Arendt on Narrative Theory and Practice

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Hannah Arendt is often—but somehow not unfailingly—credited, together with Alasdair MacIntyre, Paul Ricoeur and Charles Taylor, as being one of the central voices in the philosophical turn to the concept of narrative of a generation or more ago. Some have even cited her 1958 *The Human Condition* as providing a particular impetus for the later accounts of narrative to be found in MacIntyre's 1981 *After Virtue*, Ricoeur's *Time and Narrative* (first translated in English in 1984-88) and Taylor's 1989 *Sources of the Self*.

In recent years, there has been a sort of "second wave" of renewed philosophical attention to the topic of narrative, this time primarily in the anglophone tradition—some of it quite skeptical (Strawson 2004, Lamarque 2004) but some of it expansive in a new sense (Velleman 2003, Dennett 1998, Goldie 2003). It is odd, however, as this renewed philosophical attention has been

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directed toward the question of narrative, that Arendt's approach to narrative has not been given much new sustained attention.[1]

In this essay, I will examine what contemporary philosophical accounts of narrative might still owe Arendt, looking back at the use she makes of the philosophical tradition (and such figures as Aristotle, Hegel and Augustine) for the theoretical argument of *The Human Condition* (THC) and at her narrative practice in *Men in Dark Times* (*MDT*). In the first section, I will thus examine the philosophical basis of three of Arendt's typically bold and rich claims about narrative action that emerge in *THC*: the notion of action as revealing, as it were, an agent's own *daimõn* (that inner "divine" force in a person, as the Greeks called it, and that Arendt thought was better visible to others than to the agent himself); the condition that such action be revealable within a *world* or shared public space which has resilience yet vulnerability; and the potential for agents revealed within such a world to discover some form of *narrative rebirth* in their efforts at storytelling. In the second section, I will then examine the extent to which Arendt herself allowed those claims to be tested and thought through in her own attempts (in *MDT* and elsewhere) at constructing biographical narratives about individuals in whose lives and writings such moments of action might be thought to be especially visible.

I. Arendt as Narrative Theorist of Action

Arendt lays out the basis of a narrative theory of agency in the chapter on "Action" in *The Human Condition* (*THC*), drawing on a number of sources to which it bears comparison. In this first section, I will examine three of Arendt's philosophical sources from the tradition—Aristotle, Augustine and Hegel, primarily—with an eye to how her appropriation of these figures differs from that of contemporary philosophers of narrative. This comparison will also offer a perspective on Arendt's own contentious relationship with twentieth-century philosophers whose views with respect to narrative provide perhaps the most striking differences in points of departure from her own (Heidegger and Sartre, particularly).

Aristotle and the poetics of agency. Like many of the contemporary philosophical accounts of narrative, Arendt's has clear roots in the earliest sources of philosophical consideration of narrative form—Aristotle's Poetics. Drawing most deeply from Aristotle's notion that a human life is a bios—that is to say a praxis of some sort, as distinguished from something that is merely alive (*zoê*)—Arendt (again, like most contemporary philosophers of narrative) looks to narrative as grasping from the course of a life a certain kind of coherence: action and speech, she argues, are "the two activities whose end result will always be a story with enough coherence to be

told, no matter how accidental or haphazard the single events and their causation may appear" (Arendt 1958, 97; my emphasis).

Several important philosophical questions arise at this point about Arendt's appropriation of Aristotle. For the contemporary discussion of narrative, much hangs, of course, on the *sort* of coherence a narrative is meant to convey. Aristotle argues both that the best plot structure presents us with a *causal* connection of a certain sort and that there is an underlying *emotional* structure in well-constructed tragic plots, and these two observations stand at the root of differing contemporary takes on narrative: Noël Carroll, for example, has argued that narrative structures must in the end display a certain sort of causality, while David Velleman has claimed that even Aristotle offers us examples of compelling narratives which make sense not because of the causal relations implicit in them but because they have a certain kind of emotional cadence (Carroll 2001, Velleman 2003).

