider in detail how ASSK’s humanitarian text works. Turning again to the dominant objective of the letters – that is, making Burmese dictatorship “explode” under the double force of denouncing and destabilizing its economy – and analyzing it in relation to the geographical and private-and-public axes, it is possible to decode a series of “step objectives” on the ladder that might lead to Burma developing into a democracy:

1. To influence Japanese public opinion and politicians so as to prevent their government from providing Burma with financial aids.
2. To influence international public opinion and politicians so as to prevent their governments from supporting any form of financial aid to Burma.
3. To accuse Burma’s regime of HRs violations, by involving an audience made of Japanese people, Japanese government and of other people, governments and International Institutions (i.e. EU, UN, Amnesty International, just to mention a few) which are devoted to the promotion and respect of HRs.
4. To explicitly ask Japanese (and, implicitly, international) business companies to stop doing business with Burma.¹²⁸

¹²⁸ As regards that point, ‘Letter 52’ explicitly invites Japanese as well as other foreign investors to stop and refuse business activity in Burma.

5. To influence consumer behaviour by boycotting companies which deal with Burma. Indeed, consumers are considered as active meaning-makers and, usually, their (Western) democratic culture clashes with HRs violations by SLORC. Consumers refusal to buy whatever product comes from Burma would damage SLORC's economy sustainment.

3.4.6 *Potential Readers and Targets*

Undoubtedly, ASSK has always tried to start a dialogue with the military junta, which, at first sight, might be considered as one of the explicit addressees of her *Letters*. Nevertheless, I believe that both the author's particular choice of the means of communication and the language(s) she used actually reveal different intentions. Indeed, Burma's regime is not considered within her communicative context, but it exclusively represents the target of her literary attack, as proved by the open and incessant accusations of SLORC's infringements of HRs. Implicitly, therefore, the SLORC regime remains the target of the alleged re-actions that the *Letters* will be able to elicit from their readers.

Who are, then, the actual recipients of ASSK's *Letters*? Since her text was first published in Japanese by a Japanese newspaper, it is natural to see in the Japanese people – and specifically in the *Mainichi* readers – the main addressees of *Letters from Burma*.¹²⁹ Not surprisingly, throughout the text, one runs across many references to Japanese culture and current socio-political organizations. Exemplary is 'Letter 9', entitled 'New Year Notes', where she recalls the time spent in Kyoto in 1986, during New Year's Eve along with some Japanese friends. When talking about seasons in Burma, she also asserts: 'Neither is there a season that the Japanese would have easily recognized as autumn' (Letter, 12: 47), since to the

¹²⁹ More precisely, the letters were originally written in Burmese and then translated into Japanese. However, they were not published in Burmese at that time. The original English version was by Penguin Books in 1997, respecting their original order of instalment. The collection was later also translated into Japanese and, finally, into Burmese (published in the *Voice of Burma*, a weekly digest of Burmese news).

many Burmese people who have been unjustly imprisoned, seasons pass unchanged.¹³⁰

Nevertheless, considering that *Letters from Burma* also appeared simultaneously on the English Web page of the *Mainichi* – the *Mainichi Daily News* – it is possible to include as their potential readers the very international community. It should now be clear that ASSK wishes to bring the Burmese terrible situation to the attention of the whole world, overcrossing the limited viewpoint of Japan.

Finally, I would like to add that the *Letters'* addressees can be further divided into two other subcategories: *private* and *public* readers. The former group includes all those whose sphere of action is mainly limited to the private (e.g. single individuals, companies); the latter is defined by both governmental and non-governmental organizations (ranging from foreign countries' policy – like Japan's – to organizations such as UN and Amnesty International).

3.4.7 *First Conclusions*

We have examined both the objectives and addressees of ASSK's *Letters*, focusing on the potential and practical effects of the “humanitarian literary machine”. Hence, the text analyzed can be filed as neither a literary parenthesis of the activist ASSK, nor a commercial literary phenomenon promoted by the *Mainichi Shimbun*. Indeed, in variously fulfilling their objectives, the *Letters* explicitly and implicitly seek to promote re-actions at both individual and public (mass and political) levels in order to achieve (and sustain) democracy in Burma. Hence, the Japanese newspaper becomes a public space where ASSK is allowed to spell out to

¹³⁰ There are many other passages in which she explicitly draws on Japan. The clearest evidence of ASSK talking to Japanese people is in the letter entitled ‘The Beautiful and the Ugly’. She opens it by recalling a lesson on the Japanese tea ceremony held at Oxford with the intent to introduce the aesthetic concepts of the beautiful and the ugly: ‘I personally know many Japanese who are as ready to reject what is ugly as to accept what is beautiful. But I cannot help thinking that such a sense of discrimination is lacking in those who seek to promote business with Burma these days’ (Letter 22: 87) According to her, in a dictatorship like the Burmese one, ‘businessmen can only reap what they sow’ (*Ibid.*) (see also Chapter 2 for further details).

the entire world the terrible situation which has been coming to the fore in Burma. Since there is a limit to what we can demonstrate about specific individuals' answers, I have focused on the most evident changes regarding political and economical relationships between Burma and other countries, which were also influenced by mass opinion and public moral values. Finally, I have emphasized the nexus existing between addressees and objectives – the full recognition of HRs – which might positively affect the SLORC regime economy.

3.4.8 Letter 22: 'The Beautiful and the Ugly'

To illustrate the dynamic interaction between the private and public spheres intersecting and incorporating moral, political and economic issues, we need to analyze 'Letter 22', entitled 'The Beautiful and the Ugly'. Issued on April 22nd, 1996, it simultaneously appeared in Japanese (*Mainichi Shimbun*) and English (*Mainichi Daily News*). It is explicitly addressed to Japanese investors, to whom she reprimands that '[b]usinessmen can only reap what they sow', as the subtitle declares.

Main Themes

ASSK aims at undermining SLORC economic power by inviting Japanese companies – and, indirectly, international ones – to avoid doing business in Burma. The author appeals to the businessmen's moral responsibility, arguing that any of their potential Burmese investments will represent, unquestioningly, a backing of the regime and its HRs violations. That is, she challenges Japanese businessmen by describing them as co-responsible for the oppressive dictatorship in Burma: investing in her country means accepting and sustaining the distorted junta's ideology. In addition, from a utilitarian point of view, doing business in Burma – with its blatantly anti-democratic government – would dramatically increase the risk of losing both capitals and profits. Hence, the initial motto of the subtitle conveys a

specific meaning: (business) sowing in a terrain harassed by HRs violations makes a proportionately terrible harvest. Hence, 'Letter 22' blurs the boundary connoting the private dimension of business and moves towards the ethics and economic interests of businessmen themselves. Its perlocutionary force can be summed up with the following strong command: "Do not do your business here!"

The letter opens with the author's remembering a joyful time of her life when the Burmese issue was still far away. She was in Oxford attending a Japanese tea-ceremony lesson, which is here turned into a starting point to illustrate basically aesthetic principles. Indeed, this episode introduces the main theme of the letter: learning how to distinguish between *the ugly* and *the beautiful*, consisting in 'the necessity of removing all that is ugly or disharmonious before reaching out to a beauty that is both visual and spiritual' (Letter 22: 87).

Noticeably, those notions must not be seen exclusively as pertinent to Japanese tea-ceremony, but to all things, as ASSK comments: "The fundamental principle of aesthetics which we learnt from our teacher, that to acquire truly good taste one has to be able to recognize both ugliness and beauty, is applicable to the whole range of human experience' (*Ibidem*). Analyzing the letter's opening with a rhetorical lens, we may argue that it conforms to a *captatio benevolentiae* strategy. Indeed, she encourages a positive attitude in Japanese readers by praising their culture for being so much concerned with aesthetics: 'I personally know many Japanese who are as ready to reject what is ugly as to accept what is beautiful' (*Ibidem*). Nevertheless, that intimacy between author and Japanese readers is imbued with a particular (and different) function: it provides ASSK with an authoritative voice that allows her to directly and explicitly accuse Japanese businessmen of deflating their culturally aesthetic values: 'But I cannot help thinking that such a sense of discrimination is lacking in those who seek to promote business with Burma these days' (Letter 22: 87). To understand the reasons for such a behaviour, ASSK imagines herself in the Japanese businessmen'

shoes and tries to depict how they see her country: ‘Perhaps they merely see the picturesque scenery, the instinctive smiles with which Burmese generally greet visitors, the new hotels, the cheap labor and what appear to them as golden opportunities for making money’ (*Ibid.*: 88). However, this is not the reality, but its superficial appearance. Behind that illusory *façade* stands something else:

Perhaps they do not know of the poverty in the countryside, the hapless people whose homes have been razed to make way for big vulgar buildings, the bribery and corruption that is spreading like a cancerous growth, the lack of equity that makes the so-called open market economy very, very open to some and hardly ajar to others, the harsh and increasingly lawless actions taken by the authorities against those who seek democracy and human rights, the forced labour projects where men, women and children toil away without financial compensation under hard taskmasters in scenes reminiscent of the infamous railway of death of the Second World War (*Ibidem*).

ASSK displays, thus, the many brutal aspects of life in Burma: poverty, corruption, lack of equity, (naturalized) violations of HRs – the forced labour, in particular. Moreover, according to Donald M. Seekins, a professor of Meio University (Japan), by unburying the tragic memory of the Burmese railways’ construction, which notoriously involved Japan, ‘a country wrestling with its wartime aggression in Asia, she [ASSK] chose a “potent imagery”’.¹³¹ Finally, that passage also calls for the necessity to make people know – that is, to render visible – what is really happening in her country, confirming the soundness of both ASSK and *Mainichi* editor’s intentions underneath the *Letters from Burma* project. After debunking a widespread misconception about the real situation in Burma for those who live outside it, she depicts such a false impression in terms of “naivety” when coming from businessmen, who are usually considered wise and smart people: ‘it is surprising that those who pride themselves on their shrewdness and keen eye for

¹³¹ Donald M. Seekins, ‘Japan’s “Burma Lovers” and the Military Regime’, Japan Policy Research Institute, Working Paper No. 60: September 1999, available online: <http://www.jpri.org/publications/workingpapers/wp60.html> (Retrieved: October, 2011). ASSK refers to the Burma Railway construction, which was considered as a strategic necessity for the Japanese army in Burma during World War II. It has been called the “Death Railway” since it caused a huge number of deaths among prisoners of war and civilians (more than 100,000).

opportunity cannot discern the ugly symptoms of a system that is undermining the moral and intellectual fiber and, consequently, the economic potential of our nation' (Letter 22: 88).

In the following paragraph, ASSK switches again from moral to economic interests. If (Japanese) businessmen do not respond to Burmese people's suffering, certainly they will demonstrate interest towards their own business. Therefore, the author deeply examines the possible negative effects of dictatorship on business, resulting in a silent and commercial connivance at HRs violations:

If businessmen do not care about the numbers of political prisoners in our country they should at least be concerned that the lack of an effective legal framework means there is no guarantee of fair business practice or, in cases of injustice, of reparation. If businessmen do not care that our standards of health and education are deteriorating, they should at least be concerned that the lack of a healthy, educated labour force will inevitably thwart sound economic development. If businessmen do not care that we have to struggle with the difficulties of a system that gives scant attention to the well-being of the people, they should at least be concerned that the lack of necessary infrastructure and an underpaid and thereby corrupt bureaucracy hampers quick, efficient transactions. If businessmen do not care that our workers are exposed to exploitation, they should at least be concerned that a dissatisfied labour force will eventually mean social unrest and economic instability (*Ibidem*).

Finally, in the last paragraph, she leaves the businessman's utilitarian field to explicitly voice her *J'accuse* to Japanese companies, making a very powerful simile between Japanese investors and bad-mannered passers-by. Such positive terms as 'orchard', 'blossoms', 'fruits', are here countered by violent verbs like 'stripping off', 'spoil', 'imperil':

To observe businessmen who come to Burma with the intention of enriching themselves is somewhat like watching passers-by in an orchard roughly stripping off blossoms for their fragile beauty, blind to the ugliness of despoiled branches, oblivious of the fact that by their action they are imperilling future fruitfulness and committing an injustice against the rightful owners of the trees. Among these despoilers are big Japanese companies (*Ibid.*: 88-89).

I would like to note here that the Letter's closure circularly echoes the aesthetic notions which had been introduced in the opening lines, and anticipated

in the subtitle. At the same time, this literary strategy of mixing and contrasting bad and good elements leads to an enhancing of both: the former appears obscurer while the latter seems even more luminous. Significantly, ASSK does not deconstruct “Japanese biases” with a view to substituting them with Burmese ones. Therefore, she carefully avoids generalizations: not all Japanese people are ‘despoilers’. Such an assertion does not function as a rhetorical device, but it is the result of ASSK’s learning and incorporation of the ‘the good and the ugly’ principle:

But they do not represent the best of Japan. I have met groups of Japanese, both young and old, anxious to find out for themselves the true state of affairs in our country, prepared to look straight at both the beautiful and the ugly. At the weekend public meetings that take place outside my gate, there are usually a number of Japanese sitting in the broiling sun and, although they cannot understand Burmese, paying close and courteous attention to all that is going on (*Ibid.*: 89).

Since she always concludes her letters hinting at the hope that things can ameliorate, she thanks here all those Japanese who happened to attend her public meeting (in the face of linguistic barriers), showing her their positive support: ‘And when, at the end of the meeting, many of them come up to me to say: “ganbatte kudasai”, I am strengthened by the knowledge that our struggle has the support of Japanese people in whom the sense of moral aesthetics is very much alive’ (*Ibidem*).

Word Power: Some Tangible Consequences on Reality

It should be now clearer that *Letter 22* is not only relevant for its evident attack on SLORC’s economic power, but also because it emerges, among all the *Letters*, as representative of a “cause-effect” relationship between (humanitarian) words and reality. To say it in other words, this letter has tangible effects on the world. Literally, what have been the actual consequences of ASSK’s words on Japanese businessmen? Before going deeply into the question, it is essential to remind the strategic importance of Japan for Burma’s economy. Although this

argument has been discussed above, I wish to quote this consideration by Seekins on their “special relationship”:

The SPDC’s main interest in Japan is clearly economic. The junta has made direct requests for economic assistance to facilitate economic reforms. Japanese influence? Japan has been widely credited with having influenced the SLORC’s decision to liberalise the economy, as well as several later political concessions, notably the release of Aung San Suu Kyi from house arrest in 1995.¹³²

Some years after the publication of the *Letters*, Seekins asserted that: ‘[a]ccording to 1998 statistics, Japan is only the ninth largest foreign investor in Burma, after Singapore, France, Britain, and even the United States’ (Seekins, 1999).¹³³ Why did Japan drastically change its financial support to Burma? Commenting on the fact that ‘mainstream companies consider the business environment excessively risky outside the profitable channel of official developmental assistance contracts’ (Seekins, 1999), Seekins deliberately mentions ASSK’s ‘Letter 22’ as a primary cause: ‘she has opposed any form of economic engagement (except for carefully monitored humanitarian aid), and in one of her “Letters from Burma” [...] she singled out Japan for special criticism’ (*Ibid.*). Hence the practical effects of ‘Letter 22’ on Japanese businessmen’s decisions are not to be undervalued. The measure of its force is also indicated by the numerous reactions of those who were attacked. As with Saviano, as soon as her ‘Letter 22’ was published, the ‘mud machine’ started to move. Delegitimizing and discrediting ASSK were considered essential means to foster business between Japan and Burma. According to Seekins:

¹³² ‘Myanmar: The Military Regime’s View of the World’, *ICG Asia Report*, N° 28, December, 7th, 2001, p. 18. In November 1997, SLORC changed its name into SPDC, which stands for State Peace and Development Council.

¹³³ Also according to *IMF* statistics, Japan was not the most influential partner of Burma anymore: ‘Japan ranked as the sixth largest investor in Myanmar from 1995/1996-1999/2000 with a disbursement of U.S.\$87.2 million, or 3.2 percent of total investments for the period. Japanese-Myanmar trade in 1999/2000 amounted to 5.1 percent of Myanmar’s total exports and 9.9 percent of imports’, quoted in *ICG Asia Report*.

