

On Strangers and Ambivalence: Reconsidering the Ethical Boundaries of Asylum

in Michael Helm's Cities of Refuge

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The other is the uncertainty, that source and archetype of all fear. The tropes of 'the other of order' are: undefinability, incoherence, incongruity, incompatibility, illogicality, irrationality, ambiguity, confusion, undecidability, ambivalence.

Zigmunt Bauman, *Modernity and Ambivalence*

Refugee identity is a limit-concept of modern accounts of the political and is constituted through an exceptional logic: whatever qualities are present for the citizen are notably absent for the refugee.

Peter Nyers, *Rethinking Refugees*

Only in a world in which the spaces of states have been thus perforated and topologically deformed and in which the citizen has been able to recognize the refugee that he or she is—only in such a world is the political survival of humankind today thinkable.

Giorgio Agamben, *Means Without End*

This essay is an attempt to begin to unravel some of the central concerns and rhetorical, philosophical, political and cultural discourses embedded in Michael Helm's very dense and multilayered recent novel *Cities of Refuge* (2010). It shifts from its initial focus on the asylum seeker as the paradigmatic ambivalent stranger whose extraterritoriality raises questions about humanitarianism and citizenship, to the consideration of the average Canadian as a stranger. This is a move towards the recognition of the ontological indistinctiveness between the citizen and the noncitizen, and calls for a political and cultural reconfiguration of the nation-state in the age of neoliberal globalization so as to facilitate what Giorgio Agamben terms "the political survival of humankind" (2000, 26). I submit that, in weaving a complex net of ethical stances regarding the undocumented noncitizen, Helm contests Agamben's notion that the sovereign state is the *sole* producer of both modern humanity—by giving protection to citizens—and of bare life—by denying it to

noncitizens. My reading of the novel draws on a rich variety of sources that take into account the historically contingent documents and discourses of the Canadian nation about citizenship, security and peacekeeping (e.g. North American Act of 1867, Jason Kenny's statements, etc.), recent scholarship of Canadian theorists of citizenship and globalization (Härting & Kamboureli, Coleman, Nyers), analysis of neoliberalism and cosmopolitics (Ong, Chea), as well as a European philosophical tradition of thought about the ambiguities attached to the figure of the stranger in the context of the nation-state, which inevitably brings forward questions about humanity, citizenship, hospitality, compassion, forgiveness, and cosmopolitanism (e.g. Derrida, Foucault, Bauman, Agamben). Marlene Goldman's *Rewriting Apocalypse in Canadian Fiction* and Frank Kermode's *Sense of an Ending* have proven equally illuminating in my attempt to grasp the novel's focus on the production and control of narratives that both challenge and reinforce the biopolitics of the sovereign state.

In an era of increasingly accelerated globalization and transnationalism, when the nation-state faces imminent obsolescence as an economically and politically sovereign territory and a bounded cultural unit, Canada cultivates a cosmopolitan self-image as the protector of international human rights. Accordingly, the Citizenship and Immigration Canada Department proudly states in its official website that Canada stands out among Western nations as an important asylum giver which, "in keeping with its humanitarian tradition and international obligations, "provides protection to thousands of people every year. Moreover, the state's benevolence is not just directed towards those accepted within the national borders but aims to extend itself globally by adopting, for example, "international peacekeeping in the name of human compassion, responsibility, and protection" (Härting & Kamboureli 659). As Heike Härting and Smaro Kamboureli explain, this has been one of Canada's "most important political and diplomatic strategies for self-invention employed both domestically and internationally" (659), at least since 1957, when

Lester B. Pearson won the Nobel Peace Prize after having helped resolve the Suez crisis. In the new millennium Canada's hospitality towards foreign subjects who suffer from persecution and its professed compassion for nation-states in need of assistance must be contextualized within the neoliberal technology of government "that relies on market knowledge and calculations for a politics of subjection and subject making that continually places in question the political existence of modern human beings" (Ong 13). Hence, making use of the concept of sovereign exception,¹ Canada's humanitarianism relies on policies that "can be deployed to include as well as to exclude" (5).

The term *compassion*, which comes from the Latin verb *compati* meaning "suffer with," entails not only a "sympathetic consciousness of others' distress together with a desire to alleviate it" (*Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary*), but also grief and pity. These emotions are certainly elicited when considering the traumatic experiences of the refugee, who is defined under the 1951 UN Convention as a person who "owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted [...] is outside the country of his nationality" (qtd. in Nyers 2006, 47). To be a refugee, therefore, implies being able to produce a convincing fear narrative accounting for the unusual violence and suffering caused by loss and forced displacement. It is this fear that the compassionate empathy of the Canadian nation-state seeks to assuage by allowing the refugee to start a new life in the allegedly secure and peaceful Canadian space.

However, Thomas Hobbes reminds us, state sovereignty also has its roots in fear, as it emerged as an attempt to subdue "the fearful chaos of the pre-national 'state of nature,' a state of constant warfare where everyman is Enemy to everyman" (Coleman 2012, xxiii). That fear is still ingrained in the reimagining of the refugee as a menace to the domestic

¹ Political exception is, according to Carl Schmitt, a prerogative of the sovereign state to make decisions outside the juridical order "to depart from a generalized political normativity, to intervene in the logics of ruling and of being ruled" (Ong 5). To Giorgio Agamben the exception is "a fundamental principle of sovereign rule that is predicated on the division between citizens in a juridical order and outsiders stripped of juridical political protections" (ibid.).

