

## Contingency, History and Narration in Hannah Arendt

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‘Truth, like time, is an idea arising from, and dependent upon, human intercourse.’

Karen Blixen<sup>1</sup>

Hannah Arendt’s thinking was always far from what Agnes Heller later called the ‘redemptive paradigm’ of politics – the belief that human emancipation requires the radical surmounting of all contradictions in a homogenous community of justice, liberty and perfectly realised equality. Arendt’s thoughts regarding history, the past, memory and stories are marked by different elements derived from a clear acknowledgement of the fragility and contingency of human affairs. Among these elements we can highlight three significant reflections:

First, her awareness of the fact that throughout modernity the thread of tradition is broken and that this rupture became irrevocable after the emergence of totalitarian regimes. From this moment on, the **loss** of tradition could not be viewed as something only belonging to the speculative field of ideas –as the philosophers who proclaimed the death of metaphysics throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century seemed to think– but, rather, to political history. Thus, Arendt wrote in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*<sup>2</sup>: “We can no longer afford to take that which was good in the past and simply call it our heritage, to discard the bad and simply think of it as a dead load which by itself time will bury in oblivion.”<sup>3</sup>

Moreover, Arendt<sup>4</sup> stresses that, the disappearance of tradition does not entail an immediate **loss** of the past, but that it is even possible that in this situation we find ourselves before the “great chance to look upon the past with eyes not distracted by any tradition”.<sup>5</sup> What has been lost is the continuity of the past as it seemed to be passed on from one generation to another. “What you then are left with is still the past, but a *fragmented* past, which has lost its certainty of evaluation”.<sup>6</sup> And once the past has shown itself without any common thread with the present, we must look for another kind of relationship with it.

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1 Isak Dinesen: *The Roads Round Pisa, Seven gothic tales*, London: Putnam, 1969, p. 1.

2 Hannah Arendt: *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, New York: Schocken Books, 2004.

3 Hannah Arendt: *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, *ibid.*, Preface to the First Edition, p. XVII

4 Hannah Arendt: *Between Past and Future*, New York: Penguin Books, 1985, p. 94.

5 Hannah Arendt: “Tradition and the Modern Age” in: *Between Past and Future*, New York: Penguin Books, 1985, p. 35.

6 Hannah Arendt: *The Life of the Mind*, t. 1: *Thinking*, New York: Harcourt, 1981, p. 212.

To avoid losing the present together with tradition, Arendt thinks a kind of relationship with the past that does not lead us to an absolute historical present and that does not situate us in a world which can be maintained but not rejuvenated must be found, as characterised by Ágnes Heller.<sup>7</sup>

Second, her preoccupation with finding a kind of historiographic narrative that does not mean a justification of the emergence of totalitarian regimes. In 1953, in relation to her book *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, she wrote: "The problem originally confronting me was simple and baffling at the same time: all historiography is necessarily salvation and frequently justification; it is due to man's fear that he may forget and to his striving for something which is even more than remembrance. These impulses are already implicit in the mere observation of chronological order and they are not likely to be overcome through the interference of value-judgments which usually interrupt the narrative and make the account appear biased and 'unscientific'".<sup>8</sup>

In her reply to Eric Voegelin, Arendt declared: "my first problem was how to write historically about something –totalitarianism– which I did not want to conserve but, on the contrary, felt engaged to destroy".<sup>9</sup> She continued by stating that describing concentration camps *sine ira* does not mean being objective but, rather, condemning them. Moral indignation is an essential ingredient if you want to describe the totalitarian model occurring in the midst of human society and not on the moon. However, this need not entail an observation of the facts only from the victims' point of view, since doing so means ending with an apology, which by no means is history.

Moreover, for Arendt, the emergence of totalitarian regimes didn't only involve a political crisis, but also a problem of understanding, given that it wasn't understandable in terms of the conceptual categories of the Western political tradition. In the cited reply to Voegelin, she recognised that one of the difficulties of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* is that it does not belong to any school, nor does it cover any officially recognised or orthodox tools.<sup>10</sup> Thus, she understood that totalitarian terror should be analysed from its '**unprecedented**' character and far from the tendency, too easy, of historians to draw analogies.