Many inside Japan's business world – and their supporters in academia and the media – seem to share a common goal with the junta: discrediting Aung San's daughter. Given her central role in the struggle for democracy, it is not an exaggeration to say that if she could be marginalized and lost the support of the international community, big corporations in Japan and elsewhere would find it easy to get their governments to snuggle closer to the junta. Without Suu Kyi, full economic engagement and recognition would surely follow swiftly (Seekins, 1999).

Since ASSK had been demonstrating the power of literary attacks, she was herself attacked by opponents through the same communication medium, the newspaper, where criticism involved both her private and public life. As regards the former, she was even charged with racism, since ASSK was not married to a Burmese but an American (e.g. by Kazushige Kaneko, director of Institute of Asian Ethniforms and Culture in Tokyo or by a business authority in Japan, Yusuke Fukada).¹³⁴

The status of ASSK's denigration reached its negative climax by way of an international management consultant, Ohmae Kenichi, who politically linked the author to USA colonial micro-strategies. Indeed, he argued that they capitalize on her present – and unquestionably short – appeal on Burmese people as an *escamotage* to extend USA influence on the territory: despite its military regime, Burma has important infrastructures and has been admitted into the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (*ASEAN*).¹³⁵ Here follow Kenichi's harsh comments on ASSK's 1990 election victory:

The West knows Myanmar through one person, Aung San Suu Kyi. The obsession with Suu Kyi is a natural one if you understand the United States. Superficial democracy is golden in the U.S.: Americans love elections. Just as Myanmar is Buddhist, and Malaysia is Islamic, America has a religion called democracy (Seekins, in Houtman, 1999: 155.)

¹³⁴ Kazushige Kaneko, 'Contradiction in American Oppression on Human Rights Problems', *The Asia 21 Magazine*, (Autumn Edition), 1996, English Translation, Original text in Japanese. Available online: <http://www.ibiblio.org/obl/reg.burma/archives/199708/msg00037.html>. Retrieved: October, 2011. Further references to articles against ASSK are provided in (Seekins, 1999).

¹³⁵ He even contends that Burma is not the military dictatorship that Suu Kyi depicts and that democracy is not a system suitable for all cultures.

Yet, as pointed out by Seekins, it is important to emphasize that all those who attack the author show their (deliberate?) ignorance of Burma's history, simply defined by revolutionary nationalism – firstly against British colonialism and, successively, the military junta.¹³⁶

Finally, ASSK was charged with writing just to earn money, demagogically portraying Burma as a HRs waste land (Houtman, 1999: 173). Although it is not possible to know “if” and “how much” she was paid for her speeches and articles, and “how” she used her incomings, let us in fact consider both that she entirely donated the sum of her Nobel Prize to sustain democracy in Burma and all the sufferance she went through due to her political involvement (*Ibidem*).

The charges mentioned above are particularly significant because they ominously echo those addressed to Saviano, reaching a perfect correspondence in the following assertion by Mr. Kenichi: ‘Mrs. Suu Kyi is becoming a burden for a developing Myanmar’.¹³⁷ And yet, in spite of that constant delegitimizing propaganda, ASSK is still an authorial voice in Japan:

Aung San Suu Kyi, however, is highly respected. Her “Letters from Burma” appeared as a weekly series in the mass-circulation newspaper *Mainichi Shimbun* in 1995-1996, winning a national journalism award. *Mainichi Shimbun* and the more liberal *Asahi Shimbun*, another major newspaper, have reported sympathetically on her activities since 1988. Her book, *Freedom from Fear*, and her collected speeches have been translated into Japanese, and her life has even inspired Manga, the popular Japanese genre of comic books for grown-ups (Seekins, 1998).

Finally, it is worth pointing out that the idea of an international boycotting by consumers and companies was neither originally nor exclusively launched in

¹³⁶ Moreover, Seekins asserts that there are also mythical legends referring to this revolutionary and democratic spirit of Burma: ‘Burma’s revolutionary roots go back further than the colonial period. A theme which recurs often in the history of old Burma is the overthrow of an unjust ruler by a minlaung, a claimant to the throne, who governs benevolently according to Buddhist precepts. Many Burmese see Aung San Suu Kyi as a minlaung not only because of her “royal” blood (being the daughter of Aung San) but because of her courage and spiritual strength. (It should be pointed out that she has never expressed a desire to become Burma’s leader)’ (Seekins, 1999).

¹³⁷ Kenichi Ohmae, ‘Mrs. Suu Kyi is becoming a burden for a developing Myanmar’, *SAPIO*, November 12th, 1997. Available online <http://www.ibiblio.org/obl/reg.burma/archives/199712/msg00396.html>. Retrieved: October, 2011.

Letters from Burma, since there is a videotape previously recorded by ASSK suggesting the same message:¹³⁸ 'Foreign investors should realize there could be no economic growth and opportunities in Burma until there is agreement on the country's political future' (quoted in Klein, 1996: 331). On June 4th, 1989, a member of US House of Representatives reported:¹³⁹

Aung San Suu Kyi, opposition leader, is quoted in *Bangkok Post* as calling on foreign countries to impose complete economic boycott, including trade embargo, against Burma until regime follows through on promise to hold elections.¹⁴⁰

As a result of that declaration, some US companies, administrations and then the very structure of USA foreign policy increasingly responded to the appeal:¹⁴¹

In a press release announcing its withdrawal from Burma, US company Levi-Strauss states, 'Under present conditions, it is not possible to do business in Myanmar without

¹³⁸ In the same videotape smuggled from her country, ASSK calls for economic sanctions against Burma to make it quite clear that economic transformation is not possible without political change. ASSK adds: 'I think that the only people whom sanctions will affect are the privileged' (*Journal of Commerce*, July 19th, 1996, 3A; *International Herald Tribune*, July 19th, 1996, 4).

¹³⁹ As a consequence, the regime placed ASSK and another political leader of the NLD under house arrest.

¹⁴⁰ US House of Representatives, Subcommittees on Human Rights and International Organizations, and Asian and Pacific, Foreign Affairs Committee, 1989. *The Crackdown in Burma: Suppression of the Democracy Movement and Violations of Human Rights*. Hearing and Markup on H. Con. Res. 185. (13 September). Washington. Source: Case: 88-1 US/EU/Japan v. Burma (1988 - Human rights, democracy, narcotics), The Peterson Institute for International Economics. Available online: <http://www.iie.com/research/topics/sanctions/myanmar.cfm>. Retrieved: October, 2011.

¹⁴¹ Before a national agreement on actions was reached against Burma, some of the United States took relevant measures. See particularly the State of Massachusetts, which in June 25th, 1996, passed a legislation that 'adds a 10 percent premium on contracts with state agencies for companies that do business in Burma and prohibits those companies from purchasing or leasing state-owned property' (*Inside US Trade*, January, 31st, 1997, 10). Some months later, in November 25th, 1996, we read that the 'State of Massachusetts releases a list of 234 firms involved in Burma that could be affected by the selective purchasing law. Eight cities have already followed the Massachusetts initiative by adopting similar restrictions' (*International Herald Tribune*, November, 25th, 1996, 11; *Inside US Trade*, 7 February 1997, 10). Case: 88-1 US/EU/Japan v. Burma (1988 - Human rights, democracy, narcotics), The Peterson Institute for International Economics. Available Online: <http://www.iie.com/research/topics/sanctions/myanmar.cfm>. Retrieved: October, 2011.

directly supporting the military government and its pervasive violations of human rights'.¹⁴²

The town of Berkeley, CA, bans city contracts with companies that deal with the regime in Burma to protest Rangoon's human rights record.¹⁴³

Some years later, in 1997, her husband gave a speech on her behalf at the American University in Washington, D.C., inviting students to put pressure on multinational corporations investing in Burma: 'Please use your liberty to promote ours' – he said (Suu Ky, 1997a).

Thus, 'Letter 22' is one of ASSK's reiterated appeals to boycott Burma's economic interests. Although it is not possible to attribute a specific effect to each message, I think that her literary attack – much more than others – might have actually laid the cornerstone for such a request: strong USA sanctions against Burma were introduced as early as 1997.¹⁴⁴ No matter what, ASSK finally got what she asked. In her masterly analysis of recent capitalism, *No Logo*, Canadian Naomi Klein mentions ASSK and her role in getting big brands, with their "Mcjob" philosophy, to leave Burma:

After the campus boycotts made it into *The New York Times*, Pepsi sold its shares in a controversial Burmese bottling plant whose owner, Thien Tun, had publicly called for Suu Kyi's democracy movement to be 'ostracized and crushed'. Student activists, however, dismissed the move as a 'paper shuffle' because Pepsi products were still being sold and produced in Burma. Finally, facing continued pressure, Pepsi announced its 'total disengagement' from Burma on January 24, 1997. When Zar Ni, the coordinator of the American student movement, heard the news, he sent an E-mail out on the Free Burma Coalition listserve: 'We finally tied the Pepsi Animal down! We did it!! We all did it!!!... We now KNOW we have the grassroots power to yank one of the most powerful corporations in the world' (Klein, 2000: 403).

¹⁴² *Washington Post*, July 21st, 94, A31. The Peterson Institute for International Economics, available online: <http://www.iie.com/research/topics/sanctions/myanmar.cfm> (Retrieved: October, 2011).

¹⁴³ *Burma Focus*, Vol. 6, No.1, April 1995. Source: The Peterson Institute for International Economics. Available online: <http://www.iie.com/research/topics/sanctions/myanmar.cfm>. Retrieved: October, 2011.

¹⁴⁴ For further details, see *CRS Report for Congress*, 'Burma: Economic Sanctions', by Larry A. Niksch and Martin A. Weiss, August 3rd, 2009. Available online, <http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/row/RS22737.pdf>. Retrieved: October, 2011.

This is not an isolated event, but part of a Nineties phenomenon aiming at discouraging foreign companies which were ready to increase their profits at any cost. Hence, after only three months since the *Letters from Burma*'s publication, one does not feel surprised when reading that on July 7th, 1996:

A day after Carlsberg of Denmark abandons plans to invest in Burma, and under fire from its unions and from American and European human rights activists, Dutch beer multinational Heineken announces its withdrawal from a \$30 million venture in Burma. The Burmese government bans imports of Heineken and Carlsberg.¹⁴⁵

And again:

A leading Danish pension fund sells its \$10.45 million holding in Total, the French energy group, because of fears that Total's investment in Burma might lead to an international boycott of the company's products. Total is developing Burma's largest foreign investment project to date - a \$1.2bn venture to produce natural gas for export to Thailand. Total's pipeline project is a joint venture with Unocal of the US, PTT of Thailand and Burma's state-owned Myanmar Oil and Gas Enterprise.¹⁴⁶

About one year later, January 28th, 1997, the back-flow of foreign businesses has not yet come to an end:

Following Heineken, Carlsberg, Kodak, Apple and Walt Disney, PepsiCo announces its complete withdrawal from Burma. The company had already sold its 40 percent equity stake in its Burmese bottler in May 1995, but was still under pressure from activists in the United States, especially since its competitor Coca-Cola does not operate in Burma.¹⁴⁷

As one may easily gather, the effects of ASSK's 'Letter 22' mainly occurred in Europe and USA. Unfortunately – apart from the denigrating campaign against ASSK hinted at before – it is not possible to find other kinds of public response to her appeal. Unlike those boycotting campaigns that took place in US and Europe, a

¹⁴⁵ *Financial Times*, July 12th, 1996, 5; *Journal of Commerce*, August 6th, 1996, 3A. The Peterson Institute for International Economics. Available online: <http://www.iie.com/research/topics/sanctions/myanmar.cfm>. Retrieved: October, 2011.

¹⁴⁶ *Financial Times*, July 19th, 1996, 1. The Peterson Institute for International Economics, Available Online: <http://www.iie.com/research/topics/sanctions/myanmar.cfm> (Retrieved: October, 2011).

¹⁴⁷ *Financial Times*, January 28th, 1997, 1. *Ibid.*

total lack of information bears on other forms of dissents. There is a paradox embedded in that discrepancy: indeed, we know that the author's project was aimed at trespassing Japanese borders in order to move beyond and, thus, reaching its fullest success. The *Letters* were in fact published by other newspapers and translated into many languages, as we gather from the following article, reporting Hiroshi Nagai's assertions:

Nagai said the first foreign media to reproduce the series was the "Nation", an English-language newspaper in Thailand, which began to publish the essays last spring. Then followed Universal Press Syndicate, a major news syndicate in the United States. A weekly magazine in Thailand has also reproduced the essays in the Thai language.¹⁴⁸

Moreover, the first editor announced:

As some Burmanet subscribers already know, Daw Suu's "Letter from Burma" series has been translated into Burmese by Kyaw Kyaw Soe, an activist in Tokyo, and published in "Voice of Burma", a weekly digest of Burmese news in the Burmese language. Kyaw Kyaw Soe's translations will also be compiled in a book to be published by "Voice of Burma" Group later this month. Stay tuned for details.¹⁴⁹

As a matter of fact, in 1997 the *Letters* were collected in a book by the well-known *Penguin Publishing House* and, some months later, a Japanese translation was issued on the *Mainichi Shimbun*. Increasingly, news agencies referred to ASSK's *Letters* as containing (reliable) social and economic information on Burma under the military regime. Finally, the letters were published on the Net, where they have been posted by her sympathizers.¹⁵⁰ Nevertheless, for all their success in the world, in 2011 there is still no evidence of a Burmese translation freely available in Burma.

Finally, I would like to point out that, although Japan suspended, in principle, its economic sustainment to Burma, in 1997 the ODA assistances were

¹⁴⁸ Zaw Win Maung, 'Japanese Daily Helps Suu Kyi's Messages', *Kyodo*, December 27th, 1996. Available online: <http://www.ibiblio.org/obl/reg.burma/archives/199612/msg00299.html>. Retrieved: October 2011.

¹⁴⁹ Aung San Suu Kyi, 'Voice of Reason Looks Back on Eventful Year: "Year End"', *Letter from Burma* (No. 52) *Mainichi Daily News*, Monday, December 9th, 1996.

¹⁵⁰ The *Letters* are currently available on the Internet at <http://www.aappb.org/suukyi.html>. Retrieved: December 2011.

reconfirmed specifying that – differently from Massachusetts’ sanctions – Japanese ‘projects [...] would directly benefit the people of Myanmar by addressing their basic human needs (BHN), on a case-by-case basis meanwhile monitoring democratization and the improvement of human rights’.¹⁵¹ It is with this (official) statement of *constructive engagement* that Japan succeeded in convincing the members of *ASEAN* to admit Burma.¹⁵²

To all appearances, then, the *Letters* did not manage to break Burma-Japan economical relationships.¹⁵³

¹⁵¹ *MOFA* (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan), ‘Japan’s Position Regarding the Situation in Myanmar’ March 1997. Available online: <http://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/myanmar/myanmar.html>. Retrieved: October, 2011. As regards this aspect, the NDL has recently dropped the opposition to tourism to Burma, which together with economic sanctions and the boycott of corporations had been used to oppose the junta’s regime. Mr Win Tin, a co-founder of the NLD and close friend of Ms Suu Kyi, said: ‘We want people to come to Burma, not to help the junta, but to help the people by understanding the situation: political, economic, moral – everything’ (Kenneth Denby, ‘Burmese Opposition Drops Longtime Tourism Boycott’, *The Times*, November 04th, 2010 9:40AM). However, it is still unclear whether ASSK approves such a change in politics. Seekins also recognised that boycotting finally worsened the man-in-the-street’s conditions. It is no coincidence that ASSK’s philosophy later changed. Nevertheless, I do not know if this change in her way of contrasting the military junta is due to the fact that not all the countries responded as she wished. When interviewed by Italian journalist Raimondo Boldrini, she asserted that the presently bad economical conditions of Burma are not linked to other countries’ economical sanctions, but to the military government, as was also declared by the International Monetary Fund (Aug San Suu Kyi, ‘La mia battaglia’ *la Repubblica* March 31st, 2001).

¹⁵² On the Japanese government web site we still read that ‘Japan does not feel international isolation is the optimal way for the improvement of the domestic situation in Myanmar. Rather, Japan thinks it important to give Myanmar incentives to behave in line with it.’ And on the *New York Times*: ‘Despite internal concerns and appeals from the US and Burmese opposition leader Suu Kyi, ASEAN members agree to admit Burma in July. ASEAN leaders affirm that their philosophy of “constructive engagement” will have more positive effects than imposing sanctions, which could push Burma into a closer alliance with China’ (*The New York Times*, June 1st, 1997).