peace of the nation-state. As Bauman argues in *Liquid Times*, asylum seekers have the stench of war on them, and they ultimately remind us of global instabilities and injustice, becoming the scapegoats for our anxieties about a global system that we neither control nor understand. Once refugees are configured as the product of fear, their position in the realm of emotions diminishes them in the face of the rational nation, which construes them as “human beings ‘in the raw,’ so to speak, because they are motivated by a *feeling*—the subjective emotion of fear—rather than by *rational deliberation*” (Nyers 2006, 61; my emphasis). Yet, the state offering asylum is no less riddled with conflicting emotions, torn between the self-complacency derived from its role as a grantor of empathy and compassion and its fear to put at risk the integrity of its territory by misjudging those who are let in within its borders. It is at this point that the issue of authenticity or veracity of the refugee’s narrative becomes one of utmost importance, given the difficulty of telling the difference between a bogus and a genuine asylum seeker, between someone deserving compassion and someone who is potentially a threat to the common good that the state is in charge of guaranteeing. As Sara Ahmed explains, the figure of the bogus asylum seeker evokes the figure of the ‘bogy man’, as a figure that stalks the nation and haunts its capacity to secure its borders.” Even further, the possibility that we may not be able to tell the difference “swiftly converts into the possibility that *any* of those incoming bodies may be bogus,” and as a result, “they are read as the cause of an injury to the national body” even before their arrival (Ahmed 47).

The interlocking of the Canadian narratives of benevolence, fear, and security is clearly at work in the recent declarations of The Honourable Jason Kenney, Minister of Citizenship, Immigration and Multiculturalism on the occasion of the introduction of the *Faster Removal of Foreign Criminals Act* on June 20, 2012. In Kenney’s rhetoric the figure of the foreign criminal is not only connected to that of the asylum seeker, as the Act limits

the access of convicted criminals to the Immigration and Refugee Board's Immigration Appeal Division, but it is also emotionally charged with the politics of fear. Thus, Kenney explains, the Act puts a stop to the endless appeals that delay deportation, preventing these foreign criminals from continuing "to terrorize innocent Canadians" (Kenney 2012) whose generosity is being abused. The discourse of authenticity is also central to the logic of the new legislation, which contemplates increased penalties for those "fraudsters" who try to "cheat the system" (Kenney 2012). The discourses on the safety and security of Canadians reinforce the state's *social contract*, as they function "as both a legitimizing cultural narrative of power and an ideological remedy that pacifies fears of transgression, contamination, and invasion by a perceived Other" (Härting & Kamboureli 673). Hence, the state's hospitality presupposes, as Jacques Derrida explains, "the possibility of a rigorous delimitation of thresholds or frontiers: between the familial and the non-familial, between the foreigner and the non-foreign, the citizen and the non-citizen" (2000, 49). Yet, due to their philosophical and legal instability, no rigorous delimitation of thresholds between these binaries is possible, as the imminent implementation of the *Faster Removal of Foreign Criminals Act* will make all the more evident.

Like the Greek *xenos*, the term *stranger* refers in English to a person who does not know, or is not known in a particular place or community, one who is strange because he or she is a foreigner, a guest, a visitor, or even an intruder. The stranger is the outsider marked by the ambiguity of that which is unknown. Clearly construed as an *other*, the stranger, Zigmunt Bauman contends, is neither friend nor enemy—the two modalities in which the *other* may be "admitted into the self's life world, be counted, become and stay relevant" (Bauman 1991, 55)—but may be both. "And because we do not know, and have no way of knowing" (56), the stranger becomes an even more horrifying threat than that posed by the

enemy. As an archetypal member of Derrida's family of *undecidables*, the stranger's underdetermination is his power:

because they are nothing, they may be all. They put paid to the ordering power of the opposition, and so to the ordering power of the narrators of the opposition. Oppositions enable knowledge and action; undecidables paralyse them. Undecidables brutally expose the artifice, the fragility, the sham of the most vital of separations. They bring the outside into the inside, and poison the comfort of order with suspicion of chaos. (56)

As a result, strangers become the embodiment of incongruity and "must be tabooed, disarmed, suppressed, exiled physically or mentally—or the world may perish" (60). The stranger's existence in our midst leads the reader to ponder how far the idea of cosmopolitanism still is from Immanuel Kant's understanding of it as "universal hospitality," (Kant 1972, 17) a concept that demands to relinquish judgment and control in order to welcome whoever may be in need of hospitality. In Derrida's words,

absolute hospitality requires that I open up my home and that I give not only to the foreigner (provided with a family name, with the social status of being a foreigner, etc.), but to the absolute, unknown, anonymous other, and that I *give place* to them, that I let them come, that I let them arrive, and take place in the place I offer them, without asking of them either reciprocity (entering into a pact) or even their names. (Derrida 2000, 25)

Derrida reminds us, however, that whereas hospitality demands this surrender of control, it paradoxically entails power for host. Not only property ownership is required to be a host, but also to be able to exert a certain control over the people who are being hosted. Hence, Derrida submits, despite our best intentions to be hospitable, *possible* hospitality sets up limits that the other should not trespass. Possible hospitality has a tendency, as a result, to be rather inhospitable (Derrida 1995, 68) and to render the 'other others' as strangers and refugees. On the other hand, if unconditional hospitality were practiced, the very possibility of hospitality would be circumvented by the ensuing abandonment of all claims to ownership and the surrender of control. As a result, Jacques Derrida notes in his revision of Kant's law of cosmopolitanism, Kant himself subordinated universal hospitality

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to the sovereignty of the state, and the right of residence to particular treaties between states (21), restricting the right of *residence* to the right of *visitation* (Derrida 2005, 20). By foregrounding the ethical responsibility toward the stranger in our midst, Michael Helm's novel engages with the tensions involved in the Canadian state's offer and relinquishing of hospitality.