While Arendt acknowledges the causalist side of this debate in her discussion of event coherence, her own definition of narrative suggests a tendency more in the direction of the emotional cadence argument. Yet there are some broader considerations implicit in her definition that go beyond the terms of this debate altogether—in fact, beyond the primary concern of a coherence-of-events perspective on narrative (Kristeva 2001, 17). First, she includes both speech *and* action as forms of narrative action revealing of an agent's character, and places the narrative coherence of that character in an audience's *response*. And, secondly, she critically examines the importance of that audience response in political and cultural terms that acknowledge the shifting ways in which "emotional cadence" can itself be construed.[2]

Another important connection between Arendt and contemporary philosophers of narrative concerns the question of narrative *genre*. Like Aristotle, Arendt also sees the narrative or story-constructing impulse at its clearest manifestation in *drama* (Arendt, 1958, 187, with n. 11). Arendt not only notices the interesting etymological claim Aristotle makes in this regard between drama and *action* (*dran*)—Aristotle says that tragic drama is precisely "about action"—but she emphasizes the important political or public nature of this action in her insistence that drama is also the "only art whose sole subject is man in his relationship to others," the political art *kat' exochên* (Arendt 1958, 188).[3]

Finally, a central Aristotelian question about dramatic narrative concerns the relation between *agent* and *action*—in literary terms, that is, between character and plot. How are agents revealed within the dramas of which they are a part? Kristeva suggests that Arendt is drawn less to the formal considerations of action (*praxis*) prominent in Aristotle's *Poetics* and more to the consideration of how ethical agents (*prattontes*) reveal themselves that one may

find in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*. Arendt's account of narrative action thus spends less time on formal considerations of plot structure, for example, than on the question of how one can assess responsibility and character in the identification of an agent with a particular action.[4] Although Arendt cannot help noticing the point (which also strikes Ricoeur so strongly) that "tragedy does not deal with the qualities of men, their *poiotês*, but with whatever happened with respect to them, with their actions and life and good or ill fortune" (Arendt 1958, 187, n. 12), there are nonetheless some odd formulations within the "Action" chapter that seem to run against this.[5]

Perhaps more importantly, however, Arendt converts the question of how the "who" is in an action in a direction that differs from Aristotle's notion that it is from his dramatic actions that we can construe what sort of a character an agent has. This is a tension already present in Arendt's account from the second of her two epigraphs, the quotation from Dante's book on world government (*De Monarchia*) that ends with the provocative claim that "nothing acts unless [by acting] it makes patent its latent self" (*Nihil igitur agit nisi tale existens quale patiens fieri debet*) (Arendt 1958, 175).[6]

Arendt links this "making patent" of the "latent" self with the Greek (often tragic) experience of a person's *daimõn* or inner divinity:

> [the] disclosure of "who" in contradistinction to "what" somebody is—his qualities, gifts, talents, and shortcomings, which he may display or hide—is implicit in everything somebody says and does. It can be hidden only in complete silence and perfect passivity, but its disclosure can almost never be achieved as a willful purpose, as though one possessed and could dispose of this "who" in the same manner as he has and can dispose of his qualities. On the contrary, it is more than likely that the "who," which appears so clearly and unmistakably to others, remains hidden from the person himself, like the *daimõn* in Greek religion which accompanies each man throughout his life, always looking over his shoulder from behind and thus visible only to those he encounters. (Arendt 1958, 179-80)

As Kristeva notes, "[t]he Heideggerian question '*Who* is the *Dasein* ?'" had in many ways not only "come first" for Arendt, but in fact "subtends the whole of the distinction established, in *The Human Condition*, between '*who*' and '*that which*'" (Kristeva 2001, 55-56). Yet Arendt's transformation of the Heideggerian background of this question—for Kristeva, particularly its transformation in the political sphere that Arendt opens up with this notion of daimonic action—is decisive, bold and new. Arendt's stresses on how *plurality* matters in the question of the "who"—and on the specific ways in which the worldly aspects of fallible action among vulnerable agents nonetheless capable of greatness can be construed—make for an original account of narrative identity. Despite the Aristotelian and Heideggerian

sources of her reflections on the question of how an agent is "in" an action, the Arendtian answer to this question is (much as her claim about the genuine nature of action itself) *sui generis*.