¹⁵³ Their strongly sympathetic relationship is also witnessed by a recent Burma donation in response to the Tohoku-Pacific Ocean Earthquake: as reported on the official web site of the Japanese Foreign Ministry: ‘the Government of Myanmar made donation of 100,000 US dollars, moreover, many people of Myanmar gave donation through the Embassy of Japan in Myanmar. In addition, H.E. Mr. Thein Sein, President of Myanmar, H.E. Mr. Nyan Win, then Foreign Minister of Myanmar and many other Myanmar people from various fields sent letters and messages of sympathy and condolences. The Government of Japan deeply appreciates the Government of Myanmar and its people for their expression of solidarity and generous assistance to Japan.’

3.4.9 *What Happened to ASSK after her Weekly Column was Over?*

As soon as ASSK published her last ‘Letter’, the situation in Burma became ever more uncertain. In November 1996 some officials of Suu Kyi’s National League for Democracy were attacked by a crowd, and in December there were antigovernment student demonstrations and bombing incidents in Yangon. The following year witnessed a tremendous rise in violence, as reported in the following excerpts:

January 30th, 1997. Department of State Report on Human Rights Practices for 1996 confirms increased repression of human rights in Burma during the past year. Offenses include new restrictions placed on Suu Kyi and growing numbers of arbitrary detentions, both contributing to more Burmese asylum seekers in Bangladesh and Thailand (US Department of State, 1997).¹⁵⁴

February 12th, 1997. Amnesty International reports that current political repression and human rights violations in Burma have reached their highest levels since 1989 (*Washington Post*, February 12th, 1997 A29).¹⁵⁵

The proliferation of HRs infringements did not for that matter diminish the role of ASSK as a leader of NLD, which continues to be regarded as an incomparable threat to the regime:

August 19th, 1997. The military junta imprisons three family members of Suu Kyi, in an apparent effort to put pressure on the opposition leader (*Journal of Commerce*, August 19th, 1997, 4A).¹⁵⁶

Until 2003 ASSK remained in a semi-freedom condition: she might not leave the country (otherwise they would have denied her the permit to return) and was not allowed to receive visits. Even her family members have not succeeded in meeting her for years – with her husband making no exception (he died of cancer in 1999). Then, after the May 30th, 2003 attack, in which many of her supporters

¹⁵⁴ The Peterson Institute for International Economics. Available online: <http://www.iie.com/research/topics/sanctions/myanmar.cfm>. Retrieved: October, 2011.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibidem*.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibidem*.

were killed, she was put under house arrest until 2010. Undoubtedly, her battle for democracy in Burma has meant putting her life daily at risk. In this connection, Bettina Ling asserts in her biography of ASSK that ‘She lives at all times with the threat of re-arrest and with the possibility that she could be assassinated by people loyal to the SLORC government. Still Daw Suu fearlessly continues to make optimistic speeches to the Burmese citizens to buoy their spirits and to speak out and write about the abuses in her country’(Ling, 1999: 16). The Letters from Burma are a heroic act of courage, the umpteenth. She wrote them after 6 years of house arrest, well aware of the risk of being condemned once again. The Letters, her words, represent a powerful and peaceful means for her non-violent battle against the regime and may be seen as the core of her practices for bringing democracy and HRs in Burma.

In conclusion, to quote the words used by a reviewer of *Letters from Burma*: ‘This is not just a book. Along with Aung San Suu Kyi’s two other major books (*Freedom from Fear* and *Voice of Hope*), this book is destined to be at the heart of the struggle – and eventually the victory – for democracy in Burma’.¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁷ Maurizio Giuliano is a political scientist working in the field of international affairs and development. Available online: <http://www.amazon.com/Letters-Burma-Aung-San-Suu/dp/0140264035>. Retrieved: October, 2011.

3.5 The Power of Words in *Gomorra*

Quando mi chiedono perché racconto, rispondo semplicemente: “[...] e perché tu non racconti?”

Roberto Saviano

The idea of a “word power” sustains and precedes the composition of *Gomorra*. As we said in the previous pages, Saviano strongly believes that language is not a neutral means of communication, but that it can prove to be extraordinarily efficient for the author’s specific intents.

Such a word power springs from the author’s sense of nausea for and indissoluble tie with his native land, a repulsive desire that all the people born in the Naples area can be shown to feel. It is like a primordial language that he does not want to forget. It is the language spoken by Don Diana, who actually used his words to make a diffused conspiracy of silence explode against Camorra bosses: ‘La parola diventa un urlo. Controllato e lanciato acuto e alto contro un vetro blindato: con la volontà di farlo esplodere’ (Saviano, 2006: 244). That is, the word becomes a concrete means of action that manages to scare even the Sistema. Nevertheless, where does that power come from? While commenting on Don Diana’s discursive strategies, Saviano carves out an answer:

Scrisse un documento inaspettato [...], un testo religioso, cristiano, con una traccia di disperata dignità umana, che rese quelle *parole universali*, capaci di superare i perimetri religiosi e di far tremare sin nella voce le sicurezze dei boss, che arrivarono a temere quelle parole più di un blitz dell’Antimafia, più del sequestro delle cave e delle betoniere, più delle intercettazioni telefoniche che tracciano un ordine di morte (*Ibidem*, my own emphasis).

Hence, this kind of words’ use blurs its initial *hic et nunc* boundaries to speak to the inner humanity peculiar to all individuals, who consequently participate somehow in reinforcing the effect. The opening pages of the chapter on Don

Diana are a case in point regarding ordinary people's involvement in the "dangerous" power of words. Although Saviano's memory is discontinuous, we can be sure about the rage circulating among (different) people: all felt the priest as being part of them. Indistinctly, all suffered his murder because the Sistema killed not only a just man, but also his collective fight against *Gomorra*.¹⁵⁸

Saviano does not forget him, but cherishes his teachings and proceeds to trace his own word strategy: as already asserted, he (instinctively) knows, experiences and makes the readers participate in this virtual voyage into the *Sistema* world. Nevertheless, are his words eventually powerful?

There are different levels at which his words can be considered powerful, namely capable of triggering effects on reality which are in line with a humanitarian practice. These levels concerns the law, morality and the Camorra's economic interest. Let's start with the first one:

1) The level of the Law. In the legal territory, Saviano's words are like a testimony since they can add information or evidence to judicial inquiries. As a matter of fact, Saviano's text is built on his personal experiences in the underworld of the Camorra, as a witness, and on many public accounts based on investigations led by the Italian magistrates. In an interview, journalist Peppe Ruggiero asked him how he would define *Gomorra*:

Un "romanzo di non-fiction". Un romanzo con nomi e cognomi, dati e analisi, documenti della magistratura, interviste, intercettazioni, ormai il vero avamposto della letteratura. Sono nato e cresciuto in terra di Camorra. Ho sempre sentito la presenza dei clan, il loro potere economico e militare. Ho deciso di "raccontare la terra" in cui vivo usando la realtà non come fonte d'ispirazione, ma inserendomi in essa come parte attiva.

¹⁵⁸ The importance of words had already been stressed in the opening chapter, although they seemed to remain suspended in still and stale air, unable to create a human tension between speaker and listener. Here, I refer to the words that Padre Mauro pronounced during his commemoration of a young robber called Emanuele: "Se quindici anni nel sud Italia sono abbastanza per lavorare, decider di rapinare, uccidere ed essere uccisi, sono anche abbastanza per prendere responsabilità di tali cose'. Poi tirò forte col naso l'aria viziata della chiesa: 'Ma quindici anni sono così pochi che ci fanno vedere meglio cosa c'è dietro, e ci obbligano a distribuire responsabilità. Quindici anni è un'età che bussa alla coscienza di chi ciancia di legalità, lavoro, impegno. Non bussa con le nocche, ma con le unghie'. Il parroco finì l'omelia. Nessuno capi fino in fondo cosa voleva dire, né c'erano autorità o istituzioni'" (Saviano, 2006: 33).

Infiltrarmi è il mio primo gesto letterario. Penso che il solo svelare le dinamiche di potere le renda più fragili, sostituibili. Credo ancora che la “parola” possa essere forgiata come antidoto al potere (Saviano, 2010a).

Saviano could be cast as an intradiegetic narrator, witness and protagonist at the same time. He does not resemble a detached and cold journalist or investigator, but an “emotional reporter” – he belonged to those places and lived through some of those stories – a “wise/critical observer”, an embodiment for an insider/outsider’s view on the Camorra. The novel can in the upshot be considered as an investigative reporting about the *Sistema*, a memorial of his life in the land of the Camorra, and also a denunciation of a corrupted world.

According to Saviano, *Gomorra* was inspired by a few juridical investigations, among which one named “Cassiopea”, an operation about the illegal disposal of toxic waste coming from the North of Italy and directed towards the abusive landfills of the South. Indeed, a part of the book is based on the description of the lorries full of toxic material discharging their deadly loads in the Neapolitan suburban areas. Saviano describes in details the names, places and effects on the natural environments of such an illegal traffic, one of the most remunerative for the Camorra:

L’operazione “Cassiopea” del 2003 dimostrò che ogni settimana partivano dal nord al sud quaranta Tir ricolmi di rifiuti e – second la ricostruzione degli inquirenti – venivano sversati, seppelliti, gettati, interrati cadmio, zinco, scarto di vernici, fanghi da depuratori, plastiche varie, arsenico, prodotti delle acciaierie, piombo [...]. Si stima che negli ultimi cinque anni in Campania siano stati smaltiti illegalmente circa tre milioni di tonnellate di rifiuti di ogni tipo, di cui un milione solo nella provincia di Caserta. Il casertano è un’area che nel “piano regolatore” dei clan è stata assegnata alla sepoltura dei rifiuti (Saviano 2006: 322-323).

The “Cassiopea” operation was concluded in 2011 with nobody judged guilty, due to prescription. Remarkably, Saviano commented on the trial result as an indirect way to kill his book, *Gomorra*.¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁹ Napoli, tutti prosciolti i 95 imputati. “Escluso l’inquinamento delle falde”. Un’indagine durata tredici anni. Fra i reati ipotizzati dalla procura, quello di disastro ambientale. Nulla sembrava più difficile

A peculiarity of *Gomorra* is its explicit nature. Whether he is talking about Camorra bosses or clans:

Facevano parte del Direttorio i clan afferenti all'Alleanza di Secondigliano, il cartello camorristico che raccoglieva diverse famiglie: Licciardi, Contini, Mallardo, Lo Russo, Bochetti, Stabile, Prestieri, Bosti e poi, a un livello di maggiore autonomia, i Sarno e i Di Lauro. Un territorio egemonizzato da Secondigliano, Scampia, Piscinola, Chiaiano, Miano, San Pietro a Patierno, sino a Giugliano e Ponticelli (Saviano, 2006: 50).

Domenico Russo, soprannominato "Mimì dei cani", boss dei Quartieri Spagnoli, chiamato così perché da ragazzino vendeva cuccioli di cane lungo via Toledo. E poi Antonio Carlo D'Onofrio "Carlucciello 'o mangiavatt" ossia Carletto il mangia gatti, leggenda vuole che avesse imparato a sparare usando i gatti randagi come bersaglio (*Ibid.*: 66).

the Chinese Mafia:

Da almeno cinque anni ogni relazione della Commissione Antimafia segnalava "il pericolo crescente della mafia cinese" ma in dieci anni di indagini la polizia aveva sequestrato vicino a Firenze, a Campi Bisenzio, appena seicentomila euro. Qualche moto e una porzione di fabbrica. Nulla rispetto a una forza economica che riusciva a spostare capitali di centinaia di milioni di euro, secondo quanto scrivevano quotidianamente gli analisti americani (*Ibid.*: 21).

or when he is accusing the Italian fashion of complicity in the illegal manufacture of *griffe*:

Le griffe della moda italiana hanno cominciato a protestare contro il grande mercato del falso gestito dai cartelli dei secondiglianesi soltanto dopo che l'Antimafia ha scoperto l'intero meccanismo. Prima di allora non avevano progettato una campagna pubblicitaria contro i clan, non avevano mai fatto denunce, né avevano informato la stampa rivelando i meccanismi di produzione parallela che subivano (*Ibid.*: 52).

Saviano is never afraid of making explicit references and providing evidence to the facts he focuses on with names, surnames, places, as if he were an eye-witness who is making a report in front of a magistrate.

del provare in tribunale le responsabilità del nord Italia', (Saviano, 2011a). There are many other facts told in *Gomorra* which are based on legal investigations (i.e. the Chinese Mafia, the wars among Camorra clans, drug traffic, building trade, etc.). However, there are also facts which are based on Saviano's own experience, as a witness, which could be used by the magistrates to start new investigations, such as those regarding the illegal traffic in the Port of Naples and the cloth manufacture industry in Secondigliano.

By mixing a direct knowledge of the world of the Camorra with true facts taken from trials and legal investigations, *Gomorra* becomes a ‘denuncia nazionale, che mette sotto gli occhi di tutti l’inarrestabile ascesa della camorra campana e delle sue ramificazioni internazionali’ (Di Feo, 2006).

The first tangible consequence of an interaction between *Gomorra* and the real world is that, soon after the publication of the book, Saviano was put under a protection programme. He is very much aware that *Gomorra* is the signature of his death sentence, like many other writers, such as Salman Rushdie.¹⁶⁰

Such a fact is clear evidence that *Gomorra* can be classified among the “dangerous books”, a renewed manifestation of the power of words. As pointed out by Umberto Eco in an interview: ‘Il caso di Saviano si lega a Falcone e Borsellino. Perché in questi casi sappiamo da dove arriva la minaccia, sappiamo persino i nomi e i cognomi. Si tratta di intervenire preventivamente e pubblicamente su un fenomeno di cui si sa tutto’ (Eco, 2006).

Another telling example which proves the fact that a migration from the book to reality has been achieved, is given by the reaction shown towards *Gomorra* by ordinary people from Naples (not just readers in the academia),¹⁶¹ Italy, and abroad. Among the reactions, it is possible to distinguish two trends: an enthusiastic and a critical one. Belonging to the latter are the people directly involved with *Gomorra*, namely the Neapolitans. As regards this, one might turn to the interviews collected by Giuliana Santerini among the high-school students of

¹⁶⁰ He later remarked in an interview that he hated *Gomorra* for having deprived him of his freedom: ‘Non mi pento di aver scritto questo libro ma non lo amo perché mi ha tolto la libertà: cammina più il mio libro di me’ (ANSA, Los Angeles, November 17th, 2008).

¹⁶¹ In Chapter Two, I have already pointed out some of the critical observations made by academics on *Gomorra*. Concerning the criticism of Saviano’s style, the main issues are: that there is no single narrative thread, that there are numerous lists of names which are nonsense to foreign readers and are attached to characters with walk-on parts (as readers would first approach the text with the idea of an ordinary novel in mind). Saviano’s work would also lack structural clarity, appearing verbose and incoherent at times, undermined by choppy writing. Although many of these criticisms may be true (and, personally, I in part agree with some of them), it seems to me that criticizing *Gomorra* for its style is like criticizing the Italian Constitution for its prose. The value of Saviano’s work lies only in part in its literary aspect, since its message and therefore content are paramount.

San Cipriano (Caserta) on Saviano. Among the students supporting Saviano for his courage to denounce the Camorra, there are those saying: ‘era meglio che si faceva i fatti suoi’; ‘se stava zitto stava più sicuro’, ‘e ‘nu scemo, doveva stare a casa sua’, ‘se Saviano non parlava tutto questo a Casale non succedeva. Era tutto tranquillo’, ‘minacce o non minacce. Io non ci credo: è un altro fenomeno mediatico’, ‘non bisogna fare niente [contro la Camorra] perchè a noi non da nessun fastidio; quindi stiamo a posto, stiamo normali’ (Santerini, 2008).

When reading such attacks, one can find both some genuine opinions and the cultural background of a generation of youngsters grown up alongside the Sistema.

As in the case of ASSK, Saviano’s opponents, perhaps Camorra itself, have as their weapons not just “killing” – Saviano has received many life threats by bosses and he is now living under police protection – but also defamation and intimidation. This is another way of “killing” a person, by attacking his/her reputation and honor through the already mentioned “mud machine”.