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Cities of Refuge alludes in its very title to Canada's humanitarian role as a provider of asylum and protection. The novel's fictional Toronto appears as a sanctuary for a variegated range of asylum seekers. On the one hand, Toronto hosts a number of educated, highly skilled immigrants and refugees who are greatly valued in the neoliberal state for their human capital and potential entrepreneurship. This is the case of Chilean Eduardo Jofre who, while working "in a northern suburb for a self-proclaimed 'socially progressive' investment company" (Helm 311), also kept transnational hemispheric connections with the Chilean reparations movement. Jofre, therefore, illustrates the "detachment of entitlements from political membership and national territory" (Ong 16) that is taking place under neoliberalism, "as certain rights and benefits are distributed to bearers of marketable talents and denied to those who are judged to lack such capacity or potential" (ibid.) On the other hand, by portraying Toronto as a sanctuary for refugees, Helm links this Canadian space to the Biblical cities that offered asylum to people who had been expelled from their own communities, and thereby reduced to the condition of what Giorgio Agamben terms "bare life." As one of the characters in the novel explains, "[a]mong the Levitical cities six were designated as cities of refuge [...] Only those who killed without enmity and were subject to the laws of blood vengeance [were allowed to seek asylum there]. They didn't deserve to die, so they needed a place where they would be safe" (Helm 175). The refugee claimant

emerges then as *homo sacer*, a juridical term from archaic Roman law designating an individual who is cast out of the city in response to what his community perceives as a grave trespass. As a result, he stands outside the range of the law and anyone may kill him with impunity. Putting it in the terms Giorgio Agamben borrows from Hanna Arendt, Toronto promises to replace the bare life or *zoe*—“the simple fact of living common to all living beings (animals, men or gods)”—to which the refugee claimant has been reduced in his or her country of origin, with *bios*—“the form or way of life proper to an individual or group” (Agamben 1998, 1). Toronto, transformed into a city of refuge and standing as a metonymy for Canada, offers the refugee re-entry into the polis and, together with it, protection and the restitution of his or her humanity. The conundrum for the state is how to distinguish between those who deserve to be let into the safe space of the nation-state and those who do not, and what to do with those who are potentially a threat to national security and to the common good.

Foregrounding the figure of the failed or excluded refugee, the novel presents the reader with the philosophical and political tensions involved in such a choice and responsibility. Stripped of citizenship, a stateless noncitizen, the rejected refugee remains in the condition of *homo sacer*, “no longer representable inside the nation-state” (Agamben 2000, 21). With none of the qualifications of the specific lives in a community (*bios*), the failed refugee is reduced to bare life (*zoe*), and emerges as an ambiguous subject who functions as the epitome of the stranger. *Cities of Refuge* shows that the life of the refugee as *homo sacer* has an essential function in the politics of the Canadian state, reinforcing its image as either benefactor when it gives asylum or as guardian and protector when asylum is denied. Furthermore, the novel reflects on a diversity of multilateral systems, including multinational companies, religious organizations, and NGOs, that contest or circumvent the state’s ethical norms of legal citizenship and offer alternative (re)evaluations of humanity.

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The novel's intricately layered plot is the result of intersecting narratives whose protagonists seem to exist on the edge of some apocalyptic crisis or transition. *Cities of Refuge* thus engages a tradition of Canadian apocalyptic fiction that during the last decades has highlighted the experience of loss and trauma from the vantage point of the marginalized (see Goldman). Furthermore, Helm may be expanding this tradition by combining the apocalyptic perspectives of both mainstream and marginal subjectivities and by showing that the figure of the other as stranger is not restricted to the socially and politically marginalized. Marlene Goldman unravels the basic structural, thematic and political elements of the genre in what she calls "a grammar of apocalypse" (14). She first situates the idea of apocalypse within the realm of eschatology, a term derived from *eschaton*, meaning "'the furthestmost boundary,' 'the ultimate edge' in time or space" (14). Following Salmond, Goldman establishes that scriptural eschatology rests on the idea that history is a moral process and moves towards the redemption of humankind. God is the author of this process as well as its goal or end. Therefore, awaiting beyond the edge is divine truth. Secondly, Goldman distinguishes two eschatological strands: prophetic eschatology relies on "the prophetic announcement to the nation of the divine plans for Israel . . . which he [the seer] translates into the terms of plain history, real politics, and human instrumentality" (Hanson 11). It envisions humans as agents intervening in history to accomplish God's plans in the present and on earth. Apocalyptic eschatology, on the other hand, holds no hope of earthly redemption, but believes that "God will bring an end to the profane world and create an entirely new one" (Goldman 15). Furthermore, apocalyptic literature concerns itself with the disclosure of a secret that is encrypted in riddles or allegories. This revelation "inevitably involves the destruction and judgment of the old, earthly world and the creation of a new, heavenly paradise" (16). It emerges from a crisis situation, "identifying a variety of oppressive political and social forces" (17) and offers a

new perspective of resistance and hope. The traumatic violence at the heart of apocalypse is conveyed through testimony and an ethics of bearing witness which relies on intertextuality as a means of creating an overarching vision of “all of history from beginning to end” (Frye 70). The aim is to offer a unified vision that, by rewriting the past, can forecast the future, as well as “the location of the final contest between good and evil and of the New Jerusalem” (Goldman 19). Apocalypse, therefore, is predicated on binary oppositions. The prophet or seer holds that the universe is not out of control, in spite of how it might appear, but that God has predetermined the course of world history, whose climatic end is within reach.