Hegel and the claims of retrospectivity and the social world. Another layer of Arendt's account of narrative action in *THC* can be found (as I have argued elsewhere) in Hegel (Speight 2002). Unlike Aristotle, Hegel is not explicitly named in the "Action" chapter's discussion of narrative, yet Arendt's re-reading of the "Spirit" chapter of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* in connection with the preparation of *THC* apparently drew on two large elements of the Hegelian view of agency: action's essentially *tragic* character and the possibility of *reconciliation or forgiveness*. Hegel's notion of action as a kind of "breaking-open" and Arendt's notion of action as making a beginning thus lead both to a consideration of the unexpected that can emerge in action and ways to reconcile ourselves to it. "A stone thrown is the devil's," Hegel liked to say: action by its nature is not something construable in *given* terms but is a kind of "stepping-forth" or opening up of the unexpected and unpredictable (Hegel 1991, 148). The classic, tragic examples of action in its openness—Antigone's deed, for example, which both Hegel and Arendt were drawn to—present in an intensified way what is an underlying condition within ordinary action, one requiring the need for some means of reconciliation. Action's structure, then, for both Hegel and Arendt, moves from a consideration of tragedy to forgiveness.

Arendt also shares in the broadest sense another commitment I take to be important to Hegel's view of narrative: a commitment to the *socially inflected* character of narrative that is implicit in Hegel's view.[7] Arendt of course decisively opposes Hegel's more overarching commitments to a certain view of historical rationality: thus the social character of narrative for Arendt requires the broader terms of her notion of *world*—the public space *between* individuals—rather than any specific Hegelian account of historically embedded institutions. It perhaps goes without saying that Arendt's account of the "world" is one that also shows its vulnerabilities in a way which Hegel often masks. Thus Arendt cites the expressive power of lament, while Hegel notoriously decries the weakness of such expressions from the perspective of worldly *Geist*.[8]

Arendt's notion of action, like Hegel's, is one which is discontent with picking out either intention or result as an independent determinant of an action's worth. Both therefore share some notion of the larger significance of an action, but Arendt's criterion of an action's "greatness" is one which ultimately looks aside from *both* motive and result (unlike Hegel's attempt to see intentional agency as present *in* the action as a whole):

> Unlike human behavior—which the Greeks, like all civilized people, judged according to "moral standards," taking into account motives and intentions on the one hand and aims and consequences on the other—action can be judged only by the criterion of greatness because it is in its nature to break through the commonly accepted and reach into the extraordinary, where whatever is true in common and everyday life no longer applies because everything that exists is unique and *sui generis*. . . . Motives and aims, no matter how pure or how grandiose, are never unique; like psychological qualities, they are typical, characteristic of different types of persons. Greatness, therefore, or the specific meaning of each deed, can lie only in the performance itself and neither in the motivation nor its achievement. (Arendt 1958, 205-06)

While the discussion of "greatness" as a criterion of action raises a number of important moral and political issues which cannot be discussed here,[9] it is clear that Arendt, like Hegel, thought carefully about action's tragic and reconciliatory character, as well as about the specific, socially inflected ways in which action is embedded and judged. As we will see in the second section, Arendt has (thanks to her non-Hegelian reading of history) a far more fragile sense of what is implicit in the claims about the *worldliness* of our narrative conception of agency.

Augustine and the question of narrative rebirth. Although Augustine, like Hegel, is not drawn upon in *THC* in general to the extent that Aristotle is, Kristeva and others have observed the important Augustinian legacy behind Arendt's treatment of narrative, especially the resilient claim that (as Kristeva puts it) "there is no life except in and through narrative rebirth" (Kristeva 2001, 48). Like Ricoeur, whose *Time and Narrative* rests on careful back-to-back readings of Aristotle's *Poetics* and Augustine's *Confessions*, Arendt likewise envisions a notion of narrative that has roots together in the quite different Greek and Christian experiences of life-story-telling. And, while Arendt's view of narrative remains distinct from Ricoeur's, the horizon of temporality remains an important dimension for both (something that will be especially apparent, as the next section will discuss, in Arendt's treatment of the work of Hermann Broch).