Third, her conception of human action and the specificity of the experience of political liberty. In placing the emphasis on natality, Arendt provides a way to account for the specificity of human action: to be born is to become part of a world that already existed before we arrived and that will continue to be after we leave; to be born is to appear, burst in and interrupt. In the same sense, the action is beginning, freedom; it brings out the

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7 Ágnes Heller: "El último estadio de la Historia (Memoria, Rememoración y *Bildung*: sobre la teoría de la modernidad en Hegel", in: *Isegoría*, nº 14 (1996). Martin Jay wrote an article on the link between Hannah Arendt and Ágnes Heller, see Martin Jay: "Women in Dark Times: Agnes Heller and Hannah Arendt", in: *Force Fields. Between Intellectual History and Cultural Critique*, New York & London: Routledge, 1993.

8 Hannah Arendt: "A Reply to Eric Voegelin" in: idem: *Essays in Understanding, 1930-1954*, New York: Harcourt Brace & Co, 1994, p. 402.

9 Ibid.

10 Seyla Benhabib echoes this difficulty in pointing out that, from the standpoint of established disciplinary methodologies, the text of 1951, defies categorization while violating a lot of rules. Benhabib adds that to be a strictly historical account is too systematically ambitious and overinterpreted; to be considered social science is too anecdotal, narrative, and ideographic and although it has the vivacity of a work of political journalism, it is too philosophical to be accessible to a broad public (*The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt*, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1996, p. 63).

new and is distinguished by its constituent freedom, by its *unpredictability*. Every action occurs in a plural context and in a web of already-existing relationships and references; it always goes further and puts in relation and motion more than the agent can predict. Thus, actions are significant or initiate something to the extent that they exceed the mutual expectations that constitute human relationships. As opposed to fabrication and work, they are not governed by the means-end logic and their results are not calculable or limited, characterising themselves by their contingency. "The real history in which we are committed to while we are living does not have any visible or invisible creator, because it is not made."<sup>11</sup> It is because of this that one of the fundamental questions of Arendt's treatment of history and understanding is: how to account for the moments of human freedom in history without eliminating contingency or opting for predictability, as philosophy has been doing? Arendt's point of view is characterised by taking seriously the fact that when we act, we never know the results of our actions; if we knew, we would not be free. In acting, a relationship with the unknown is established so that in a way, 'somebody' does not know what is he/she doing, the temporality and contingency of being with others are, to a certain extent, the imposed conditions to be able to disclose his/her identity, to be able to say the 'who of somebody'. Arendt thus understands that there is no immediate knowledge of oneself but, rather, continuous appropriations through of stories. Perhaps, in answering the question 'Who are you?' one would have to respond with some lines from one of Isak Dinesen's characters: 'in the classic manner, and to tell you a story'.<sup>12</sup>

Arendt is not inclined to give in to the idea according to which, in taking into account human events it is necessary to ignore the concrete and particular and, in the same stroke, eliminate the aspect of plurality and unpredictability of the action. She wrote in her *Denktagebuch*: „Sobald man der Beliebigkeit und Kontingenz des Konkreten entrinnen will, fällt man in die Beliebigkeit und Kontingenz des Abstrakten, die sich Darin äussert, dass das Konkrete bereit ist, sich von jeglicher gedanklichen Notwendigkeit beherrschen zu lassen.“<sup>13</sup>

Facing this, Arendt tries to illuminate the world as a scene of action and not as a place for the development of social processes. Hence, she backs reflective judgement and imagination, and also thinking of the particular, since after the loss of tradition, understanding has the mission of "anchoring man in the world that, without judgement, would not have meaning or existential reality..."<sup>14</sup> When we say: we cannot understand now, we want to say: we cannot send out roots, we are condemned to the surface.<sup>15</sup>

## Thinking and Narrating the Particular

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11 Hannah Arendt: "Labor, Work, Action", in: Library of Congress, Washington, *Hannah Arendt Papers*, 023216 (Lecture 1957).