Cities of Refuge combines the prophetic and apocalyptic eschatologies to offer a political critique of the nation-state as the holder of the rights of citizenship. It also ponders how the presence of undocumented people in the country contributes to create an apocalyptic atmosphere of threat and imminent catastrophe on the one hand, and of revelation, redemption and renewal on the other. The novel’s plot is triggered by the brutal assault on the twenty-eight-year-old Torontonion protagonist, aptly named Kim Lystrander². Just before the attack she believed that “[e]ven for a young woman . . . it was still possible to feel safe on foot almost anyplace in this city” (Helm 7). However, the physical violence she experiences challenges her view of Toronto as a safe, multicultural haven. Kim’s emaciated body after the attack is symbolic of what Goldman calls “an aesthetics and politics of brokenness and woundedness” in stark contrast with “that of wholeness, order, and control” (21) characteristic of the overarching vision of apocalypse. Her wounded body turns into a fragment and an emblem of apocalyptic catastrophe that provides her with a

² The term *strander* derives from the words stroll and wander mixed into one, meaning a walk (see Lucas Neil. Urban Dictionary <http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Strander>), and fits Kim's experience as a city walker and cyclist. Furthermore, to be stranded means to be moored and in a helpless condition, attributes that apply as much to the Lystrandors as to the refugee claimants at some point in their lives. In addition, a strand is an important element in the making of complex stories or plots, something at which Kim is adept. Her story is just one among the mesh of narratives interwoven in the novel.

new “way of seeing” (97), but it also evokes the broken bodies of tortured refugee claimants. The state’s failure to protect her and to punish her aggressor momentarily reduces her to a condition similar to that of the noncitizen, to bare life. Linking this fragment of apocalyptic catastrophe that her body represents to other allegorical fragments and intertexts, Kim begins to try to understand evil—the ultimate goal of apocalypse’s unique temporal and teleological framework—in both historical and personal terms. She thus becomes Walter Benjamin’s allegorist, who aims to construct meaning out of fragments (Goldman 20).

Kim’s generous volunteer work at an NGO called GROUND—an acronym standing for Group for the Undocumented—is indicative of her positionality in a world of neoliberal globalization. Her support of asylum seekers who have been rejected by the system not only shows her adherence to an ideal of political liberalism in defense of individual rights and civil liberties, but also her critique of and opposition to a form of state’s hospitality that problematically ascribes to the economic tenets of neoliberal capitalism. In her view, the Canadian state implements unjust discriminatory practices by privileging the claims of well-off asylum seekers over those of poorer ones: “[w]e screen by sending back the poorest unless they’re in danger, so we’re bound to make mistakes and send people off to their deaths. We already knowingly hand them over to torturers” (Helm 24). Hence, she sees the state as oscillating between the ethos of *neoliberalism as exception*—implementing a politics of inclusion whereby “talented expatriates are incorporated as prototypical ideal citizens” (Ong 21)—and *exception to neoliberalism*—by which low-skill migrants are politically excluded. Such noncitizens usually seek to protect their rights as outsiders by appealing to nonstate agencies that, as Aihwa Ong explains, “increasingly depend on normative mechanisms that can map spaces that are exceptions to neoliberalism” and “negotiate with various governments and cultural authorities for a transnational sense of

moral responsibility to migrant workers and trafficked individuals” (ibid.). Whereas GROUND represents those “novel political systems that are neither state nor market, but that articulate both” (ibid.), Kim’s work at the nongovernmental organization proves her practice of citizenship as a kind of political engagement (*bios*) that transcends the boundaries of the nation-state by linking to a form of global solidarity that is attuned to new forms of radical cosmopolitanism from below. Her activism may be viewed as a practical cosmopolitics that, as Pheng Chea maintains, “can regulate the excesses of capitalist economic globalization” (19) by relying on “mass-based emancipatory forms of global consciousness” (31). Yet, GROUND also holds the kind of ambiguity explored in the novel at various levels as it functions as a supranational political formation that, while alleviating or correcting the negative effects of the state policies regarding refugees, also collaborates with the neoliberal ideology by taking over some social services from the public sector, further eroding its ability to implement genuine social justice.

Kim’s job as a night-time security guard at the Royal Ontario Museum—a museum of world culture and natural history—also points to her progressive cosmopolitanism, based on the acknowledgement of historical human—rather than just Western—achievement and evolution, a cultural legacy that she helps preserve in the heterotopian space of the museum.

In addition, Kim is a PhD student of History, which provides her with an overarching temporal and geopolitical perspective on human (in)justice. Her involvement with the humanitarian NGO is coherent with her practical approach to cosmopolitics as well as with her *empathetic* approach to history, which leads her to quit her studies because she could no longer bear the critical detachment required of the conventional historian, who is best represented by her father, Harold, a History professor. She does not share the modern Western—and eschatological—framework of a linear chronotope whereby human history is conceived of as a relentless movement of progress seen from an objective distance. Instead,

Kim testifies to an experience of fragmentation and chaos that contradicts the apocalyptic assurance of divine order and control, of a linear history advancing inexorably towards the climactic moment of apocalypse, redemption and renewal. Her conviction that linear history is a human construct is most apparent when she begins working on a documentary covering the history of the twentieth century as a series of wars and holocausts, and concludes, “[i]t seems every frame predicts the one to follow in the illusion of history’s logical sequence” (Helm 114). Although she thinks that “it’s self-evident that our species is fucked-up and on the whole just innately destructive and cruel” (115), Kim believes that human agency—her own political engagement with excluded refugees as a case in point—can transform the world into a better and fairer place, that we can learn from the past to act upon the present. In eschatological terms, Kim subscribes to the prophetic over the apocalyptic stance. Thus, she becomes a seer or prophetic figure involved in interpreting apocalyptic fragments in her own life and the lives of others with the objective of influencing the present—rather than forecast the future, as the apocalyptic vision does. Her father, on the contrary, seems to have adopted the apocalyptic view whereby nothing but total destruction will ensure renewal.