The Augustinian element in Arendt's account is perhaps most important in connection with contemporary philosophical accounts of narrative in terms of the central question about the relation between one's life and one's account of life. This question has often inspired philosophers in terms framed by Sartre's Roquentin in *Nausea*, who was dismissive of the ways in which agents led lives falsified by stories of great adventures: "you have to choose: live or tell." Sartre's formulation of Roquentin's choice implies that there is a disparity between a (first-person) experience of life-as-lived and the narration of that life (whether by oneself later or by others); for Sartre, this meant

a clear dilemma: one may either attempt a (falsified) narrative or live an (authentic) life.

Arendt agrees with one interpretive conclusion from the choice as Sartre has framed it: that there is a crucial difference between the "who" that is an agent and any story that would be "made" (or "made up") about that agent: "The distinction between a real and a fictional story is precisely that the latter was 'made up' and the former not made at all. The real story in which we are engaged as long as we live has no visible or invisible maker because it is not made" (Arendt 1958, 186).

But for Arendt the distinction between a life that is "lived" and a story that is "made" involves two distinctly non-Sartrean consequences. The first we have already seen in her "*daimõn* thesis": that precisely *because* we *live* rather than *make* a life, there is a privileged—but (pace Sartre) a *not* necessarily false—retrospective position from which we must view the "who," the *daimõn*, that is revealed in our lives. Thus, as we have seen, the "who" is visible "*ex post facto* through action and speech" (Arendt 1958, 186) and this retrospectivity in turn privileges the work of the discerning interpretive historian or storyteller: "Action reveals itself fully only to the storyteller, that is, to the backward glance of the historian, who indeed always knows better what it was all about than the participants" (192).

The second non-Sartrean consequence that Arendt draws is that seeing the life/narration question in terms of the "tell *or* live" dilemma prevents one from considering the possibilities implicit in the notion of narrative rebirth—a phrase of Kristeva's which captures nicely the importance of *natality* implicit in Arendt's view of narrative action. In Arendt's view, there are many cases in which—but for the sake of narration—an agent would never have been able to live with herself. A story can save a life, in other words: and this is the positive conclusion of the *older* Isak Dinesen who (as we will see in section two) knows the truth about earlier attempts to compel one's life in a direction ordered by story but can conclude in the end that "[a]ll sorrows can be borne if you put them into a story or tell a story about them." Arendt therefore looks to the possibilities of narrative rebirth as essential to the complex of ways in which narrative matters to us.

Just on theoretical terms, each of the significant claims about narrative action stemming from Arendt's engagement with her philosophical forbears is bold and engaging. She has drawn on Aristotle's notion of a character's emplotment in action but developed, in contention with Heidegger, her own notion of action as "daimonically" revealing in ways that cannot be mastered by an agent; like Hegel, she is drawn to a consideration of the *worldliness* of action in ways that cannot be grasped simply by looking at either intention or result, yet what emerges is not an Hegelian attempt to see these together

but rather the notion of an "inner" that in some way breaks free from genuine action as its very core; and, reading Augustine against Sartre, she has put a stress on story as condition for coherent life.

In each case, Arendt has made a theoretical claim about what action is and how agents perform it that—given an agent's inability to "master" action in any given instance—would seem to require a consideration of numerous actual cases of agents in practice. That Arendt was engaged both at the time of *THC* and years afterward in her own praxis of narrative-writing about extraordinary agents and narrativists in the midst of the world she was contemporary with should therefore not be surprising. In the next section, I will turn to a discussion of Arendt's *practice* as narrativist—primarily her own attempts at narrative biographical construction in the relatively contemporary collection *Men in Dark Times*, where we will find a number of important parallels and a consideration of actual cases that serve as a commentary on the claims about action in *THC*.