Quite remarkably, a similar reaction based on the assumption that “Saviano is exaggerating” came also from a few politicians in charge during the aftermath of the publication of *Gomorra*, including the Italian ex-Prime Minister, Mr. Silvio Berlusconi, who blamed *Gomorra* for promoting the Italian Mafia abroad.¹⁶²

Another example of a contamination between the text and reality is given by a widespread use of *Gomorra* as a metaphor for Camorra, in the language of the press and other media. In this Figure an example is shown:

¹⁶² ‘La mafia italiana famosa per Gomorra’. *Corriere della Sera.it*, (April 16th, 2010). Available Online:http://www.corriere.it/politica/10_aprile_16/berlusconi-mafia-famosa-colpa-di-gomorra_62d92572-4948-11df-af35-00144f02aabe.shtml. Retrieved: October, 2011.

The image shows a screenshot of the website 'la Repubblica NAPOLI.it'. At the top, the date is 'Sabato 03.12.2011 Ore 15.16'. There are search bars with the text 'Cerca: Archivio' and 'Cerca: Cerca nel Web con Google'. A navigation menu includes 'Home', 'Cronaca', 'Sport', 'Foto', 'Video', 'Annunci', 'Aste-Appalti', 'Lavoro', and 'M'. Below the menu, there is a section for 'IN EDICOLA' with a thumbnail of a newspaper. To the right, there are social media sharing icons (Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn) and options for 'CONDIVIDI:', 'VERSIONE STAMPABILE', and 'INVIÀ'. The main headline of the article is 'Cosentino, il candidato di Gomorra' with a sub-headline 'L'accusa "Concorso esterno con i clan"' and the author 'di Giovanni Marino'.

Figure 3 From text to reality: the word “Gomorra” and its widespread use in current press language.

2) The level of morality. Therefore, in Saviano’s hands literature grows into a process of investigation, historical memory or testimony and a “revelation” regarding humanitarian rights. Among the many humanitarian rights for which the author is fighting – putting at risk his own life – are the universal right to freedom of speech and the possibility to know how things really are (from Camorra’s violent mechanisms to its economic entanglements). However, most important of all is the right to dignity. Saviano intends to bring to the fore the dehumanizing conditions in which the System forces human beings to live and survive. Among the objectives of Saviano is giving all readers, who are also citizens, the means to know how the Camorra is working. Therefore, they can decide not to be involved in criminal acts, to denounce what they happen to witness and, in general, to behave critically and according to higher values. *Gomorra* is an act of rebellion and an invitation to fight Camorra. Going back to Thomas Laqueur’s theory of humanitarian narrative, in *Gomorra* the elements of “personal body” and “causal link” are of paramount importance: ‘an analytic of suffering exposes the means for its relief’ (Laqueur, 1989: 178). In other words, to know how things are means to be able to change them. According to Saviano, fighting against the Camorra and, in more general terms, against any injustice which oppresses you, is a matter of dignity:

Porsi contro i clan diviene una guerra per la sopravvivenza, come se l’esistenza stessa, il cibo che mangi, le labbra che baci, la musica che ascolti, le pagine che leggi non riuscissero a concederti il senso della vita, ma solo quello della sopravvivenza. E così conoscere non è più una traccia di impegno morale. Sapere, capire diviene una necessità. L’unica possibile per considerarsi ancora uomini degni di respirare (Saviano, 2006: 331).

However, to know how Camorra works and fight against it, as Saviano maintains, is not just a matter of moral dignity or civil rights, but it means getting to know your historical period, both in Naples or Italy, and potentially everywhere:

In terra di camorra combattere i clan non è lotta di classe, affermazione del diritto, riappropriazione della cittadinanza. Non è la presa di coscienza del proprio onore, la tutela del proprio orgoglio. E' qualcosa di più essenziale, di ferocemente carnale. In terra di camorra conoscere i meccanismi d'affermazione dei clan, le loro cinetiche d'estrazione, i loro investimenti significa capire come funziona il proprio tempo in ogni misura e non soltanto nel perimetro geografico della propria terra (*Ibidem*).

In an interview conducted by *The Guardian* reporter John Hooper in Rome, Saviano maintained:

I'd like to ask people not to consider my story as that of a southern Italian and thus of a man who lives in an underdeveloped country of violent men, but to regard it as a European - very European - story. What I and the others who write on these matters are talking about is the biggest single economic force in the European Union. What affects me also affects Londoners, Berliners and Madrilenians. All the organised criminal cartels invest in London and it is no coincidence that London is among the five cities with the highest consumption of cocaine (Saviano in Hooper, 2008).

I cannot say how many people, after reading *Gomorra*, have changed their habits or started fighting, in a more or less explicit way, against the Camorra. However, effects generated by Saviano's text can be grasped by navigating through a few blogs in search of comments from ordinary readers:¹⁶³

Vivo in quelle zone...ogni pagina è un pugno nello stomaco. Vorrei dire che è un libro bellissimo, ma qui non si può parlare di "bellezza"... [lo zio (01-12-2011)].

Gomorra è un pugno nello stomaco a chi se ne sta seduto in salotto e non sa nemmeno che dovrebbe sapere, che non vede quel che non gli fanno vedere, come me. Nelle dense pagine di Saviano c'è qualcosa di raro: non c'è solo la camorra com'è, ma soprattutto e per la prima volta quello che la camorra ti fa. Ci sono nomi e cognomi e morti ammazzati e fatturati, d'accordo, ma quel che colpisce è la disanima sempre accorata e umanissima di come il "sistema" incida nella vita di tutti i giorni, di come modifichi impercettibilmente

¹⁶³ All comments and reviews are taken from IBIS Internet Bookshop. Available online: <http://www.ibs.it/ser/serdsp.asp?isbn=9788804554509&rec=421>. Retrieved: July, 2011.

ma senza possibilità di redenzione i sentimenti, le aspettative, le identità, perfino le paure [Livio Macchi (27-05-2006)].

Ho letto il libro per 15 ore di filato... non ho staccato gli occhi nemmeno per un momento. Tutto ciò di cui si parla ha dell'incredibile, e per non morire sotto i dolori che il tuo stomaco ti provoca dal nervosismo, sei costretto a continuare... a chiederti perché e a tentare di capire. Raramente scrivo e sottolineo su dei testi "letterari", raramente chioso a margine con puntualità e ossessione tutto, ma con *Gomorra* sono stato costretto. Dopo aver finito la prima lettura mi sono preso dei giorni dalla vita e ho cominciato a cercare... mi sono sentito investito di un ruolo e avevo bisogno di andare ancora più a fondo. I morti e i nomi di questo libro te li porti dentro, ma ti porti l'odio verso un modus che è quello liberale... Non puoi più evitare di vedere certe cose e quando vedi e ne hai le prove senti il bisogno di parlare [utenteabusivo (01-07-2006)].

Sono di Varese, sono rimasto sconvolto. E questo è un paese democratico? Saviano mostra cos'è il capitalismo criminale. Ci credete che dormo molto peggio dopo aver letto *Gomorra*? [Gianfilippo Baj (06-03-2007)].

E' un libro che tutti dovrebbero sforzarsi di leggere, a partire dai docenti e studenti (come l'*Agenda Rossa* di Borsellino, del resto). Non è una lettura semplice, soprattutto per chi sente per la prima volta molti dei nomi e dei fatti citati. Però vale la pena aprirsi la testa, perchè c'è bisogno che di queste cose si parli e tanto. E soprattutto per renderci conto che la Camorra non è solo quella della droga/armi/prostituzione, e non è solo a Napoli ma è completamente impregnata in tutto il nostro tessuto socio-economico. E' un sistema fatto da persone estremamente intelligenti e colte, pensare al boss grezzo, ignorante e spacciatore è una semplificazione comoda e pericolosa. Bravo Saviano e bravi tutti i ragazzi che mettono la faccia e si sporcano le mani per non arrendersi alla prepotenza della criminalità organizzata [Beatrice (24-01-2008)].

Non finirò mai di ringraziare Roberto Saviano per questo suo capolavoro. Ti fa aprire gli occhi, capire i meccanismi assurdi che stanno alla base di ogni azione della camorra. Oltre che una denuncia, *Gomorra* dev'essere anche una spinta fortissima per noi tutti a fermare CONCRETAMENTE e senza paura quello che succede da anni in Campania. Roberto non sei solo [Marialucia (21-01-2008)].

Among the most common reactions is sincere incredulity and astonishment in the face of Saviano's words. Of course, some doubt that everything he writes is true, but incredulity often suggests that readers are surprised, frightened, shocked to know what is usually hidden by false appearances. However, in many cases, surprise gives a way to indignation.

To quote just a few ones, from non-Italian readers: 'It's frightening that the Italian people, especially those in the South, have lived with this reality for so long.

And, frightening as well, is how we are affected globally by this entity.’ And also: ‘All said, the information contained within this book is pretty incredible and uncovers an entire underworld that I would have never known existed!’¹⁶⁴

Another very frequent observation concerns the idea of Mafia, at its most popular version at the international level. Many non-Italian readers acknowledged that, after reading Saviano’s book, their idea of Mafia changed from an almost amateurish, low-level and idealized picture (e.g. Francis Ford Coppola’s movie *The Godfather*), to the brutal and cynical scenario of *Gomorra*. Such remarks remind me of the *Mainichi* editor’s goal in proposing to ASSK to keep a weekly column on his newspaper. The stereotype to debunk here is not about democracy and its supposedly lack of effectiveness in poor countries such as Burma, but it is about the workings of the Camorra, which, for many citizens, Italians as well as Europeans, is just a Southern Italian affair, something belonging to an “exotic” country, half factual and half-fictional, as *Gomorra* itself.

3) The final level at which *Gomorra* produces effects on reality is, in my opinion, the one of **Camorra’s economic interests**. This third level stems from the previous ones: moral obligation and law. It is a personal struggle which Saviano fights, hoping that his example will ultimately affect the readers’ behaviour. Among the ways in which *Gomorra* had an impact on reality, whether in an intentional way or not, it is possible to identify an urge to undermine the economic interests of the System. I am not only talking about sending the police to stop the profits coming from such illegal activities as drug traffic, the building trade, the prostitution racket, which affect specific categories of people, but also about stopping the profits coming from those illegal activities which have become almost ordinary in the daily life of people, concerning the *griffe* and high-tech goods made in China as well as the consequences on the quality of the food and water produced in the South of

¹⁶⁴ Taken from the “Customers reviews” on Amazon.com. Available online: <http://www.amazon.com/Gomorra-By-Roberto-Saviano/dp/0374165270>. Retrieved: February, 2011.

Italy (mozzarella, fruit and vegetables). It is very likely that, after reading *Gomorra*, the markets of illegal cloths as well as that of food shall lose many potential customers. See for example the following passage:

Nessun'altra terra nel mondo occidentale ha avuto un carico maggiore di rifiuti tossici e non tossici, sversati illegalmente (Saviano, 2006: 311).

Le campagne del napoletano e del casertano sono mappamondi della monnezza, cartine al tornasole della produzione industriale italiana (Saviano, 2006: 325).

L'immagine di una discarica, di una voragine, di una cava, divengono sempre più sinonimi concreti e visibili di pericolosità mortale per chi ci vive intorno. Quando le discariche stanno per esaurirsi si dà fuoco ai rifiuti. C'è un territorio nel napoletano che ormai è definito la terra dei fuochi. Il triangolo Giugliano-Villaricca-Qualiano. Trentanove discariche, di cui ventisette con rifiuti pericolosi. L'agricoltura di questi luoghi, che esportava verdure e frutta fino in Scandinavia, crolla a picco. I frutti spuntano malati, le terre divengono infertili. Ma la rabbia dei contadini e lo sfacelo diventano ennesimo elemento di vantaggio, poiché i proprietari terrieri disperati svendono le proprie coltivazioni, e i clan acquistano nuove terre, nuove discariche a basso, bassissimo costo. Intanto si crepa di tumore continuamente (*Ibid.*: 326-327).

As remarked by Carla Benedetti:

Dunque la prima cosa che io ricavo dal caso Gomorra è che i libri non sono cose inerti. I libri agiscono. Non solo "raccontano la realtà" ma la modificano. Gomorra ha modificato la nostra percezione della criminalità organizzata, dell'economia, persino delle griffes della moda e dei loro simboli (Benedetti, 2008: 177).

Therefore, to appeal to people as much as possible is one of the goals of Saviano's policy. Saviano's hope is that his readers might be awakened by reading his book.

He hopes that, like himself, his/her readers will try to see what lies beyond appearances:

Cerco sempre di calmare quest'ansia che mi prende ogni volta che cammino, ogni volta che salgo scale, prendo ascensori, quando struscio le soles su zerbini e supero soglie. Non posso fermare un rimuginio d'anima perenne su come sono stati costruiti palazzi e case. E se poi ho qualcuno a portata di parola riesco con difficoltà a trattenermi dal raccontare come si tirano su piani e balconi sino al tetto. Non è un senso di colpa universale che mi pervade, né un riscatto morale verso chi è stato cassato dalla memoria storica. Piuttosto

cerco di dismettere quel meccanismo brechtiano che invece ho connaturato, di pensare alle mani e ai piedi della storia. Insomma più alle ciotole perennemente vuote che portarono alla presa della Bastiglia che ai proclami della Gironda e dei Giacobini. Non riesco a non pensarci. Ho sempre questo vizio. Come qualcuno che guardando Vermeer pensasse a chi ha mescolato i colori, tirato la tela coi legni, assemblato gli orecchini di perle, piuttosto che contemplare il ritratto. Una vera perversione. Non riesco proprio a scordarmi come funziona il ciclo del cemento quando vedo una rampa di scale, e non mi distrae da come si mettono in torre le impalcature il vedere una verticale di finestre. Non riesco a far finta di nulla. Non riesco proprio a vedere solo il parato e penso alla malta e alla cazzuola (Saviano, 2006: 234-235).

This is exactly what happens, in my opinion, to the reader of *Gomorra*. I believe that this is also what Saviano aimed at in writing this book. To bring the hidden reality of the Sistema out of the coated pretence created by power, *omertà* (conspiracy of silence), and fear, right in front of the reader's eyes.

3.6 The Power of Words in Gordimer's *The Ultimate Safari*

[Y]et I remain a writer, not a public speaker:
nothing I say here will be as true as my fiction.
Nadine Gordimer

The Ultimate Safari was first published in Great Britain, in 1989, in the British magazine *Granta*; two years later, it appeared in the collection *Jump and Other Stories* (1991); finally, in 2004 Gordimer included the short story in the anthology *Telling Tales*.

There are two levels at which Gordimer's story may be seen to produce tangible effects in the world. The effects I am talking about correspond to or can be related to humanitarian practices. The first one manifests itself on the extra-textual level and has to do with the fund-raising campaign in favour of HIV scientific and medical research. In fact, *The Ultimate Safari* is Gordimer's contribution to her collection entitled *Telling Tales*, an anthology which gathers together 21 stories – the best stories – written by well-known writers, including Günter Grass, Kenzaburo Oe, Salman Rushdie and Arthur Miller, who along with their publishers have agreed to waive fees and royalties. Gordimer's intention was to use the profits of the book in aid of the Treatment Action Campaign, a charity organization working for the prevention and treatment of HIV, especially in Africa. In the introduction to the anthology, Gordimer explains her intentions, pointing out how, with respect to other art forms, such as music, writers do not seem to have done much for HIV:

Musicians have given their talents to jazz, pop, and classical concerts for the benefit of the 40 million worldwide men, women, and children infected with HIV/AIDS, two-thirds of whom are in Africa. We decided that we too should wish to give something of our ability, as imaginative writers, to contribute in our way to the fight against this disease

from which no country, no individual, is safely isolated (Gordimer, *Telling Times*, 2004: 10).¹⁶⁵

The book conveys a fundamental meaning: we live in one world and we all have to contribute to the healing of its wounds.