These apocalyptic fragments that Kim struggles to put together are moments of crises which stand out in the chronological narratives that we imagine in order to make sense of our existence. They belong, Frank Kermode propounds, “to a different order of time than the merely successive” (Kermode 2000, 191). This different conception of time he terms *kairos* so as to distinguish it from *chronos*. Whereas *chronos* involves an interminable sequence of time, *kairos* entails a focus on selected ending moments. These moments signal a “turn of time” (189) and are *intemporal* signs, in the sense that they remain an indelible mark shaping who we are. In the novel every character’s subjectivity is shaped by *kairos* moments which are rendered as endings or apocalyptic turning points that

invest each life-narrative with form and meaning; that is, it is from the exploration of these moments that a person's actions and life can be understood. These epiphanies are the “worst moments” (Helm 51), nadirs of exposure and revelation—“[y]our September eleventh” (313), as Kim puts it once. Refugee narratives, with their emphasis on violence, fear and apocalyptic endings, are paradigmatically built upon Kermode's *kairos* sense of time. Accordingly, the lives of the refugee claimants at GROUND appear as stories “full of high drama, veered off in unlikely directions.” In their accounts Kim feels “the force of plot design, some hand at work, rounding the periods in their lives into legible wholes” (Helm 236).

Helm's novel, like the novels Marlene Goldman analyzes in *Rewriting Apocalypse*, critiques the Manichean division of the world into the elect and the non-elect, the citizen and the undocumented noncitizen. It suggests that evil springs “from the uncritical reliance on the apocalyptic narrative” which seeks to exterminate the non-elect (Goldman 21). In the novel the excluded refugee claimant is the paradigmatic non-elect, facing rejection, deportation, and even death. Instead of the powerful teleological narrative of binary oppositions, Kim struggles to accept ambiguity in order to understand and to avert evil. In the process, not only rejected refugees emerge as ambiguous figures, but so does human nature at large, as well as the nation-state, a product of social organization.

Together with Kim, Rosemary Yates—a devout Christian social worker who provides sanctuary to undocumented immigrants and exclusion refugee cases, regardless of their former crimes—illustrates this undermining of apocalyptic teleology and embracing of ambiguity. She even surpasses Kim in her subversion of the state's refugee policies. Drawing on the Biblical account of the six cities of refuge, she goes well beyond Canadian compassion and UN humanitarianism by defending the idea that even murderers should be given asylum if their criminal acts were not something they sought and relished, but the

result of seeing themselves involved in circumstances out of their own control. Her ethical stance, based on the Christian religion, but more extreme than the orthodox position defended by Father André, for example, and different from Kim's laic cosmopolitics, contributes to show the intermeshing and the possibilities of multiple ethical systems that negotiate the claims for those without territorialized citizenship. In so doing, these different ethical systems contest Giorgio Agamben's idea that legal citizenship is the only form of human protection and legitimacy.

The institutional pressure to draw from asylum seekers fear narratives that fit the UN definition of the refugee raises ontological questions related to truthfulness and falseness, goodness and evil, compassion and exploitation, power and powerlessness. Zygmunt Bauman explains that refugees are usually the object of either narratives of victimization focusing on the perpetrators of wars and other conflicts causing the refugee's suffering; or refugees are narrated in terms of humanitarian discourse, in which case the emphasis is on the benefactors. "In both cases," Bauman argues, "refugees enter the discourse as objects and emerge from it with their status of objects uncompromised; they are, so to speak, the sediments of other people's actions and it is from other people's actions that they derive their social characteristics and their identity is composed" (Bauman 2002, 343). Helm's novel registers both the rescue discourse that turns refugee claimants into the passive objects of compassion, and its reverse, the criminalizing discourse that sees the asylum seeker's narrative as unreliable. Rodrigo Cantero, for example, is a young man who "was suspected of having been in a Colombian paramilitary group that had kidnapped and killed local farmers in a documented incident" (Helm 356). His own version of this moment of apocalyptic crisis in his life is that "he'd tried to stop the shooting of farmers by the narcotics thugs who employed him" (366), but could not; as a result, he claims, he had to escape his country in fear for his life and that of his family. For Rodrigo, this is the *kairos*

moment that thoroughly transformed his status from a citizen in his native country to a noncitizen in Canada, his humanity into bare life. Unable to prove the authenticity of his account, Rodrigo's story hovers in ambiguity. On the one hand it is viewed as a narrative of victimization drawing empathy and compassion from those who believe his life account of persecution is genuine. On the other hand, it provokes mistrust and revulsion from those who consider that it hides Rodrigo's criminal identity. How can he prove that he was forced to join the paramilitaries and that he is not a drug dealer and a murderer? Harold, for one, cannot accept Rodrigo's story: "He didn't believe it, he couldn't say why. Maybe because the story so easily invited pity" (366). Hence, Rodrigo is as ambiguous as his narrative, as he may be either a criminal, or a victim, or both if we admit that he committed crimes forced by inescapable circumstances.

The mechanisms at work in the production of refugee accounts are constantly under scrutiny in the novel. Rosemary understands the dangers that the demand for specific fear narratives places on refugee claimants: "[w]hoever Rodrigo was when he arrived in the country had been distorted by the judgment and compassion of others, expressed in the wrong language. She was not absolved" (325; see also 146). Rosemary seems to understand that compassion and good intentions do not prevent the distortion and expropriation of identity forced upon asylum seekers. On the contrary, there is a kind of compassion that Henri Bergson terms *aspiration downwards*, which feeds on such an expropriation. Father André mentions it to Rosemary (385-386). For Bergson true pity consists

not so much in fearing suffering as in desiring it. The desire is a faint one and we should hardly wish to see it realized; yet we form it in spite of ourselves, as if Nature were committing some great injustice and it were necessary to get rid of all suspicion of *complicity* with her. The essence of pity is thus a need for self-abasement, an aspiration downwards. (2001, 19; my emphasis)

In the process, Bergson claims, this painful aspiration "raises us in our own estimation and makes us feel superior to those sensuous goods from which our thought is temporarily

detached” (19). As the object of pity, Rodrigo unwittingly plays this function in Rosemary’s life (Helm 259). The ambivalences involved in expressions of altruism, compassion and hospitality add up to the ambivalence of refugee narratives.