II. Arendt's Narrative Practice

How does Arendt's narrative practice compare with these theoretical insights into the structure of narrative? As Kristeva points out, Arendt wrote—despite her strong interest in the notion of "narrated life"—neither an autobiography nor a novel. But the turns to narrative within her own work were both purposeful and differentially related to the tasks of her various projects—from the early book *Rahel Varnhagen* that she had written most of before she left Germany (and where Kristeva sees that Arendt "comes close" to the sort of narration she discusses) to her most famous later work involving narrative scene-setting and character assessment in *Eichmann in Jerusalem* and *Men in Dark Times*, a collection of biographical vignettes written separately over a period of twelve years and published together with an introduction in 1968.

In discussing Arendt's narrative practice, I have decided to look particularly at the narratives she assembles in *Men in Dark Times*, primarily because of the closeness of thematic content on the topic of narrative in this collection of pieces with the explicit narrative discussion in *THC*—a topic that has not been frequently discussed in Arendt studies. The two works are not only roughly contemporary in their gestation within Arendt's maturing views but there are (often striking) direct borrowings between the texts—in language often quite similar—in their passages about narrative structure, and (I shall argue) the collection as a whole seems to have focused Arendt's attention on the central question of the relation between *story* and *life* in its most *public* or *worldly* character.[10]

Given this framework, there is also something perhaps quite importantly visible in Arendt's own biographical self-assessment in this later collection. Kristeva, for example, sees the collection's sketch of Isak Dinesen as completing a narrative arc begun in Arendt's earlier biographical treatment of Varnhagen: "From Rahel to Titania [Dinesen], the circle is closed, and Hannah already knows (the article is written in 1968) that her own life is from now on a true history, as much as it is a told story" (Kristeva 2001, 37).

The stylistic differences between the two works from different phases of Arendt's life are an important place to begin. Arendt's stated intention with the *Rahel Varnhagen* book is "solely . . . to narrate the story of Rahel's life as she herself might have told it" (1974, xv); by contrast, there is an extended and explicit reflection in the narrator's voice, across several biographical subjects in *Men in Dark Times*, about the odd relation between what the *world* must make of someone, taken in full, and their own subjectivity.[11]

The stylistic differences match a difference in content. *Men in Dark Times* is composed of eleven essays, on ten individual figures—eight men and two women—whose primary point of commonality, as Arendt sees it, is their contemporaneity: Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (the subject of the first piece, who is treated as a kind of assumed contemporary), Rosa Luxemburg, Angelo Giuseppe Roncalli (Pope John XXIII), Karl Jaspers (who has two pieces in the volume devoted to him), Isak Dinesen, Hermann Broch, Walter Benjamin, Bertolt Brecht, Waldemar Gurian and Randall Jarrell. Arranged chronologically by subjects' birth year, the essays reflect a range of types of writing about eminent lives: two are public speeches on occasions of the reception of a prize, two are introductions to new editions of key works by the author, and the rest are reviews or appreciations published in magazines or journals.

The ties to her theoretical discussion of narrative in *The Human Condition* are striking: in the course of the eleven essays, several explicit points from *THC* are made in either the same or similar form and individual figures turn out to shed specific light on these points.[12] It is of course not possible within the scope of a short article to do justice to the numerous ways in which the three conceptual issues from Arendt's theoretical treatment of narrative in *THC*—agent's revealing *daimõn*, the world as the space of such revelation and the possibilities within for narrative rebirth—are given implicit and explicit discussion within *MDT*. But I'd like to highlight parts of the biographical studies that especially allow us to see how Arendt appears to be using her narrative praxis to think through the theoretical claims about narrative from *THC*.

(1) On the notion of the *daimõn*, the essays repeatedly come back to the theme of the *revelation of something essential about an agent that may not be per-*

sonally accessible to that agent but that *is* accessible to others. The collection as a whole begins with Arendt's stress, in the celebratory language of her acceptance of the Lessing Prize, on the importance of prize recipients "ignoring ourselves and acting entirely within the framework of our attitude to the world," of allowing the world in essence to speak (1968, 3).