12 Hannah Arendt: "Isak Dinesen 1885-1963", in: *Men in Dark Times*, New York: Penguin Books, 2001, p. 106. (Arendt quotes *The Cardinal First Tale*, Isak Dinesen: *Last Tales*, New York: Vintage Books, 1991).

13 Hannah Arendt: *Denktagebuch*, München: Piper, 2002, Heft XXI, [75], January 1956, p. 554.

14 Celso Lafer: *La reconstrucción de los derechos humanos. Un diálogo con el pensamiento de Hannah Arendt*, México: FCE, 1994, p. 342.

15 Hannah Arendt *Denktagebuch*, op. cit., Heft XIV [17], March 1953, p. 322.

To assume contingency does not mean a renunciation of thinking or submission to the accidental but, rather, a clear and firm willingness for responsibility toward the world. Understanding the event does not mean "denying the outrageous, deducing the unprecedented from precedents, or explaining phenomena by such analogies and generalities that the impact of reality and the shock of experience are no longer felt. It means, rather, examining and consciously bearing the burden that our century has placed on us –neither denying its existence nor submitting meekly to its weight. Comprehension, in short, means the unpremeditated, attentive facing up to, and resisting of, reality – whatever it may be".<sup>16</sup> Reconciling oneself to what happened does not mean discovering the Hegelian ruse of reason in history but, rather, overcoming our estrangement and maintaining contact with our world. "Who says what is –λέγει τὰ ἔοῦτα- always tells a story, and in this story the particular facts lose their contingency and acquire some humanly comprehensible meaning."<sup>17</sup>

As Melvyn Hill underlined, storytelling gives an account of what happens in terms of initiatives, more than abstract chains of causes and effects that obscure the interaction between people.<sup>18</sup> Action always produces stories, intentionally or unintentionally. For Arendt, the perpetuation of memory in the story is the remedy for the frailty in acting, since the narrative imitates the unpredictability of the human condition and *poetically* reproduces contingency,<sup>19</sup> without cancelling it. As we have said, the agent cannot control the results of his/her actions. Only when it's too late he/she will know what he/she has done: "the light that illuminates processes of action, and therefore all historical processes, appears only at their end".<sup>20</sup> What distinguishes the meaning of an act can only be revealed when the action itself has been completed and has become a story susceptible to being told.

Arendt emphasises the unifying character of the story: in the narrative we make sense of the heterogeneous –actions, passions, circumstances, the blows of fortune– without cancelling it or defining it. As Simona Forti has written: "The narrative is essentially a linguistic device that reconstructs that which has happened in history through a plot that privileges human agents more than impersonal processes and that no longer derives its meaning of the particular from the general."<sup>21</sup> We find ourselves far, then, from the teleology of philosophers of history and the causal explanations derived from the desire to make a science of historiography. What is more, unlike philosophers, Arendt understands the continuist conception of history is not defensible; there is no single story that establishes the meaning of actions. There is not a single spectator or a single author: "History is a story which has many beginnings but no end"<sup>22</sup> and an account must be given of how much escapes to closed rationality which does not contemplate ruptures or the unexpected. This is "zu urteilen ohne den Anspruch, das Ganze in der Hand zu haben,

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16 Hannah Arendt: *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, op. cit., p. XXVI.

17 Hannah Arendt: "Truth and Politics", in: *Between Past and Future*, op. cit., p. 262.

18 Melvyn A. Hill: "The Fiction of Mankind and the Stories of Men", in: *Hannah Arendt: The Recovery of the Public World*, New York: Martin's Press, 1979, p. 298.