The deep valuing of the right story properly told is apparent when Rodrigo, for example, sticks to his own story as a means of resisting the expropriation of identity involved in the fabrication of a suitable fear narrative that could warrant him refugee status. When he is asked to produce his story he decides that “he couldn’t lie [...] his new life owed to the true story, and he couldn’t give it up” (Helm 60). Eschewing objectification, Rodrigo is keen on maintaining his individuality and subjectivity as represented by his true story. For the same reason he disapproves of those who fake their stories for the sake of staying in Canada, believing that these forged stories “cheapened his own true one” (120). Although from the opposite stance, Sadaf too values the power of narratives. She proves to be an active agent in Toronto’s Iranian community by recirculating her own story. After learning that her refugee claim has been rejected because her story of persecution and life threat “couldn’t be established for the Review Board’s satisfaction” (28), she starts adapting it to give it to other refugee claimants: “[a] good story, without the fatal inconsistencies of the original. The other claimant had her own history to tell, but wanted a better one” (26). As it happens, the system induces even genuine claimants to produce bogus narratives to ensure a successful application.

The stories of refugees hold political value. On the one hand, their accounts testify to their belonging in the political realm of *bios*, and therefore, reconstitute their humanity. On the other, their narratives are potentially more meaningful to the state than their personal presence, as they function to reinforce the impression of the state’s role as both a sovereign benefactor of (the proper kind of) asylum seekers and a protector of its own citizens. Harold, for example, illustrates the power of social biopolitics when he denounces Rodrigo

and gets him deported, disregarding the deadly consequences that returning him to Colombia may have. Treating him as *homo sacer*, Harold construes Rodrigo as an “undocumented semi-literate bloodstained young monster” (Helm 304) with a “bogus story” (307), questions his legitimacy for refugee status, and wishes him out of Canada. Harold believes that, if *illegals*³ such as Rodrigo have been denied the right to asylum, the Refugee Board must have their reasons. They are, in Kim’s father’s terms, the *rejects*, or in Sara Ahmed’s words, “bogus asylum seekers,” as opposed to genuine ones. This differentiation “enables the national subject,” Ahmed explains, “to imagine its generosity in welcoming some others [...] and yet at the same time, it constructs some others as already hateful (as bogus) in order to define the limits or the *conditions* of this hospitality” (Ahmed 2004, 46-7). Whereas the state profits from their labor, these others are also perceived to invade its space and even to threaten its existence. Rodrigo’s disrupting indeterminacy is thus vanished out of sight. The original order that the nation-state allegedly defends is re-established by forcing the stranger to leave, or in Bauman’s words, “through bringing together, so to speak, personal and spatial estrangement” (Bauman 1991, 67).

Rosemary provides a thoroughly negative assessment of the state’s biopolitics regarding both the hosting and the rejection of refugees when she argues: “‘Take a thousand people in dire circumstances,’ she said. ‘We take them in, a kind of miracle to them, and support them only enough until they begin to see that they can’t really escape their past here, and many can’t ever have a future. And so they begin to rot. Or we reject them and send them running, with no hope even of basic security’” (Helm 176). Rosemary offers a

³ Different kinds of imaginations of the state are at stake in the terminology used to refer to people with precarious immigration status. Whereas activists and advocates of migrant rights with a socially inclusive attitude prefer the terms “non-status” or “undocumented” immigrant, government bodies and corporate news media in Canada and the US use the pejorative term “illegal immigrants,” or the exclusionary “aliens,” or “irregulars.” The latter term is applied to those whose application for official legal status, necessary to permanently reside in Canada, is rejected. They are consequently stigmatized and marginalized as undesirable for inclusion in the body politic. Following Peter Nyers I use the term *non-status* to refer to “people who do not possess the legal status that would allow them to live permanently in Canada” (Nyers 2009, 126).

lucid and extremely harsh critique of the way the state reduces undocumented people to bare life and uses deportation to implement its utter power and control over them. Only the citizens' political action may avert the state's dehumanization of those who, as Father André puts it, are "in the country but not of the nation" (Helm 325). Thus, as Rosemary sees it, only by changing the laws may undocumented people re-enter political life and recover their full humanity. In achieving this, the narratives of the undocumented are instrumental: "all their hope lies in the possibility of a change in the laws. But nothing happens unless someone tells a single compelling story, usually involving some rare case, between categories, and it hits the news, and pressures form around it, and a minister finds himself under siege, and then maybe a bill or some amendment gets put forward, and it passes or not" (177). Yet, as long as the state only recognizes full political rights to its nationals, this is never a definitive solution—"but either way, the thousands who aren't between categories still suffer, hopeless in a new place" (177)—and the undocumented remain as *homines sacri*, reduced to naked life, and posing ethical questions that perforate and alter the state—to paraphrase Giorgio Agamben (2000, 25-26): "[t]hey simply exist. Do you understand when I say they exist?" (Helm 177).

If the narratives produced by or about refugees are inscribed as apocalyptic fragments revolving around the violence and trauma of key ending, or *kairos*, moments that configure their subjectivity as ambiguous, so are the stories of the Canadian protagonists. Harold, for instance, is revealed as another stranger in a world of familial and familiar strangers, whose identity is as marked by a *kairos* sense of time as that of the excluded asylum seekers he mistrusts. *Stranger* is the word Kim and Harold use to address each other:

They sometimes called each other 'stranger.' He used the term jokingly, Kim to draw a pinprick of blood, in reference to the day he returned to her life when she was sixteen. Or returned again—he'd disappeared for four months when she was thirteen,

and then left Marian for good a year later—but on this second return her parents were promising the establishment of a new order. (16)