Therefore, in buying this book people can enjoy high-quality literature and, at the same time, carry out a moral “task” by giving help to others: ‘So when you buy as a gift or for your own reading pleasure this unique anthology of renowned storytellers, you are also making a gift, of the money you have paid for the book, to combat the plague of our new millennium’ (*Ibid.*: X).¹⁶⁶

Contrary to ASSK and Saviano’s texts, where there is consistency between the subjects of their “humanitarian” stories and the recipients of their respective humanitarian efforts, Gordimer’s *The Ultimate Safari* is not directly linked to the beneficiaries of the fund-raising campaign, though two thirds of the people affected by HIV are Africans, as she reminds us. This discrepancy is due to Gordimer’s wish to include in her collection only ‘beautiful stories celebrating life, which is what people suffering with HIV and Aids are deprived of - the fullness of life.’ (Gordimer in BBC NEWS, 2004).¹⁶⁷ In the novel by Piasecki, as we shall see, the fields coming to the fore are very general, but more directly involved: the rights of children and the violence of war. Such differences allow me to distinguish between a humanitarian literature which aims to promote Human Rights and a more engaging one that attempts to restore Human Rights.

¹⁶⁵ According to journalist Tim Adams, ‘The story goes something like this: Nadine Gordimer, the South African Nobel laureate, was watching the efforts of the Sugababes and Busted and the rest in the current Band Aid revival and she felt guilty. Why were the world’s writers not following the lead of pop stars and doing their bit for charity?’ (T. Adams, *The Observer*, Sunday, December 5th, 2004).

¹⁶⁶ Indeed, as reported by Felicia Lee in her review for *The New York Times*, November 29th, 2004, Frances Coady, vice president and publisher of Picador, said: ‘Perhaps now more than ever we should appreciate the power of fiction, the will to fight injustice and suffering [...] and Nadine Gordimer’s spirit made this international collaboration possible’.

¹⁶⁷ However, the short story she chose for her anthology does not seem to respond to such a claim.

The statement quoted above, together with a previous one in which she explained that one of the virtues of fiction consists in enabling one to learn about others and about oneself,¹⁶⁸ might lead us to assume that, as far as Gordimer is concerned, reading literature in itself cannot produce any material or quantifiable benefit to humanity. This is where the second level comes instead into play: that is, the effects actually brought about by her story.

The story is believed to be based on real events: it originated from a visit to a refugee camp in the late 80s which Gordimer paid together with a BCC troupe. Soon after, the author read an alluring advertisement in the London *Observer*, presenting African adventures as the “ultimate safari” and she thought: ‘what I’ve just seen is the ultimate safari’.¹⁶⁹ The advertisement is reproduced by Gordimer in the epigraph to the short story: ‘The African Adventure Lives On... You can do it! The ultimate safari or expedition. With leaders who know Africa. – Travel Advertisement, *Observer*, London, 27/11/88’ (Gordimer, 2004 [1989]: 269).

Critics have often and rightly pointed out that it is not possible to read Gordimer’s literary works without knowing the political and social background of her stories. As recently underlined by publisher Mark White: ‘Throughout most of her fifty-year career, Gordimer has used her writing to explore, expose, and oppose South Africa’s long-standing system of racial segregation known as apartheid’ (White, 2004).¹⁷⁰

In *The Ultimate Safari*, she deals with two main social and political phenomena: regimes such as apartheid and the effects of war on people. The story is set in the 1980s, on the border between Mozambique and South Africa. At that time, Mozambique had recently gained its independence from Portugal (June 25th,

¹⁶⁸ ‘The reader learns about others – and about oneself, revealed as only fiction, the ancient art of storytelling can do and always has done’ (Gordimer, 2004: IX).

¹⁶⁹ Available Online: http://www.dnaindia.com/mumbai/report_gordimer-on-her-ultimate-safari_1204999. Retrieved: May, 2011.

¹⁷⁰ Mark White, Critical Essay on “The Ultimate Safari”, in *Short Stories for Students* (Eds.) by Milne, I. Mark, Gale, Detroit, 2004.

1975) and was ruled by a black Marxist government, the Mozambique Liberation Front (Frelimo).¹⁷¹ In 1976 the Mozambique Resistance Movement (Renamo), a rebel group economically and militarily supported by the South African government, started countering the Frelimo government with a view to destabilizing Mozambique by targeting civilians. The civil war between Renamo and Frelimo officially ended in 1992, with the Rome General Peace Accords.

In supporting the Renamo guerrilla, the South African government intended to strengthen the architecture of apartheid, by dwarfing the liberation and equality movements which spread throughout the continent during the 1960s and 1970s and eventually brought white domination to an end in Zimbabwe (the former Rhodesia) and Mozambique. The Renamo troops, which in the story are represented by the ‘bandits’, were responsible for terrible atrocities against the civilians, most of them peasants and villagers. This fuelled a mass exodus towards the South African border, where there were many refugee camps. It is generally estimated that almost one million people were killed during the civil war in Mozambique (Middleton, 2002).

The Ultimate Safari focuses on the odyssey of a Mozambican family fleeing their country and civil war. At an extradiegetic level, this might also be read as the story of the repercussion of South African politics and military operations to keep the apartheid system alive.

However, the tale also probes into the consequences of war on civilians: whole families running many kinds of risks. The cruelty of war comes to the foreground since the very beginning of the story: ‘That night our mother went to the shop and she didn’t come back. Ever. What happened? I don’t know. My father also had gone away one day and never come back; but he was fighting in the war’ (Gordimer, 2004 [1989]: 269). There are many other passages in which violence appears in all its poignancy. However, in my opinion, the most pregnant message is

¹⁷¹ A summary of *The Ultimate Safari* and other editorial details are provided in Appendix 1.

given by the fact that the refugees fear less crossing the Kruger Park, which implies the risk of being killed and eaten by wild animals, than staying in their country as preys to bandits, famine, and poverty: 'We wanted to go away from where our mother wasn't and where we were hungry. We wanted to go where there were no bandits and there was food' (Gordimer, 2004 [1989]: 271).

So in which way is it possible to argue that Gordimer's text performs a sort of humanitarian practice? According to her, the role of the writer and that of literature are similar to that of a cultural interpreter:

I have already delineated my presence here on the scale of a minority within a minority. Now I shall reduce my claim to significance still further. A white; a dissident white; a white writer. If I were not a writer, I should not have been invited here at all, so I must presume that although the problems of a white writer are of no importance compared with the liberation of 23.5 million black people, the peculiar relation of the writer in South Africa as interpreter, both to South Africans and to the world, of a society in struggle, makes the narrow corridor I can lead you down one in which doors fly open on the tremendous happening experienced by blacks (Gordimer, 1988 [1982]: 272).

Being an interpreter means getting people to understand each other, translating facts into intelligible meanings. The role of Gordimer in *The Ultimate Safari* is thus similar to that of ASSK in her *Letters from Burma*: namely she endeavours to let Western and South African readers come to terms with the inhumanity of apartheid.¹⁷²

In addition to the presence of war, the most evident sign of the effects of apartheid is given by the recurring theme of the difference between white and black:

¹⁷² 'Ultimately it is not pity that Gordimer wants to elicit from her readers, but rather she wants her readers to come to a profound understanding of the human toll of apartheid. Holding off until the last possible moment before revealing the girl's race has the effect of giving her white audience every possible reason to feel for the girl as "one of us", rather than reasons to feel sorry for the miserable conditions of yet another poor anonymous black African. In other words, by effectively creating a character who closely resembles her readers, or who at least resembles people with whom her readers were familiar, Gordimer gave her audience the vicarious experience of what it was like to be, or know, a refugee, even if for a brief amount of time.' (White, 2004).

We knew about the Kruger Park because some of our men used to leave home to work there in the places where white people come to stay and look at the animals (Gordimer, 2004 [1989]: 272).

He said we must move like animals among the animals, away from the roads, away from the white people's camps (*Ibid.*: 273).

We walked at night as well as by day. We could see the fires where the white people were cooking in the camps and we could smell the smoke and the meat (*Ibid.*: 274).

The man who led us had told us that we must keep out of the way of our people who worked at the Kruger Park; if they helped us they would lose their work. If they saw us, all they could do was pretend we were not there; they had seen only animals (*Ibid.*: 274).

Elsewhere, Gordimer postulates that writers are a benefit to society:

Our books are necessary: for in the words of the great nineteenth-century Russian writer Nikolai Gogol they show both the writer and his or her people what they are. The writer is both the repository of his people's ethos and his revelation to them of themselves. This revelation is what regimes fear, in their writers (Gordimer, 2000 [1997]: 19).

When she first wrote *The Ultimate Safari*, in 1989, apartheid was still in power,¹⁷³ since it was officially abolished only in 1990. As a protection against censorship laws, the majority of her stories, including *The Ultimate Safari* itself, were first published in Great Britain and the United States. According to Mark White, Gordimer was well-aware that her texts were widely read by Western people, and therefore she devised techniques which might render her stories more effective. As far as *The Ultimate Safari* is concerned, according to White, Gordimer's decision not to reveal the race of the narrator resulted in the creation of a more empathetic character with whom her white American and British readers could identify:

By keeping the reader uncertain about the girl's background, Gordimer effectively holds out the possibility in the reader's mind, on some level, that the narrator could be "the girl next door" and not simply another distant and nameless African refugee. While this may seem insignificant to the overall meaning of the story itself, in light of the fact that the

¹⁷³ "The Afrikaner word meaning "separateness" was a system of laws that effectively stripped all South African blacks of their citizenship rights and was instrumental in maintaining white control over the majority black population" (White, 2004).

vast majority of the story's readers at the time of its publication were not only white, but also non-South African, this technique effectively helped Gordimer to maximize the empathy the story's readers felt for the character and effectively contributed to her agenda of enlightening the world to the dehumanizing effects of her country's system of apartheid (White, 2004).

Here we can see at work the same mechanisms used by Piasecki in *Marie* for bridging the gap between the reader and the characters and, in so doing, potentiating the influence on the receiver. Indeed, with the exception of Kruger Park, there are neither spatial nor temporal references in the story. As to the narrator's identity, I believe that the colour of her skin is easily understandable by the reader, as a consequence of the racial issue, then present since the beginning, which I have already pointed out above. Nevertheless, as suggested by White, it seems possible to argue that *The Ultimate Safari* is a story told for Western readers and identification takes place mainly by means of style. As pointed out again by White:

The sentence structure and diction are simple, yet not so simple as to indicate that the narrator is a person of lesser intelligence or capabilities. The narrator speaks in plain, everyday English; there is nothing remarkable in terms of vocabulary, syntax, or dialect that would indicate her to be anything but an English speaker of ordinary intelligence and sensibilities. She does not speak in dialect; she could be from any number of English-speaking locations. And Gordimer leaves few idiosyncratic clues that give her racial, cultural, or ethnic identity away (White, 2004).

3.6.1 *Leaving a permanent mark: boycotting the image of Kruger Park?*

Critics have often focused on the symbolic or ironic valence of Kruger Park in Gordimer's story. Such a contrastive effect is allegedly produced by comparing the refugees to animals, the lions and other wild animals to the bandits, the safe tents of the rich westerners to the unsecure shelters of the refugees, the dangerous flight through the park by the refugees to the safe adventurous safari by tourists in their Land Rovers.

I would like to propose a complementary reading of this central episode, since by setting her story in Kruger Park, Gordimer appears to demystify the idyllic

aura of the natural reserve. Whether this corresponded to her intention I cannot say with certainty, but I will try to show that some clues seem to point towards an affirmative answer. The relevance of such a “deconstructive” effect on an icon of South Africa such as Kruger Park should not be underestimated in terms of political as well as economic consequences.

Kruger Park, with its area of over 21.700 sq.km, is the world’s largest game reserve. Its significance for South Africans was described in the autobiographical passage below, written by Gordimer in her youth:

For some reason, our family did not visit the Kruger National Park until I was sixteen and in my last year at high school. Just how unusual this abstinence is is difficult to explain to anyone who is not South African. For whatever else the South African in general, and the Transvaaler in particular, may or may not do for this family, he will manage somehow to get them to Kruger Park, the great wildlife preserve in the Transvaal. If he has no car, he will borrow one, and if he cannot do this, he will persuade a friend that two families can travel as uncomfortably as one, and beg a lift. The Park opens at the beginning of winter, in late April or early May, and by dawn on the opening day, cars and trucks loaded with camping equipment and tinned food are lined up in mile long queues outside the various camps that serve as points of entry to the preserve (Gordimer, 2010 [1954]: 3).

The Kruger Park is also very popular outside South Africa. Indeed, it is one of the most ambitious sites for Western tourists to visit. Such a widespread interest makes the park a significant source of income for the country.

In this thesis I argue that narrative can be considered as a sort of action, not because telling a story is an action itself, but for the effects that stories can have on readers and through them on things. In addition to performative sentences, one of the means to change things with words is by using analogies. As regards this, according to cultural and linguistic anthropologist Keith Basso, for instance, Western Apache’s civilization use of oral narratives is a way to correct someone’s misconduct. By providing analogies between a story and an event, and by connecting with the geographical landscape, the teller acts as if he/she were an archer “shooting with stories”. Narratives become a powerful corrective means, so that ‘whenever the person passes by the particular geographical place associated

with the narrative, he or she is reminded of the previous transgression' (Basso, 1996: 40).

In Gordimer's story, the reserve ceases to be a tourist place for 'thrilling game drives and walking safaris' (from Kruger Park web-site); it acquires an additional, negative connotation: *The Ultimate Safari* readers will always associate it to the setting of numberless human tragedies like that of the young narrator and her family.

The new connotation assumed by Kruger Park in Gordimer's story is also pointed out in the following passage by professor of English Rob Nixon:

The megafauna-rich game park is symbolically central to South Africa's conservation history, wilderness mythology, and tourist industry. Yet it is also multiply liminal, serving during the Mozambican civil war that lasted from 1975 until 1991 as an over determined border zone: between a Marxist post-colonial state and its anti-communist apartheid neighbour, between black majority rule and white minority supremacy, between the culture of tourist leisure and migrant labour, and between the animal and the human. This liminal overdetermination has a profound temporal dimension as well, bringing into frictional proximity animal time, tourist time, refugee time, the spiritualized time of white supremacy (Nixon, 2011: 189).

According to American journalist Robert Frump's estimate, the people (i.e. refugees) that have been killed and eaten by lions since 1960 amount to a figure oscillating between 1.650 and 13.380 (Frump, 2006).¹⁷⁴ In his recent non-fiction story, Frump contends that lions in Kruger National Park adapted to the man-eating behaviour during the apartheid period, as a consequence of the many refugees crossing the border via the reserve. According to Frump, due to an inadequate governmental response to the refugee problem, the efforts made by conservationists to preserve lions are directly the result of the loss of human life.

¹⁷⁴ Frump points out that the remarkable discrepancy between the two numbers depends on the different sources used for calculating the number of casualties: the former corresponds to the ultra conservative, while the latter, to the conservative one.

That Gordimer intended to challenge the *status quo* of Kruger Park, and through it, that of the apartheid episteme, is also suggested by professors of English Derek Attridge and Rosemary Jolly:

Indeed, one story, 'The Ultimate Safari', is explicitly intended to counter a text that is rather similar to the anti-sanctions ad: a travel advertisement published on 27 November 1988 in the London *Observer*. The slogan is reprinted as the story epigraph: 'The African Adventures Lives On', it reads, 'You can do it! The ultimate safari or expedition with leaders who *know* Africa' (Attridge and Jolly, 1998: 127).

3.7 The Power of Words in Piasecki's *Marie in the Shadow of the Lion*

Remember, if you want to help - you can. If you want to change the world - you will.
Jerry Piasecki

Marie in the Shadow of the Lion originates out of a basic humanitarian need: to “do something” for the benefit of other people: ‘You, as one of the leaders of tomorrow, have the power to change things’ (Annan in Piasecki, 2000: III) and ‘if you want to, you can change the world. It’s up to you’ (Piasecki, 2000: 108).

This time, the call for action is neither the initiative of an individual, as in the case of Saviano’s *Gomorra*, nor is it part of the activities of a political party, as with Suu Kyi’s texts, nor is it derived from the writer’s sense of duty towards history and community, as in Gordimer’s novels and short stories. On the contrary, *Marie*’s call for action comes from the agenda of the United Nations, the international organization committed to ‘international peace and security, developing friendly relations among nations and promoting social progress, better living standards and human rights’.¹⁷⁵

Many years ago, the founders of the United Nations had a vision of saving future generations from the horrors of war. They wanted to ensure that every man and woman, every girl and boy, had a chance to live in peace and freedom. That is still the goal of those of us who work at the United Nations today (Piasecki, 2000: 108).