The series of figures whose *daimones* are visible within *MDT* open further avenues for consideration of Arendt's claims about revelatory action in ways that deepen the sense of what Arendt means both by revelation and by the public space required for it. Two examples will help make clear the range of her biographical skills at revelation: the very public *Laudatio* for Jaspers and the more intimate sketch she gives of her friend Waldemar Gurian.

In the Jaspers *Laudatio*, for example, Arendt makes a high appeal to the public—and not merely the political—as necessary for the genuinely *personal*. Noting that the German Book Trade's Peace Prize (for which she wrote the *Laudatio*) requires that the recipient have "proved oneself in life," and hence have shown something not just of one's *work*, but of one's *personality*, Arendt offers a further specification of what she means by the *daimõn*:

> [Personality] . . . is very hard to grasp and perhaps most closely resembles the Greek *daimõn*, the guardian spirit which accompanies every man throughout his life, but is always only looking over his shoulder, with the result that it is more easily recognized by everyone a man meets than by himself. This *daimõn*—which has nothing demonic about it—this personal element in a man, can only appear where a public space exists; that is the deeper significance of the public realm, which extends far beyond what we ordinarily mean by political life. (Arendt 1968, 73)

It is interesting to juxtapose her description of revelatory character on the occasion of a public eulogy of a cherished mentor such as Jaspers with the more intimate, fondly discerning way in which she was able to see an inner connection between Waldemar Gurian's sense of the human freedom visible in its most noble battles as well as in moments of utter clumsiness or embarrassment with material objects:

> The embarrassing situation, whose whole depth was explored probably only by Dostoevski, is in a sense the reverse side of that blazing triumphant battle of souls and ideas in which the human spirit can sometimes free itself of all conditions and conditionings. Whereas in the battle of ideas, in the nakedness of confrontation, men soar freely above their conditions and protections in an ecstasy of sovereignty, not defending but confirming with absolutely no defenses who they are, the embarrassing situation exposes them and points to them at a moment when they are least ready to show themselves. . . . "(Arendt 1968, 259-60)

One thing we can learn from Arendt's biographical practice, then, is that narrative revelation for her must span a very wide and interesting range of cases of action—from key achievements in the life of a public intellectual to the awkwardness of a friend—and that these will resist many of the usual sorting techniques of action description. The criteria for narratively discerning and describing an agent's *daimõn*, so it would seem, are ones that instead rise to the surface in our ordinary attempts to see when and where a person is most "herself."

(2) Perhaps most importantly, Arendt saw *MDT* as a whole as a reflection on the second narrative issue, the importance and vulnerability of the *world* in which agents reveal themselves. Since Arendt's appeal to the notion of the worldly background of narrative deeds and words is among the most distinctive aspects of her overall account of narrative—it is hard to think of other figures who have stressed the connection between narrative and world as much as she—it is especially important to notice the ways in which she characterizes the conditions, historical and otherwise, for such worldliness.

MDT's preface is famously unsparing about the challenges such a vulnerable world faces in the darkness of the present age, in which the public realm's ability to serve as a space of appearance in which the words and deeds of human beings can be *illuminated* in some way has come to be darkened (Arendt 1968, vii). But while the public realm as a whole can offer little of illumination, the portraits of the individuals she discusses perhaps say more than *THC* about where the sources of resilience may be found among individuals even in "dark times." *MDT* opens up several lines of further thought for Arendt's notion of *world* in the context of narrative, but I will mention two here: Arendt's elaborations of the notion of *criticism or judgment* and of the importance of *friendship* as a context for narrative.

Arendt particularly develops in *MDT* the notion (so important for Arendt's treatment of the political possibilities of Kant's *Critique of Judgment*) that what we can demand of the world is in large part what can be demanded from an audience of good *critics* in its judgment. Arendt stresses in the first essay that Lessing had neither a positive nor a negative *world-attitude*, but instead a radically critical perspective that one has to see together with his extraordinary appetite for friendship, even with those of widely diverging viewpoints; she closes the final essay with Randall Jarrell's evocative appeal to his imagined serious readers ("Indulgent, or candid, or uncommon reader/—I've some: a wife, a nun, a ghost or two—/ If I write for anyone, I wrote for you").