Wounded by her father's repeated disappearances, Kim's apocalyptic life narrative also emerges from her acknowledgement of ending moments: Harold's abandonment, the assault, her father's suicide. Harold's desertion turns his previous status as a family insider into that of the stigmatized stranger. His position becomes extraterritorial and, like refugees, he can be seen as living on the borders of belonging. His uncalled-for return only makes him liable to defect again without notice, leaving his daughter hovering between resentment and "spoiled love" for him (82). Harold's departures mark endings and new beginnings which do not hold the promise of progress, but the omen of apocalyptic repetition. Kim identifies these turning moments as apocalyptic "senseless events" that occur in a day, a given hour "that can run in us forever" (237). "And now in my own life," she thinks after the assault, "I've experienced such a turn and it's had the effect of clarifying for me which things matter and which don't" (236). Harold believes that these moments that he specifically identifies as *endings* provide a certain narrative order to an otherwise chaotic sequence of life events, thus coinciding exactly with Kermode's definition of *kairos*:

You don't see your life as a shape, don't really believe it has wholeness, until a certain age, a certain break of luck, good or bad, that allows you to see a kind of ending. The ending can come at any stage, and after it, you just float for years towards your death like so much space junk destined for burning re-entry. (243)

After these crucial moments which are the harbingers of apocalypse or of resurrection and renewal, or both, the characters in the novel exist suspended in time. Rosemary, who experienced a "religious turn" (242) after a disastrous divorce, grapples with the same question in theological terms. She understands the moment before resurrection is "eternal" (244), as resurrection itself, but from Kim's prophetic perspective, it is *now* "when everything is at stake" (244). Permanently facing the imminent collapse of the world as they know it, the present appears at the edge of time. To Donald, Kim's step-

father, apocalypse understood as endless repetition “is assured” (247). He considers humanity as a scourge doomed to re-enact its vicious circle of self-destruction and rebirth. Even in the event that humanity wipes itself out, he thinks that “then the next malign thing would heave over the horizon [...] ‘We’d think we were rid of us,’ he said. ‘But then we’d appear again’” (247).

Following Donald’s advice regarding indeterminacy at the beginning of the book— “[i]n math we know that certain things are consistent only if they contain inconsistencies. Some things are built to be undecidable, Kim” (44)—Kim’s quest consists of accepting indeterminacy and ambiguity: “I want [...] to be accepting of ambiguity, even contradiction, and hard truths. And to be without illusion, and yet still hopeful” (236-237). She does not renounce, however, finding some sort of order, of cause and effect, in her otherwise chaotic world. For this she resorts to writing, following Harold’s encouragement to find “the smaller composite truths within the larger one” and thereby “consciously process” the consequences of traumatic events. Kim’s reconstruction of the past soon veers into speculative fiction, the kind of writing her father, an empiricist, repudiates: “[g]ather the facts as they’re available, Kim, and then leave them be” (342). Faced with stories of unspeakable torture and genocide in his own work as a History professor, Harold “claims not to trust fully in remembered narratives” (289). Harold does not even trust the stories engraved on the body in the shape of scars (338), much less those which are the product of the imagination: “[f]iction, no matter its scope, will always fail history. Beautiful artifice, there’s nothing true in it. Real stories have no endings, except the one that includes us all. I do believe in that story. I respect it. But it has no teller” (342). And yet, Harold partakes in the processes of story-making with his lies and self-deceptions. Furthermore, Harold’s discipline proves to be as much a product of narrative or imaginative arrangement as fiction writing. Historiography, Kermode reminds us, emerges as “a fictive substitute for authority

and tradition, a maker of concords between past, present, and future, a provider of significance to mere chronicity [...] The novel imitates historiography in this: anything can take its important place in the concord” (Kermode 2000, 56).

Kim’s hermeneutical writing leads her to two key revelations. First, through the fictional recreation of her assailant, based on Rodrigo’s anonymous files at GROUND, Kim reaches a vision of the uncanny interconnections of which our present era and lives are made up: “[e]verything connected. Her attacker has given her this way of seeing, and she hates him for the giving, for the beauty of the gift” (Helm 97). The sense of order this discovery allows for accords with that of historiography, which “ceased to be a succession and bec[a]me an inter-connexion [sic] of parts all mutually implied and conditioned in the whole” (Kermode 2000, 57). However, it does not allow for apocalypse’s progressive structure but for an endlessly recurrent pattern.

Secondly, during her convalescence Kim learns of Harold’s days as a student of Spanish in Santiago de Chile in 1973, and she is intrigued by the fact that Harold has not just hidden this from his family but has even elided it from his résumé. This secret must hide, Kim believes, some sort of apocalyptic moment or “original sin” (Helm 227) that may account for Harold’s “single ambiguity” (52) and explain his misjudgments and failures. Although Kim prompts him to tell his story, hoping to forgive him for all the pain he has caused her and to redeem him by this act of telling or confessing, Harold refuses to make use of narrative performativity. Frustrated, Kim sets out to imaginatively recreate Harold’s experience in Santiago de Chile in an attempt to get to know him through writing and research. Kim thus follows Kermode’s dictum that “fictions are for finding things out” and serve as agents of change (Kermode 2000, 39). It is her belief in the agency of writing and its capacity to influence the present that brings this character within the framework of prophetic eschatology, which relies on the faith that redemption can occur in this world:

“[t]he imagination had force, she wanted to tell her father. It was real, its movement changed governments and traffic and air currents in the room. In the right mind, it could do good work. Her own imagination was supposedly healing her. And at some point the fully imagined world could touch on the world that was” (Helm 356).