Marie is an example of how literature, and the figure of the writer (i.e. Jerry Piasecki), can be put in the service of a large group of people belonging to different countries. Like the other books analyzed in this dissertation, *Marie* too has its authoritative voice, yet, contrary to the other texts, this appeal does not derive

¹⁷⁵ The Global Peace School Programme (United Nations). Available online: <http://www.peacewaves.net/index.html>. Retrieved: October, 2011.

uniquely from the author's literary reputation, political engagement or personal story. In the case of *Marie*, authority mainly derives from its being a product of the United Nations: the book is written by a man who works for the UN, it is published by the UN, and it has a Foreword by seventh UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan.

Actually, *Marie* can be included among the strategies and tools used by the UN to implement its humanitarian practice. In this specific case, the target are young people and the topic is "children and war", which is the main theme of *Marie*. As explained by Piasecki, the UN goal is to 'try to protect the innocent victims of conflicts in different ways' by means of encouraging governments to sign legal agreements, such as the UDHR, the Geneva Convention or the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and work for the implementation of an International Criminal Court. However, *Marie* amounts to a more immediate instrument in the hands of the UN:

But we can't wait for treaties to be signed or for laws to be obeyed. We have to save lives now. This book was created within the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. OCHA works together with other organizations in the United Nations family, like UNICEF, the Office of the High Commissioner for Refugees, and the World Food Programme. It also works with what we call nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and the Red Cross movement to make sure that people get the life-saving support they need (Piasecki, 2000: 109-110).

The strategic relevance of Piasecki's text for the UN agenda is again highlighted by Mr. Olara Otunnu, UN Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict. According to him, *Marie* responded to three main "preoccupations" of the UN: 1) children as among the categories of persons worst-affected by war; 2) the importance of raising awareness among young people not involved in armed conflicts; 3) the involvement of young people

in UN projects on children (Press Briefing on First UN Novel, *Marie - In the Shadow of the Lion*, 2000).¹⁷⁶



Figure 4 ‘Adolescent boys wearing civilian clothes walk away from the weapons they once carried as child soldiers after being evacuated from a combat zone in Sudan’
(From: <http://cyberschoolbus.un.org/childsoldiers/webquest/index.asp>).

As already pointed out, the target of the UN are the young, in particular secondary and high-school students from Western countries, and the idea at the basis of *Marie* is to use the power of words to probe into the emotional level: ‘Marie’s story may upset and even alarm you’ (Annan in Piasecki, 2000: III). However, Annan goes on to point out the relevance of raising awareness in the reader: ‘It is right to be shocked when brutal things happen to innocent people’ (*Ibid.*). Shocking is not an end in itself, but it is meant to prompt readers to some sort of humanitarian commitment: ‘We must use our sense of outrage to stop them happening’ (*Ibid.*), so as to produce some real action in the real world.

Such a power is the result of Piasecki’s literary ability to give life to characters, orchestrate and depict the events of the story so as to elicit a sense of outrage in the reader. However, such an effect is also derived from the reader’s awareness that what is told in *Marie* is based on documentary truths:

Marie was written based on actual testimony of young people, child soldiers, refugees, etc. in Sierra Leone, Liberia, Congo, Burundi and Uganda. Every incident in the book is true, all I did was put the true stories together to create a life. What happens to Marie, Thomas

¹⁷⁶ The United Nations’ efforts at awakening, involving and engaging young people towards the theme of children and war are also exemplified by the Child Soldiers WebQuest project, which confirms the intention to use the language of young people in order to make the “message” more effective. Available online: <http://cyberschoolbus.un.org/childsoldiers/webquest/index.asp>. Retrieved: July, 2011.

and others is, sadly, not unusual. This is the story of all of the tortured children suffering and dying at this moment (Piasecki, 2009).

It is possible to identify two main forms of commitment that the book aims at generating on the reader. The most evident one appears at the end of the book in the section “Your Turn”, which contains clear suggestions on what the addressee can do to make a better world:

Actually, there are lots of ways you can help. For instance:

- You can set up a Humanitarian Club in your school where you can work on projects to help the innocent victims of war and violence;
- You can write articles in your school newspaper on these issues in order to let everyone in your school know what’s really going on in the world;
- You can write to newspapers, radio and TV stations, networks, and movie studios asking that the truth about what young people are going through be told loud and clear;
- You can start up a collection and donate money to charities that are helping to save the lives of children;
- You can write or call government leaders, demanding that they support international humanitarian treaties, laws and programs; and, if nothing else,
- You can remember Marie and the many like her, so that some day when you have a choice to make... you’ll make the right one (Piasecki, 2000: 110-111).

All the suggestions listed above, with the exception of the last one, refer to what readers can do “now” to trigger some short-term effect, within the range of partial solutions. The last suggestion, on the contrary, refers to a form of commitment which sounds like a definitive moral stand with a long-term effect. As we already said, the book aims at eliciting empathetic feelings among young people with the ambitious goal that such feelings will be the weapon for the next generations to fight injustice. The first step towards achieving this objective is to awaken the young to what is happening to their fellows in the world and this is what *Marie* does. As regards this, one is struck by the quotation that opens the novel and is taken from an African mother:

If you don’t deal with the holes
the ants make in your floor,
soon you have holes big enough for rats,
who will destroy your property.
If you don’t deal with the holes the rats make,

soon you have holes big enough for snakes,
who will take away your life (Piasecki, 2000).

Annan's words are also telling: 'You, as one of the leaders of tomorrow, have the power to change things. The choices will be yours. I hope that your generation will be the first to stand united against evil, injustice, hatred and indifference and say in one voice: no more and never again' (Annan, in Piasecki, 2000: III). Both the African mother and Annan's words are projected towards the future, hopefully a better one.

In this respect, *Marie* is in line with the mission stated in the prologue of the UDHR, which points out that among the goals of the Declaration is the one to promote as well as ensure respect for Human Rights: 'Member States have pledged themselves to achieve, in co-operation with the United Nations, the promotion of universal respect for and observance of human rights and fundamental freedoms' (United Nations, 1948).

In this thesis, we argue that, in order to be defined as "humanitarian" a text must be characterised by the author's willingness to bring about changes in the world for the benefit of Human Rights. We have already discussed Piasecki's intentions – which correspond to those of the UN. The most striking evidence of a "migration" from Piasecki's text to the real world is given by the inclusion of *Marie* within the syllabus of schools, from the primary level to the university one, mainly in the US. As pointed out by Piasecki himself: 'the book has been embraced by students on all continents. It has been taught in late primary school to the University level. It is the basis of the Global Peace School Programme, which has been taught in over twenty countries. Currently the Programme is being led by Save the Children – Australia' (Piasecki, 2009). The Global Peace School Programme is 'a peace education curricula designed and developed by the UN'¹⁷⁷ which contains a lesson plan on human rights based on *Marie*.

¹⁷⁷ Available online: <http://www.theglobalpeaceproject.com/>. Retrieved: July, 2011.

An example of how *Marie* has been used by teachers and students is given by the Elementary School of Iowa City (US), which in July 2007 staged a vignette based on Piasecki's novel.¹⁷⁸ What follows is the speech delivered at the end of the performance by Bjorn, a boy of 12 playing the role of the commander who shot Marie's father and kidnapped her:

Child soldier is one of the worst forms of child labor and efforts to solve this problem will need creative thinking and commitment by all members of society to actively engage in the process. One of the greatest challenges we face in the world today is lack of awareness by the general public and by those who might have creative solutions. So, it is vitally important that you get involved by teaching about this subject in your classrooms. Your students are the future leaders. You can be the catalysts for change by introducing this subject into your classrooms. With your active participation, we can build a more peaceful world for all children. Thank you.¹⁷⁹

In the upshot, *Marie* can be rightly considered as the first contemporary, international humanitarian novel, following in the footsteps of other remarkable examples in history. Piasecki's text was written and published with the conviction that through words, it is possible to change the world: 'I have received hundreds of letters from students. A great many of them include the line "This book changed my life." That alone makes it a humanitarian novel' (Piasecki, 2009).

It is the contention of this thesis that such a goal can also be achieved when keeping adult readers in mind, by virtue of a clear intention and commitment on the author's part.

¹⁷⁸ There are also examples of use in university classes, such as: the course on 'Child Labor & International Human Rights' at the University of Iowa, given in Spring 2004 (http://international.uiowa.edu/centers/human-rights/documents/precollege_syllabus.pdf) or the Human Rights Senior Seminar at the Department of Political Science - Columbia University, Spring 2004 Available Online: <http://www.apsanet.org/~humanrights/syllabi/hertel.htm>. Retrieved: October, 2011.

¹⁷⁹ *Youth Network for Children's Rights-Newsletter*, 2004. Available online: http://www.iccle.org/newsletter_children/0408/. Retrieved: December, 2011.

CONCLUSIONS

In present times, human rights issues have permeated our consciousness. According to Ishay, these human rights claims are due to ‘many courageous activists around the world who have struggled in difficult and dangerous circumstances to articulate [...] a discourse of human rights in order to better people’s lives’ (Ishay, 2007: 430). Nevertheless, this recent mobilization of human rights can also be explained, I argued, through a literary approach to human rights practices. First, we have delved into humanitarianism and its various responses to humanitarian emergency and how it has recently changed as a consequence of its failures during the Nineties. Secondly, we have introduced a particular way of writing transcending a given and canonical understanding of literary texts and embracing human rights.

A crucial marker to measure the humanitarianism within both the literary word and contemporary humanitarian practices has been the very *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (1948), which stands as an unquestionable document of the whole *humanitas*. But there is another intersection occurring between commonly intended humanitarians (those who are concretely active in theatres of war or natural disaster areas) and “humanitarian” writers (those who dare give voice to what is unsaid): they constantly put their own lives to threat. There are many examples of writers who have lost their life for facing cultural, social and political regimes. In her “Essential Gesture” essay, Nadine Gordimer asserts that ‘[e]xile as a mode of genius no longer exists;’ and it is in the Index of Censorship that we can find ‘the rags of suppressed literatures, translated from a Babel of languages, the broken cries of real exiles’ (Gordimer 1984: 288). Furthermore, such convergences demonstrate the shared desire of acting for the benefit of others and using the idea of human rights as a connective web of struggle for a different world society.

Sybil Oldfield clearly says that ‘[e]ach generation needs the moral energy that can only come from the history of heroic altruism – that is, if we are to deserve to hope. Collective identity is the product of collective memory’ (Oldfield, 2001: 45).

Another interesting interrelation between humanitarianism and *humanitarian literature* – as I have called it – is that they are grounded in performativity, that is they strive to change reality – either with actions or employing the language of rights (in the sense described by Austin in his Speech Act Theory, in 1962). This provides a further interpretation of humanitarian narrative as a relevant Human Rights tool, whose efficiency has been historically and extensively documented (see Benedetti, 2011) in our contemporary age. South African recent history provides an interesting example of the (over)role of the discursive device and negotiation for the constitution of a democratic nation, as demonstrated by the assertions of Catherine M. Cole about the post-apartheid transition (1990-1994) and the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (SATRC, 1996-1998):

in the face of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries' breathtaking capacity of genocide, state-sponsored torture, and systemic violations of human rights, the inherited mechanisms for restoring the rule of law have proven inadequate. Crimes against humanity require new means of redress, a mechanism that records hidden histories of atrocity, didactically promotes collective memory, and gives victims a place of respect, dignity, and agency in the process (Cole, 2010: 3).

In this example, Cole refers to the SATRC presided over by Archbishop Desmond Tutu as a body which resorted to a humanitarian discourse endowed with the legal and administrative power to redress human rights violations by 'determining individual responsibility, setting appropriate punishment' (*Ibid.*: 2010: 4). In the light of a performative conception of words, none of this should be surprising, although, for my purposes, the most important distinctive aspects of humanitarian narrative are its ability to give voice to HRs violations and to raise readers' awareness and responsible re-actions. I believe that the defense and promotion of human rights require a discussion of their boundaries, so as to prevent any claims for a different level of "authority", clashing with Article 30 of the UDHRs. By contrast (and central to this thesis). As Cole comes to a definition of the TRC, testimonies and interviews, she describes them as informed by the

same power of the performative arts: ‘to make visible that which had been unseen’ (Cole, 2010: 6). Likewise, *humanitarian literature* can be defined as a “place of seeing”, attaining sociopolitical consciousness and a sense of reciprocity within the human community. This paradigm also shows the dynamics of the four texts analyzed. Specifically, they are all framed on the following key feature: they are addressed to a wide number of readers and are purposely merged with different genres. Changing reality involves addressing a global community. Humanitarian narrative, thus distinguishes itself from other texts dealing with HRs, like chronicles, reports or essays that attain to more specifically selected and specialized readers.

The case studies reveals that humanitarian narrative goals are neither aesthetic nor empathetic, but “provocative”. To use the words of Clare Virginia Eby in her analysis of Ann Petry’s *The Street* (1946), ‘[t]he sympathy generated by the humanitarian narrative is no idle or armchair emotion but implies a politics and impels action’ (Eby, 2008). The implication is that the “magical” power of literature manages to invite the reader to do something, as explained by Piasecki: ‘I have received hundreds of letters from students. A great many of them include the line “This book changed my life.” That alone makes it a humanitarian novel’ (Piasecki, 2009).

Another literary strategy adopted by the authors in making claims for human rights is the explicit deployment of their intentions, which can be summed up in the following chief statement: I, the author, tell you this story in order to let you see, know, understand and act to remove human rights violations. Indeed, this type of literature involves a rehearsal of the author’s intellectual liberty and responsibility, which in the seventies and eighties were pushed in the background after Roland Barthes’ well-known claims on the death of the author. On the contrary, humanitarian literature constantly demands the writer’s commitment and reliability in connection with moral change. There have been many historical examples in which literature has been defined by focusing on the author’s

intentions, in a way that reminds us of the UDHRs framework. In 1984, in a time when the freedom of many black and coloured people was erased by the apartheid system, Gordimer pinned down some of the most (and less) known literary names which could be linked to a diffused understanding of writing as a potential tool for humanitarian practice (Gordimer, 1984). It is however not easy to theorize when and how that interrelation started. Nevertheless, drawing on recent debates on contemporary humanitarianism and literature, I suggest that some cogent instances of contemporary writing manage “to do things” with words. Undoubtedly of central importance to their functioning is the author’s intention. As we noticed, it can be either inscribed within the very story (as in Saviano’s *Gomorra* and ASSK’s *Letters from Burma*, where the authorial voice coincides with the narrator and protagonist), or can stay outside the story (as in Piasecki’s *Marie in the Shadow of the Lion*), or even outside the text itself (as in Gordimer’s *Telling Tales* collection).

A fourth characteristic of humanitarian texts – whether they be fictional or factual – is their realistic sense stemming from the objective of constructing their stories on “authentic”, real facts. This has raised a somewhat nuanced and complex debate over the limits between facts and fiction, but from my discussion reality emerges as an essential trope for the language of humanitarian narrative. Saviano is talking about Camorra – a real criminal organization – while the stories he narrates are all based on real events, most of which he personally lived through or witnessed. Although Piasecki’s *Marie* is a fictional story, it is based on the true stories told by many girls like Marie who went through such terrible experiences. Gordimer based her account on real facts, taking inspiration from real chronicles (a newspaper’s announcement and South African history and policy). Where can a defense of HRs lie more securely and efficiently than in words? It is still Gordimer who, on many occasions, suggests a response: her fictional stories are more “true” than her essays. She is a writer, not a journalist. Some decades earlier, Truman Capote had related fiction to a deeper analysis of the real world than a journalistic

account can provide: the first one goes through the many levels of narration, while the second is limited to the surface. In this respect, as I argued, humanitarian narrative prefigures some kind of continuation of the Neo-realistic movement, since it aims at fostering a new vision of the world, based on moral values and justice, by means of engaged artworks. On the plateau of ethics, however, we find the values of the UDHRs.

I finally treated one of the main issues of humanitarian narrative, which equally affects all forms of communication dealing with HRs violations: the so-called “spectacle of sufferance”. Is shocking sufferance an efficient means to obtain some kind of response? Undoubtedly, images of starving children or men and women dying from HIV or as victims of war crimes can mobilize millions of people to send money, goods or even urge their politicians or international organisations to intervene. Nevertheless, is depiction of such sufferance fundamental for the purposes of humanitarian narrative? Before answering, I needed to go back to the origins of contemporary humanitarian literature. As a genre, humanitarian literature can be historically situated in connection with three events: the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), the fall of the Berlin Wall (1989) and recent globalisation trends.¹⁸⁰ The former gave authority and universal recognition to what already existed as moral and ethical principles. The second revealed the power of international mobilization, while the last one increased – and made more powerful – the promotion and the knowledge of HRs and their abuses.