The anticipation of good critics of one's work connects in obvious ways to the important Arendtian notion of *friendship*. For Arendt, friendship, of course, should never be mistaken for mere intimacy or emotional connection: like the notion of the *daimõn* there is a more than sentimental account

to be given. But what is important in this context is what Arendt's notion of friendship might add to the notion of narrative. Little philosophical discussion of narrative has touched on the purposes and occasions for telling stories: how, for example, the interest or the silence of a friend can provoke just this story at just this moment. The importance of Arendt's point about friendship and narrative must await fuller philosophical consideration within the contemporary discussion of narrative theory, since it has few (if any) current exponents and the acceptable current "sources" of narrative most in evidence among philosophers tend to be ones which Arendt would no doubt have found insufficient because either biologically determined (for example the evolutionary importance of story-telling) or narcissistically individualistic (for example the importance of understanding the coherence of "my projects").

(3) But it is on the issue of narrative rebirth where perhaps Arendt's thinking-through of her claims about narrative is most in evidence in *MDT*. As Kristeva suggests, Isak Dinesen is the crucial figure here. The openness of potential narrative rebirth suggested by the *THC* "Action" chapter epigraph—"All sorrows can be borne if you put them into a story or tell a story about them"—is now put in the context of Dinesen's own life, which faltered on one of the tempting ways in which that epigraph can be misinterpreted.

As Arendt relates, the younger Dinesen had experienced in her own life the sense in which the power of a story could compel one to *live* a life *according to* a story. The compelling story in Dinesen's case was her father's grief over an early love of a cousin which had led him (or so the family story went) to suicide. Dinesen's "greatest ambition became to belong to this side of her father's family" and, as Arendt suggests, it was the narrative power of the importance of cousinhood that led Dinesen to her disastrous marriage to the twin brother of her cousin Hans Blixen, with whom she departed for Africa.

Dinesen's experience leads one to ask what the right relation is between life and story. The wrong interpretation of the epigraph, it would seem, can lead to "the 'sin' of making a story come true, of interfering with life according to a preconceived pattern, instead of waiting patiently for the story to emerge, of repeating in imagination as distinguished from creating a fiction and then trying to live up to it" (Arendt 1968, 106). Arendt's tone of painful lessons learned through experience is unmistakable:

> It is true that storytelling reveals meaning without committing the error of defining it, and it brings about consent and reconciliation with things as they really are, and that we may even trust it to contain eventually by implication that last word which we expect from the "day of judgment." And yet, if we listen to Isak Dinesen's "philosophy" of storytelling, we cannot help becoming aware of how the slightest misunderstanding, the slightest shift of emphasis in the wrong direction, will inevitably ruin everything. If it is true,

> as her "philosophy" suggests, that no one has a life worth thinking about whose life story cannot be told, does it not then follow that life could be, even ought to be, lived as a story, that what one has to do in life is to make the story come true? (Arendt 1968, 105)

Arendt sees clearly that Dinesen's earlier life "had taught her that, while you can tell stories or write poems about life, you cannot make life poetic, live it as though it were a work of art." It is only once this clear misunderstanding of the relation between life and story has been articulated that Arendt can return to the closing—presumably reconciling—thought about Dinesen that ends the essay: "Wisdom is a virtue of old age, and it seems to come only to those who, when young, were neither wise nor prudent" (1968, 109).

It is at this point that we should return to Kristeva's suggestion about Arendt's own self-narrative as visible within *MDT*: given the eclecticism of the choice of figures in *MDT* and their contemporaneity with Arendt, how is the collection revealing and reflective of Arendt herself? What of her is revealed by this collection, which begins in her own voice with a remark about the self-submission required for accepting a literary prize, and ends, in Randall Jarrell's, with several lines of poetry that are clearly meant to serve (implicitly or explicitly) as a coda to her own readers?