Kim’s empathetic approach to Harold’s Chilean experience results in a fictional story that evokes Escher’s complex self-referentiality, a trope Kim used at the beginning of the novel to explain the world (44). Thus, Kim narrates the story in Harold’s voice as a letter addressed to her, and then e-mails it to him hoping to provide him with the same kind of “reprieve” it gave her (291). To Kim, creative writing is revealed as an exercise in compassion and forgiveness by means of which she is allowed to inhabit somebody else’s subjectivity and share his or her burden:

She’d described the world as he saw it, an evil world guided by an evil god, but in doing so found a way to penetrate confusion, guilt, anger, even evil itself [...] In the time it took to truly imagine her father, to inhabit him, language and thought, the anger gave way to something like forgiveness, something she didn’t, finally, have words for. A place to rest, to stay, so that a soul might find itself. (290-291)

Yet, wishing to forgive her father, Kim engages in one more of Derrida’s aporias, as genuine forgiveness, he argues in *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*, must involve the impossible, i.e. the forgiving of an unforgivable transgression, and precludes the necessity of an apology or repentance. In her relation to Harold, Kim stands as the victim of his failure as a father. In this regard, she faces *impossible forgiveness*. Yet, when she learns of Harold’s obscure betrayal of his Chilean teacher and fellow students, she exchanges her own victim role for that of a mediating party between him and his other victims: “[a]ll I’ve ever wanted to be is a truth commission” (215). Amnesty and reconciliation are, according to Derrida, the traits of *conditional* forgiveness. By recreating Harold’s turning-point experience, his *kairos* moment, Kim attempts to breach the categories of self and other in

her longing to amnesty her father, to reach some sort of reconciliation and partial forgiveness.

Incidentally, the disclosure of Harold's ambiguous integrity metonymically points to the ethical ambivalence surrounding Canada's engagement with international peacekeeping. "Canada"—Harold reminds the rebel Chilean soldiers who stopped him in the streets of Santiago in the first days of the *coup d'état*—"had supported the U.S. embargo [...] it had done its part to destabilize the [Allende] government" (374).

Harold's ontological ambiguity has always been evident to Kim, who over the years has sent him postcards that encapsulate it. His multiple, ambivalent facets are represented, for example, in the cubist perspectives of Picasso's *Brick Factory at Tortosa*, as well as in his identification with Klee's *Angelus Novus*, "the angel of history blown forward through time, looking back at the piling wreckage at his feet" (215). In Walter Benjamin's description of the painting, the angel's face "is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise . . . [and] irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned" (Benjamin 257-258). Likewise, Harold's gaze is fixed on that secret *kairos* moment of his Chilean past that he cannot change, the same as he cannot bring back to life the Chilean teacher and his wife who were executed because of his betrayal. This haunting single event has influenced his further actions and brought havoc into his life for decades. Once Kim manages to unveil Harold's terrible secret, the line separating him from what he imagines as the deceptive, treacherous, cowardly and murderous nature of certain excluded refugee claimants such as Rodrigo dissolves. Unable to face the public exposure of his evil nature, Harold envisions the end of his life. The figure of the angel reappears then as the apocalyptic angel of death, watching

him as an inescapable gazing, monster eye (377, 378), and compelling him to jump into the void from a freight train in motion: “[t]he winged presence had found him out. Through the blackness it watched” (379). His unnecessary end is thus forever linked to that of an anonymous immigrant woman whose story had horrified him when he had learned years before that she had died while trying to smuggle herself over the border. She had jumped from a train in the same spot, probably after crossing borders “all up the continent” (368) without knowing that “she could have crossed by foot into Canada” (368).

At the precise moment when Kim finally understands the source of her father’s ambiguity, she needs to start grappling with her own, as she realizes the terrible consequences of her act of exposure:

She had a secret she would never tell. She was culpable or she wasn’t. It was true, he had lived inside an ambiguity, whatever it was, and had died inside another, and bequeathed it to her. Only now, facing facts, were the contradictions of her heart apparent to her. At one moment it seemed she’d acted only for his sake, and at the next to prove that he had lied to her so that he might admit all of his past, including that which had shaped her. She’d loved him and she wanted to hurt him. She saw it all, and saw how she deceived herself to think that her actions were passionate and principled, driven by moral instinct, rather than calculated upon her old pains. (389)

Thus, just when Harold dies and his life can at last be comprehended in its complex wholeness—as if through a *chronos* perspective that allows for the ordered succession of events, for a beginning and an end—Kim experiences a new *kairos* moment that brings about the revelation of her own responsibility in her father’s death, “an equation that held true forward and backward: she had ended him, he had ended her” (Helm 387). Putting an end to the mystery in Harold’s life has killed him, and Kim must now cope not just with the impossibility of forgiving him—Derrida explicitly argues that when we understand the motivation of the other in however minimal a way, absolute forgiveness is rendered impossible (Derrida 2005, 49)—but with the burden of not forgiving herself for *ending* him. Closure is precluded, nonetheless, by the persistence and reproduction of ambiguities, as well as by the hopeful renewal of faith: “[b]ecause the city gives you this, too. One day it

tries to kill you and another it finds you and hauls you clear and gives you something not entirely rational to believe in” (391).

In *Cities of Refuge* the space of the Canadian state appears as “perforated and topologically deformed” (Agamben 2000, 26) by the very existence of noncitizens in its midst. With its focus on ethics and the metaphysics of good and evil, the novel emphasizes the ontological ambivalence of both citizens and noncitizens, thus blurring the division between People (political body) and people (excluded bodies), and enabling the citizen “to recognize the refugee that he or she is” (Agamben 2000, 26). This is the prerequisite, according to Agamben, for a broader solidarity that can restore humanity to the globally excluded. Michael Helm’s novel also brings to the fore the shift from discussing humanity in terms of citizenship rights endowed by the nation-state, to the acknowledgement of a “nonstate administration of excluded humanity” (Ong 24) that buttresses claims for moral protection and legitimacy from various ethical positions (represented in the novel by the NGO volunteers, the Church, or Rosemary’s stance). The novel thus foregrounds an emergent transnational phenomenon that provides a “counterpolitics of sheer life” (ibid.). Furthermore, it presents a critique akin to what Daniel Coleman calls “wry civility,” or an “ever-renewed alertness to this fundamental paradox of the repressive violence that haunts the borders and stratifies the layers of civility” (Coleman 2006, 37).

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