It comes as no surprise, then, that the contemporary mobilization of a variety of people (journalists, humanitarians but also local or native people) who witnessed HRs violations and the increasing availability of communication media

¹⁸⁰ As pointed out by American journalist Thomas Friedman: ‘we have gone from a system built around walls to a system increasingly built around networks, characterized by a virtually total integration and whose symbol is the acronym WWW (WORLD WIDE WEB). On the contrary, the Cold War responded to the imperative of separation and was hyper-represented by the Wall’ (Friedman & Ramonet, 1999: 333).

fuelled the production of stories about HRs. On the other hand, our society, always craving for images, tends to assimilate dramatic spectacles under the rubric of “common daily topics”, which results in a commercialization of sufferance and, consequently, the creation of a distance between the sufferers and those who could stop that sufferance. In considering the narrative use of sufferance, it is useful to remember that all the case studies analysed either depict sufferance mingled with less disturbing aspects (cf. *Letters from Burma*), or deliberately do not go further in details (*Marie* and *The Ultimate Safari*). Even in a more extreme view of sufferance (*Gomorra*), one does not find a fracture between its description and the purpose embedded in such representations. Humanitarian narrative cannot afford to break the balance between narrative freedom and literary ethics because to do so would mean to threaten the Human Rights it wants to promote. Moreover, while humanitarian practices and language have been misused to justify military operations during the Nineties, and still somehow are in United States President Barak Obama’s speech held during the Nobel Peace Prize he won in 2009 (Obama, 2009), humanitarian narrative practice, as it has emerged, is political but does not imply nor promote any use of military force.

A humanitarian telling of stories is a practice of peace, a primarily *word* authority, a voiced opposition to silenced HRs abuses and a manifestation of an ethical and connected conscience. This understanding of humanitarian narrative also leads to the erasure of geographical distances between “those” and “us” through a personal sense of feeling of sufferance. Therefore, such stories aim at incorporating an empathetic attitude towards others and ourselves and the discourse of some authors becomes ours: it is the first step in the ladder toward a society based on the respect for Human Rights. Their goal is explicitly achieved through the awareness of both peoples and governments of their role and possible actions in preserving and supporting a democratic community. An epitomatic example is Saviano’s *Gomorra*, which is clearly written to denounce HRs violations,

to break what he calls the “macchine del fango” and give voice to the oppressed, while eliminating the distance between readers and the Camorra’s mechanisms and victims.

Finally, I believe that humanitarian literature, since it has officially gained a literary status, may also operate as a formative discourse for future citizens. In that sense, Piasecki’s *Marie*, a school text, is representative of how the United Nations aspire to provide full citizenship to Human Rights: they want to develop a humanitarian ability in young people. Similarly, Aung San Suu Kyi’s writings and, for example, those of Colombian activist Ingrid Betancourt – who have strongly experienced the consequences of her own words – are connected with the education of future generations. All of them and those who can be labelled *humanitarian writers* share, in the end, a general sense of the real efficacy of any humanitarian action if, and only if, it finally provides hopes for a socio-political change. Echoing Paola Pellegrinetti’s words quoted in the introduction, the future challenge is, thus, the creation of a pedagogy of humanitarianism.

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Appendix 1. The Authors' Brief Biographies and a Filing of the Texts

Information on the text: *Gomorra*

Title	<i>Gomorra</i>
Author	Roberto Saviano
Year of publication	2006
Publisher	Mondadori (Strade Blu)
Purpose	<p>Detailed analyses of the Camorra mechanisms through the eyes of a reliable witness (the author).</p> <p>Give voice to what is usually unsaid.</p> <p>It shows how words can either sustain or break 'la macchina del fango' (e.g. the chapter dedicated to Don Diana).</p>
On the author	<p>Roberto Saviano was born in Naples (1979) and graduated in Philosophy at the University of Naples <i>Federico II</i>. He writes on newspapers and magazines ranging from <i>Nuovi Argomenti</i>, <i>Lo Straniero</i> to <i>La Repubblica</i> and <i>L'espresso</i>. Since the publishing of his <i>Gomorra</i>, he has been defined in a variety of ways: 'un autore di successo, un eroe, un pazzo, un impostore, un vile, un porco, un professionista antimafia, un furbo, un infame, un fascista, un comunista, un simbolo, un sex symbol, un paladino degli ebrei, un messia, una merda, una speranza per tutti, un intellettuale, un noto millantatore senza tetto, uno che meno male che c'è' (from the first of Saviano's monologues in <i>Vieni via con Me</i>, broadcasted 15/11/2010, www.rai.tv)</p>
On the book	<p>It has sold almost four million copies around the world and it has been translated into more than forty languages.</p> <p><i>Gomorra</i> has been awarded numerous literary prizes such as <i>Premio Viareggio</i> (2006), <i>Premio Giancarlo Siani</i> (2006), <i>Premio Elsa Morante</i>, <i>Premio Stephen Dedalus</i> (2006), <i>Premio Guido Dorso e Premio Vittorini</i> (2007), just to mention a few. Recently, it won</p>

the PEN/Pinter writer of Courage award (2011).

Gomorra was adapted for both the theatre and cinema, receiving, respectively, the *Olimpici del Teatro (ETI)* and *Cannes' Gran Prix* prizes, in 2008.

Synopsis

Gomorra is an analytical voyage through the obscure mechanisms and business of Camorra (or Sistema). It reveals how the Sistema is worldwide-spread and how it has changed since the war of Secondigliano (2004 – 2006). It is divided into two parts: the first one deals with the hidden sides of what is apparently outside the Sistema to finally introduce the reader to it and its present 'concerns'. The second part goes deeply into the Sistema's mechanisms, leaders and fields of actions while presenting the origins – and understanding – of the author's writing through the life and words of Don Peppino Diana.

A Brief Biography of Roberto Saviano

Roberto Saviano was born in Naples in 1979. After taking a degree in Philosophy at the University "Federico II", in 2002 he started working as a journalist, writing for *Pulp*, *Il Diario*, *Il Manifesto*, *Il Corriere del Mezzogiorno* and for the alternative blog *Nazione Indiana*.

In 2006 Mondadori published his first book, *Gomorra – Viaggio nell'imperio economico e nel sogno di dominio della Camorra* (which was made into a film in 2008). The text soon became a bestseller (2 and a half million copies sold in Italy and almost 4 millions in the world).

The writer has been receiving death threats since September 2006 and since October 2006 he has lived under police escort.

Gomorra was inspired in a dramatic piece and a film. They were both awarded the "Olimpici del Teatro" prize and the "Gran prix du Jury" at Cannes Festival (2008).

In autumn 2008 he received further death threats and many Nobel Prize winners decided to give him their support. He was invited by the Academy of Stockholm to speak about freedom and his life.

He was invited to TV programs such as *Che tempo che fa*, *Matrix*, *L'era glaciale*, *Anno Zero*.

In November 2009, Mondadori published *La bellezza e l'inferno*, his second novel.

In March 2010, Einaudi published *La parola contro la Camorra*, consisting of a DVD and a booklet.

In November 2010 Saviano and Fabio Fazio made a TV program entitled *Vieni via con me*, which was broadcasted by Rai3.

Since the first appearance of *Gomorra*, Saviano has received international literary recognition and awards.

In December 2010 he received the title of “Honorary Member of the Academy of Fine Arts of Brera” and the “Second Level Academic Diploma in Communication and Art Teaching Honoris Causa”.

At the moment, he collaborates with international newspapers such as *The Washington Post*, *The New York Times*, *El Pais*, *Times*.

The author no longer lives in Naples, but has a secret place of residence.

Information on the text: *Letters from Burma*

Title	<i>Letters from Burma</i>
Author	Aung San Suu Kyi
Year of publication	1996
Publisher	<i>Mainichi Shinbusha</i>
Edition used	Penguin Books, London: 1997
Purpose	<p>They cross Burma borders to both paint the terrible life of Burmese people under a long dictatorship and define the role of other (democratic) countries in the face of that constant ignoring of HRs. The letters aim at triggering both mass and governments' conscience to turn Burma into a democracy.</p>
On the author	<p>ASSK is the leader of the struggle for human rights and democracy in Burma and her party, the National League for Democracy, although it won the 1990 general elections, was not allowed to take part in the government. She was detained under house arrest in Burma for almost 15 of the last 21 years, until her release on 13th November 2010.</p> <p>She was won such international prizes as: the <i>Rafto Prize for Human Rights</i> and <i>Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought</i> (1990); the <i>Nobel Peace Prize</i> (1991); the <i>Jawaharlal Nehru Award for International Understanding</i> and <i>International Simón Bolívar Prize</i> (1992). Recently, she became an honorary citizen of Canada (2007) and she was awarded the <i>Wallenberg Medal</i> (2011).</p>
On the book	<p>The letters were originally published in the popular Japanese <i>Mainichi</i> newspaper (1994-1996) and later collected in a book by Penguin Publishing House (1997). Each letter stands as a voice for human rights and, as the author claims, the very letter form best fulfils her intent to denounce and to ask for some actions from the readers. After fifteen years of silence, ASSK has started writing her letters again, since democracy has not completely settled in Burma.</p>
Synopsis	<p>The text deals with the struggle for democracy by common people and her party through peaceful ways. It also</p>

depicts the complex mechanisms, roots and responsibilities of a dictatorship intertwined with Burmese culture and ordinary life.

A Brief Biography of Aung San Suu Kyi*

1942: September 6th. Marriage of Aung San, commander of the Burma Independence Army, and Ma Khin Kyi (becoming Daw Khin Kyi), senior nurse of Rangoon General Hospital, where he had recovered from the rigours of the march into Burma.

1945: June 19th. Aung San Suu Kyi born in Rangoon, third child in family. “Aung San” for father, “Kyi” for mother, “Suu” for grandmother, also day of week of birth.

Favourite brother is to drown tragically at an early age. The older brother will settle in San Diego, California and become a citizen of the United States.

1947: July 19th. General Aung San assassinated. Suu Kyi is two years old. Daw Khin Kyi becomes a prominent public figure, heading social planning and social policy bodies.

1948: January 4th. The Independent Union of Burma is established.

1960: Daw Khin Kyi appointed Burma’s ambassador to India. Suu Kyi accompanies mother to New Delhi.

1960-64: Suu Kyi at high school and Lady Shri Ram College in New Delhi.

1964-67: Oxford University, B.A. in philosophy, politics and economics at St. Hugh's College (elected Honorary Fellow, 1990).

* The biography from 1942 to July 10th 1995 is taken from *Nobel Lectures, Peace 1991-1995*, Editor Irwin Abrams, World Scientific Publishing Co., Singapore 1999.

British “parents” are Lord Gore-Booth, former British ambassador to Burma and High Commissioner in India, and his wife, at whose home Suu Kyi meets Michael Aris, a student of Tibetan civilisation.

1969-71: She goes to New York for graduate study, staying with family friend Ma Than E, staff member at the United Nations, where U. Thant of Burma is Secretary-General. Postponing studies, Suu Kyi joins U.N. secretariat as Assistant Secretary, Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions. In the evenings and weekends she volunteers at hospital, helping indigent patients in programs of reading and companionship.

1972: January 1st. Marries Michael Aris, joins him in Himalayan kingdom of Bhutan, where he tutors royal family and heads Translation Department. She becomes Research Officer in the Royal Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

1973: They return to England and Alexander is born London.

1974: Michael assumes appointment in Tibetan and Himalayan studies at Oxford University.

1977: Birth of their second son, Kim, at Oxford.

While raising her children, Suu Kyi begins writing, does research for the biography of her father, and assists Michael in Himalayan studies.

1984: Publishes *Aung San* in “Leaders of Asia Series” of University of Queensland Press (See *Freedom from Fear*, pp. 3-38.)

1985: For juvenile readers she publishes *Let's Visit Burma* (see *Freedom from Fear*, pp. 39-81), and also books on Nepal and Bhutan in the same series for Burke Publishing Company, London.

1985-86: Visiting Scholar, Center of Southeast Asian Studies, Kyoto University, researching on her father's stay in Japan. Kim is with her, while Alexander is with Michael, who has a fellowship at the Indian Institute of Advanced Studies at Simla, in Northern India.

1986: On an annual visit to their grandmother in Rangoon, Alexander and Kim take part in a traditional Buddhist ceremony of initiation into monkhood.

1987: With fellowship at Indian Institute, Suu Kyi, with Kim, joins Michael and Alexander in Simla. Travels to London when mother is there for cataract surgery.

Publishes “Socio-Political Currents in Burmese Literature, 1910-1940” in the journal of Tokyo University (see *Freedom from Fear*, pp. 140-164). In September the family returns to Oxford. Suu Kyi enrolls at the London School of Oriental and African Studies to work on an advanced degree.

1988: March 31st. Informed by telephone of her mother’s severe stroke, she takes plane next day to Rangoon to help care for Daw Khin Kyi at hospital, then moves her to family home on University Avenue next to Inya Lake in Rangoon.

July 23rd. Resignation of General Ne Win, since 1962 a military dictator in Burma. Popular demonstrations of protest continuing.

August 8th. Mass uprising throughout the country. Violent suppression by military forces, who kill thousands of people.

August 15th. Suu Kyi, in her first political action, sends an open letter to the government, asking for an independent consultative committee to prepare multi-party elections.

August 26th. In her first public speech, she addresses several hundred thousands of people outside Shwedagon Pagoda, calling for a democratic government. Michael and her two sons are there.

September 18th. The military power establishes State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC). Political gatherings of more than four persons are banned. Arrests and sentencing without trial are reaffirmed. Parliamentary elections must be held, but in expectation that multiplicity of parties will prevent any clear result.

September 24th. National League for Democracy (NLD) formed, with Suu Kyi general-secretary. Policy of non-violence and civil disobedience introduced. October-December: defying the ban, Suu Kyi leaves for a speech-making tour throughout country to address large audiences.

December 27th. Daw Khin Kyi dies at the age of seventy-six.

1989: January 2nd. Funeral of Daw Khin Kyi. Huge funeral procession. Suu Kyi vows that as her father and mother had served the people of Burma, so too would she, even unto death.

January-July: Suu Kyi continues the campaign despite harassment, arrests and killings by soldiers.

February 17th. Suu Kyi prohibited from standing for election.

April 5th. Incident in Irawaddy Delta when Suu Kyi courageously walks toward the rifles which soldiers are aiming at her.

July 20th. Suu Kyi placed under house arrest, without charge or trial. Sons already with her. Michael flies to Rangoon, finds her on the third day of a hunger strike, asking to be sent to prison to join students arrested at her home. The strike ends when good treatment of students is promised.

1990: May 27th. Despite detention of Suu Kyi, NLD wins election with 82% of parliamentary seats. SLORC refuses to recognise results.

October 12th. Suu Kyi is granted the 1990 *Rafto Human Rights Prize*.

1991: July 10th. European Parliament awards Suu Kyi the *Sakharov Human Rights* prize.

October 14th. Norwegian Nobel Committee announces Suu Kyi is the winner of the 1991 Peace Prize.

1991: December: *Freedom from Fear* published by Penguin in New York, England, Canada, Australia, New Zealand. Also in Norwegian, French, Spanish translations.

December 10th. Alexander and Kim accept prize for mother in Oslo ceremony. Suu Kyi remains in detention, having rejected the offer to be liberated if she should leave Burma and withdraw from politics. Worldwide appeal growing for her release.

1992: Suu Kyi announces that she will use \$1.3 million prize money to establish health and education trust for Burmese people.

1993: Group of Nobel Peace Laureates, denied entry to Burma, visit Burmese refugees on Thailand border and call for Suu Kyi's release. Their appeal is later repeated at the UN Commission for Human Rights in Geneva.

1994: February: First non-family visitors to Suu Kyi: a UN representative, a U.S. congressman, a *New York Times* reporter.

September-October: SLORC leaders meet Suu Kyi, who still asks for a public dialogue.

1995: July 10th. SLORC releases Suu Kyi from house arrest after six years of detention.

She continued her struggle for democracy but the military junta restricted again her movements and put her under house arrest in 1996.