Kristeva may be right that the Dinesen essay expresses a recognition on Arendt's part that her own life "is from now on a true history, as much as it is a told story"—and hence that there is an important narrative arc that is concluded at this point in Arendt's life. But it is still worth placing beside this Arendtian self-narrative the biographical reports of her contemporaries. For, despite all of the self-revelation that we can glimpse in her writing, the "who" of this extraordinary woman remains to us in many ways mysterious.[13]

Notes

[1] Earlier treatments of Arendt and narrative include Benhabib (1994), and Kristeva (2001), whose work I discuss below.

[2] In addition to the discussion in *THC*, Arendt's discussion of the tragic emotions of *eleos* (pity) and *phobos* (fear) and their catharsis is a central aspect of her discussion of Lessing, Aristotle and the role of criticism in the first essay in *Men in Dark Times* (see section II, below).

[3] Arendt's philosophy of action has been referred to as having a "dramaturgical" character: see Wolin (1990, 191, n.3); Villa (1996, 59).

[4] See more on this point in Kristeva's discussion (2001,17). Arendt's reading of Aristotle suggests, however, that there is an underlying set of issues, perspectives and terminology (with central terms such as *praxis, eudaimonia, dianoia* , *pathos*, *lexis*, etc. being used in both texts) common to the *Ethics* and the *Poetics*.

[5] See Arendt's claim that "[o]nly the actors and speakers who enact the story's plot can convey the full meaning, not so much of the story itself, but of the "heroes"

who reveal themselves in it" (*THC*, p. 187), which Arendt justifies with the genuinely peculiar assertion in footnote 12 that "Aristotle therefore usually speaks not of an imitation of action (*praxis*) but of the agents (*prattontes*)," which not only is not the case but is followed by three citations from the *Poetics* that all seem to make exactly the opposite point (including Aristotle's well-known definition of tragedy as an imitation of a *praxis* (rather than an acting person). It's possible that the footnote contains an error in this regard, but the larger question about Arendt's more general focus on *agents* as opposed to *action*—as compared, for example, with Ricoeur's—is highly interesting.

[6] The longer Dante quotation—as well as Arendt's translation of it—is interesting from a number of perspectives.

[7] For an account of these narrative elements in Hegel's philosophy of action, see my "Narrativity and Agency in Hegel," forthcoming in *Hegel on Action*, ed. Constantine Sandis & Arto Laitinen (Palgrave-Macmillan).

[8] On Hegel's criticism of the language of complaint or lament ("the shedding of a tear about necessity"), see, for example, Hegel (1977, 653).

[9] For a very helpful discussion of the moral and political difficulties inherent in Arendt's notion of "greatness," see MacLachlan (2006).

[10] *THC* was published in 1958 and *MDT* in 1968, but a number of the essays in *MDT* were originally written and/or published between 1955 and 1958.

[11] There is much more to say on this score than I will have space here to discuss. See, for example, Hermann Broch's remark on reading Arendt's *Varnhagen*: "It is a new kind of biography . . . an abstract biography [*abstrakte Biographie*] . . . it's all woven: a Gobelin tapestry." I owe this quotation from Broch (and the translation I use here to Leibovici) (2007, 903-22).

[12] Compare, for example, the similar discussions of the *daimõn* in *THC*, pp. 179-80, and in *MDT*'s *Laudatio* for Jaspers, p. 73; on the retrospectivity of the meaning of an action, *THC*, p. 192; *MDT*, p. 21; the importance of the poet and the storyteller, *THC*, p. 185; *MDT*, p. 21.

[13] See, for example, Mary McCarthy's eulogy for Arendt: "'I knew I had done something wrong in my efforts to please,' author Mary McCarthy said in 1975, delivering the eulogy for her friend Hannah Arendt. She recounted how she had once prepared for a visit from Arendt by purchasing a small tube of anchovy paste, an item McCarthy had seen her friend enjoying with breakfast. When the philosopher spied the item, she pretended not to see it. 'I had done it to show her I knew her,' recalled McCarthy. Yet even after three decades of friendship, Arendt 'did not wish to be known.'" ("Anchovies and Empathy," *University of Chicago Magazine* Sept.-Oct. 2007, p. 26.)

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