On March 27th, 1999, while Aung San Suu Kyi was in Burma, Michael Aris died of cancer in London. He asked the Burmese authorities to allow him to visit his wife but they rejected his request. The government always urged Suu Kyi to join her family abroad, but they would not have allowed her to return.

As she was released in 2002, she started again her political activities.

In May 2003 she was arrested and put in jail, after the Depayn massacre.

In December 2003 she moved from prison to house arrest until 13th November 2010. Although dictatorship was officially defeated in Burma, its fragments and mechanisms still remain to be erased and, thus, ASSK and her party keep on fighting for democracy.

Information on the Text: *Marie in the Shadow of the Lion*

Title	<i>Marie in the Shadow of the Lion</i>
Author	Jerry Piasecki
Year of publication	2000
Publisher	UNITED NATIONS
Purpose	<p>The book clearly has a didactic purpose; in the final section, “Your Turn”, we are told that this is a book and a project. Its purpose is to combine literature with education: as a matter of fact, the book is conceived for secondary school teenagers and teachers (there is also a Teacher’s Guide to the text). The final goal is to ‘educate, motivate and activate’ young people in the field of humanitarian issues and turn them into “peace ambassadors”.</p>
On the author	<p>Jerry Piasecki is a published author of children’s books, such as <i>Chocolate Rules & the Starship Meatloaf</i> (Yearling, 1997). He is currently collaborating with the United Nations and, among his institutional duties, he set out to write school-books to educate and activate people within humanitarian fields. Marie is the first book he wrote. http://www.ctaun.org/conferences/conference-archive/2003/.</p>
On the book	<p>The text, an illustrated book, is divided into 13 short chapters (from 1400 to 2500 words approx.), plus an Epilogue. The story is forwarded by a script, in the form of a signed letter to the reader, written by Secretary General of the United Nations Mr. Kofi A. Annan. In addition, at the end of the story, there is a final section, entitled “Your Turn”, where the author, directly addressing the reader, explains the motivations that led him to write Marie’s story and how the reader can do something to improve the situation. It should be noted that the front cover contains an indication, I would say a definition, concerning the genre of the story: “A Humanitarian Novel”.</p> <p>The book can be freely downloaded from the Internet at the following web-site:</p>

<http://cyberschoolbus.un.org/childsoldiers/whatsgoingon/Marie.pdf>.

Synopsis

The story is about a young African girl experiencing hell due to a civil war just on the eve of her 13th birthday. Marie is a very intelligent, skilled, courageous and beautiful girl. Contrary to most girls of her village, who have only a basic education, she continues to attend her school since ‘she wanted to read and loved to learn.’ One day, when Marie and Joseph – her mate and neighbour – came home, Marie’s parents told that the rebels were coming and they all had to flee to a camp protected the army. It is the beginning of a terrible voyage that will change her life forever.

A Brief Note on Jerry Piasecki

Jerry Piasecki graduated at Wayne State University and he is a published author of children’s books. Among his works we can mention: *Chocolate Rules and the Starship Meatloaf* and *Laura for Dessert*.

He worked as a Director at the United Nations Radio News Service while at the moment he is Adviser at Mission of Kazakhstan to the United Nations.

Information on the Text: *The Ultimate Safari*

Title	<i>The Ultimate Safari</i>
Author	Nadine Gordimer
Years of publication	1989 (in the British magazine <i>Granta</i>) 1991 (in the collection <i>Jump and Other Stories</i>) 2004 (in the anthology <i>Telling Tales</i>)
Publisher	Picador
Purpose	Fund raising for helping TREATMENT ACTION CAMPAIGN (TAC), a non-profit organization aiming at preventing and giving medical treatment to HIV and AIDS cases mainly in South Africa, the world's most afflicted region.
On the author	<p>Nadine Gordimer was born in Springs, South Africa, in 1923. She opposed and refused to sustain the apartheid system, despite growing up in a community in which racial segregation was accepted as almost a rule. She thus used her writing as a powerful way to contrast it and, undoubtedly, her work has proved to be important for the changing response to apartheid in South Africa.</p> <p>She received numerous honorary degrees from International Universities such as: Yale, Harvard, Columbia, New School for Social Research, USA; University of Leuven, Belgium, University of York (England), Universities of Cape Town and the Witwatersrand (South Africa), Cambridge University (England).</p>
On the book	<p>Nadine Gordimer complains about the fact that writers have not devoted their talent enough to charity, although music proved to be an efficient way of helping the needy. Therefore she wrote to twenty of the most famous writers in the world and asked them to “donate” her a story. The collection which thus took shape is not only a way of doing charity, but it also represents a change in the understanding of literature as a field of collaboration and the sign of the writers’ tangible, essential gesture.</p>
Synopsis	The opening statement of the text – ‘That night our mother went to the shop and she didn’t come back. Ever’ –

stands as a distressing introduction to the story dealing with civil war in Mozambique (1977- 1992) and the desperate exodus by villagers to refugee camps in South Africa, passing through Kruger Park, its popular national reserve. Although the story – which is narrated from the point of view of a young black Mozambican girl – is apparently simple, it depicts hidden HRs violations and some humanitarian interventions' faults.

A Brief Biography of Nadine Gordimer

She was born in Springs, a small mining town not far from Johannesburg, South Africa, in 1923. She is the second daughter of immigrants Isidore Gordimer (a Jew from Latvia) and Nan Myers (a Jew from London). Gordimer's mother partly shaped her involvement with in racial and economic inequality in South Africa. She did not get a University degree but was a voracious reader and started to write very early. In 1937 she published her first short story for children, "The Quest for Seen Gold", and later, in 1939, she published "Come Again Tomorrow", her first short-story that was not juvenile fiction.

Gordimer studied for one year at the University of the Witwatersrand, but she soon left her studies and moved to Johannesburg in 1948, where in 1949 she married Dr. Gerald Gavron and has lived ever since. She continued to write and in 1949 her collection of stories *Face to Face* appeared.

In 1951, her story "A Watcher of the Dead" brought her to a larger public, while in 1953 she published her first novel, *The Lying Days*.

In 1954 she married Reinhold Cassirer, a highly respected art dealer.

She has so far published 14 novels and received international literary recognition. In 1961 she won the "W. H. Smith Commonwealth Literary Award". She was active in the anti-apartheid movement and supported the *African National Congress*. Her writing deals with moral and racial issues and during the Sixties and Seventies she continued to demand, through both her writing and her activism, that

the government of South Africa replace its policy of apartheid. During this lapse of time, Gordimer experienced the blows of censorship: *The Late Bourgeois World* was banned in 1966 for a decade and *A World of Strangers* (1958) was banned for twelve years, while *Burger's Daughter* (1979) was listed as well, but then soon unbanned thanks to international appeals from writers and intellectuals. She addressed the problem of censorship many times, as in her seminal *Essential Gesture* (1988) and *Living in Hope and History* (1999).

She was awarded the 1991 Nobel Prize for Literature. Among the honorary degrees she received, there are those from Yale, Harvard, Columbia, New School for Social Research, USA; University of Leuven, Belgium, University of York (England), Universities of Cape Town and the Witwatersrand (South Africa), Cambridge University (England).

She has recently been active in HIV/AIDS causes and as a Goodwill Ambassador for the United Nations. An important commentary by Gordimer regarding the UDHRs is to be found in her essay "The Essential Document", included in *Living in Hope and History*.

Appendix 2 An Interview with Jerry Piasecki

This e-mail interview took place on November 13th, 2009.

- 1) Belinda Giannessi (B.G.): Why is the text defined as a “humanitarian novel”, even though it seems more like a short-story? Is there any intention in specifying that it is a novel? Does the difference between a novel and a short-story have any relevance at all in the making of the text?

Jerry Piasecki (J.P.): The book was first written while I was with the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. It is designed to act as an advocacy tool for children caught in the horrors of armed conflict. A novel is of more substance than a short story to most teachers. Also, it is over 100 pages long, so it equals the size of other novels for young readers. I am also the author of young reader books outside of the UN, and all are about the same length.

- 2) B.G.: We are interested in trying to define “humanitarian narrative”. What is the difference, according to you, between a novel and a "humanitarian" novel? Why and when can we say that a novel is “humanitarian”?

J.P.: This is highly subjective. *Marie - In the Shadow of the Lion* was the first "novel" ever published by the United Nations. It might also have been the first to go by the title "humanitarian" novel. To me, a humanitarian novel is one designed to assist those in need, the goal is not to make money but to make a difference.

- 3) B.G.: Finally, what has been the reception of the novel by the public? Have you got any feedback about how many schools decided to use the text or have you received comments on how readers might help Marie?

J.P.: The book has been embraced by students on all continents. It has been taught in late primary school to the University level. It is the basis of the Global Peace School Programme, which has been taught in over twenty countries. Currently the Programme is being led by Save the Children - Australia. I have received hundreds of letters from students. A great many of them include the line "This book changed my life." That alone makes it a humanitarian novel.

4) B.G.: I would like to take advantage of this occasion to ask you a further question. Sorry but this new question has been partly suggested by you, in the final words of your email: "I am delighted that you found the book interesting. As you know, every incident in the book is true." The question is: how can a real story be turned into a fictional story? In other words, what is the difference for you between the real story and the fictional one? And what's the difference for you, namely the writer? I do not know if I managed to formulate my question well...

J.P: Marie was written based on actual testimony of young people, child soldiers, refugees, etc. in Sierra Leone, Liberia, Congo, Burundi and Uganda. Every incident in the book is true, all I did was put the true stories together to create a life. What happens to Marie, Thomas and others is, sadly, not unusual. This is the story of all of the tortured children suffering and dying at this moment.

Appendix 3 The Universal Declaration of Human Rights

PREAMBLE¹⁸²

Whereas recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world,

Whereas disregard and contempt for human rights have resulted in barbarous acts which have outraged the conscience of mankind, and the advent of a world in which human beings shall enjoy freedom of speech and belief and freedom from fear and want has been proclaimed as the highest aspiration of the common people,

Whereas it is essential, if man is not to be compelled to have recourse, as a last resort, to rebellion against tyranny and oppression, that human rights should be protected by the rule of law,

Whereas it is essential to promote the development of friendly relations between nations,

Whereas the peoples of the United Nations have in the Charter reaffirmed their faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person and in the equal rights of men and women and have determined to promote social progress and better standards of life in larger freedom,

Whereas Member States have pledged themselves to achieve, in co-operation with the United Nations, the promotion of universal respect for and observance of human rights and fundamental freedoms,

Whereas a common understanding of these rights and freedoms is of the greatest importance for the full realization of this pledge,

Now, Therefore THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY proclaims THIS UNIVERSAL DECLARATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS as a common standard of achievement for all peoples and all nations, to the end that every individual and every organ of society, keeping this Declaration constantly in mind, shall strive by teaching and education to promote respect for these rights and freedoms and by progressive measures, national and international, to secure their universal and effective recognition and observance, both among the peoples of

¹⁸² The text is taken from: <http://www.un.org/en/documents/udhr/index.shtml>. Retrieved: November, 2011.

Member States themselves and among the peoples of territories under their jurisdiction.

Article 1.

- All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.

Article 2.

- Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status. Furthermore, no distinction shall be made on the basis of the political, jurisdictional or international status of the country or territory to which a person belongs, whether it be independent, trust, non-self-governing or under any other limitation of sovereignty.

Article 3.

- Everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person.

Article 4.

- No one shall be held in slavery or servitude; slavery and the slave trade shall be prohibited in all their forms.

Article 5.

- No one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.

Article 6.

- Everyone has the right to recognition everywhere as a person before the law.

Article 7.

- All are equal before the law and are entitled without any discrimination to equal protection of the law. All are entitled to equal protection against any discrimination in violation of this Declaration and against any incitement to such discrimination.

Article 8.

- Everyone has the right to an effective remedy by the competent national tribunals for acts violating the fundamental rights granted him by the constitution or by law.

Article 9.

- No one shall be subjected to arbitrary arrest, detention or exile.

Article 10.

- Everyone is entitled in full equality to a fair and public hearing by an independent and impartial tribunal, in the determination of his rights and obligations and of any criminal charge against him.

Article 11.

- (1) Everyone charged with a penal offence has the right to be presumed innocent until proved guilty according to law in a public trial at which he has had all the guarantees necessary for his defence.
- (2) No one shall be held guilty of any penal offence on account of any act or omission which did not constitute a penal offence, under national or international law, at the time when it was committed. Nor shall a heavier penalty be imposed than the one that was applicable at the time the penal offence was committed.

Article 12.

- No one shall be subjected to arbitrary interference with his privacy, family, home or correspondence, nor to attacks upon his honour and reputation. Everyone has the right to the protection of the law against such interference or attacks.

Article 13.

- (1) Everyone has the right to freedom of movement and residence within the borders of each state.
- (2) Everyone has the right to leave any country, including his own, and to return to his country.

Article 14.

- (1) Everyone has the right to seek and to enjoy in other countries asylum from persecution.
- (2) This right may not be invoked in the case of prosecutions genuinely arising from non-political crimes or from acts contrary to the purposes and principles of the United Nations.

Article 15.

- (1) Everyone has the right to a nationality.
- (2) No one shall be arbitrarily deprived of his nationality nor denied the right to change his nationality.

Article 16.

- (1) Men and women of full age, without any limitation due to race, nationality or religion, have the right to marry and to found a family. They are entitled to equal rights as to marriage, during marriage and at its dissolution.
- (2) Marriage shall be entered into only with the free and full consent of the intending spouses.
- (3) The family is the natural and fundamental group unit of society and is entitled to protection by society and the State.

Article 17.

- (1) Everyone has the right to own property alone as well as in association with others.
- (2) No one shall be arbitrarily deprived of his property.

Article 18.

- Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.

Article 19.

- Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.

Article 20.

- (1) Everyone has the right to freedom of peaceful assembly and association.
- (2) No one may be compelled to belong to an association.

Article 21.

- (1) Everyone has the right to take part in the government of his country, directly or through freely chosen representatives.
- (2) Everyone has the right of equal access to public service in his country.
- (3) The will of the people shall be the basis of the authority of government; this will shall be expressed in periodic and genuine elections which shall be by universal and equal suffrage and shall be held by secret vote or by equivalent free voting procedures.

Article 22.

- Everyone, as a member of society, has the right to social security and is entitled to realization, through national effort and international co-operation and in accordance with the organization and resources of each State, of the economic, social and cultural rights indispensable for his dignity and the free development of his personality.

Article 23.

- (1) Everyone has the right to work, to free choice of employment, to just and favourable conditions of work and to protection against unemployment.
- (2) Everyone, without any discrimination, has the right to equal pay for equal work.

- (3) Everyone who works has the right to just and favourable remuneration ensuring for himself and his family an existence worthy of human dignity, and supplemented, if necessary, by other means of social protection.
- (4) Everyone has the right to form and to join trade unions for the protection of his interests.

Article 24.

- Everyone has the right to rest and leisure, including reasonable limitation of working hours and periodic holidays with pay.

Article 25.

- (1) Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control.
- (2) Motherhood and childhood are entitled to special care and assistance. All children, whether born in or out of wedlock, shall enjoy the same social protection.

Article 26.

- (1) Everyone has the right to education. Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages. Elementary education shall be compulsory. Technical and professional education shall be made generally available and higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit.
- (2) Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. It shall promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups, and shall further the activities of the United Nations for the maintenance of peace.
- (3) Parents have a prior right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children.

Article 27.

- (1) Everyone has the right freely to participate in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts and to share in scientific advancement and its benefits.
- (2) Everyone has the right to the protection of the moral and material interests resulting from any scientific, literary or artistic production of which he is the author.

Article 28.

- Everyone is entitled to a social and international order in which the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration can be fully realized.

Article 29.

- (1) Everyone has duties to the community in which alone the free and full development of his personality is possible.
- (2) In the exercise of his rights and freedoms, everyone shall be subject only to such limitations as are determined by law solely for the purpose of securing due recognition and respect for the rights and freedoms of others and of meeting the just requirements of morality, public order and the general welfare in a democratic society.
- (3) These rights and freedoms may in no case be exercised contrary to the purposes and principles of the United Nations.

Article 30.

- Nothing in this Declaration may be interpreted as implying for any State, group or person any right to engage in any activity or to perform any act aimed at the destruction of any of the rights and freedoms set forth herein.