19 Olivia Guaraldo: *Politica e racconto. Trame arendtiane della modernità*, Roma: Meltemi, 2003, p. 119.

20 Hannah Arendt: *The Human Condition*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1958, p. 192.

21 Simona Forti: *Life of the Spirit and Time of the Polis*, Madrid: Cátedra, pp. 276-277.

22 Hannah Arendt: "Understanding and Politics", in: *Essays in Understanding, 1930-1954*, New York: Harcourt Brace & Co, 1994, p. 320.

uns sogar ohne etwas Dahinter-stehendes, Verborgenes zu verurteilen“.<sup>23</sup> Although the story does not solve any problems and does not master anything once and for all, it adds an element more to the repertoire of the world, it enables us to endure, not as a species but as a plurality of *whos*.

Although Arendt would be in total harmony with the idea that the work of narrating history never ends, there is no profession of relativism there at all but, rather, a gesture to recognize the unstable and provisional quality of historical truth. The emphasis on retrospective narration and backing the fragment are connected to her strong concern for the importance of factual truths. Arendt is aware –and has experience of it– that, before the onslaught of political power, facts and events are much more fragile than axioms or theories and that, once lost, no rational effort can recover them.

Likewise, in referring to the vulnerability of factual truths in history, Arendt does not allude to the variety of predicates that actions support but, rather, to the dangers of the contemporary attitude of dealing with facts as if they were mere opinions. Despite the fact that generations of historians and philosophers of history have shown that there are no facts without interpretations, Arendt understands that this does not constitute an argument against the existence of the objective question, nor can it justify the elimination of dividing lines between fact, opinion and interpretation.<sup>24</sup> Facts are beyond consensus and agreements, they have to do with common reality itself. Factual truth is always tied to other people. It refers to events and circumstances in which many are involved; it is established by direct testimony, by records, documents and monuments and depends on statements: it only exists when talking about it. Its opposite is not, therefore, error, or illusion, or opinion, but deliberate falsehood or deceit, that is, the flight from reality.

### ***Storytelling: Notes on Benjamin and Karen Blixen***

There are many texts by Arendt to which we could refer to account for her conception of the story and the role of storytelling in history. Years ago, André Enegren made a list: the **living history** of the Eichmann trial, the **reflective history** of *The Origins*, the **counter-philosophy of history** of *On Revolution*, the biography on Rahel Varnhagen and some texts from *Hidden Tradition*, the **stories** from *Men in Dark Times* and a long etcetera.<sup>25</sup> In general, we can say that in all these texts the emphasis is, on the one hand, on the fact that thought arises out of incidents of living experience and must remain bound to them in order to take its bearings<sup>26</sup> and, on the other hand, on the role of retrospective storytelling and its ability to bring out the significance of the event in its particularity.

In her controversial book on Eichmann, Arendt simulates a distant and non-partisan observation point, while assuming the voice of a fictitious moving observer who would

23 Hannah Arendt: *Denktagebuch (1950-1973)*, op. cit., Heft III[3], February 1951, p. 58.

24 Hannah Arendt: “Truth and Politics”, op. cit., p. 251. It is an article written like a reflection on the attacks received after the publication of *Eichmann in Jerusalem*.

25 André Enegren: *La pensée politique de Hannah Arendt*, Paris: PUF, 1984; Ágnes Heller analyses three of Arendt’s stories: *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, *The Human Condition* and *On Revolution* in “Hannah Arendt on Tradition and New Beginnings” in: Steven Aschheim, (ed.): *Hannah Arendt in Jerusalem*, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2001.

26 Hannah Arendt: *Between Past and Future*, op. cit., p. 20.

also be involved in the voice of the observed murderer. As we have seen, Arendt does not usually try to reflect reality *objectively* but, rather, *accurately describe* a phenomenon, to look at it from forgotten perspectives: confronting experiences or problems we are always surprised when she shines the light where we hadn't looked and shows them to us from an unexpected perspective. As Ágnes Heller wrote,<sup>27</sup> Arendt usually knows in advance what she is looking for in the stories she tells, despite (sometimes) finding or discovering something unexpected. "It was this strategy of letting Eichmann speak *through* –not *in*– her voice that many of her Jewish critics found most objectionable [...]. Arendt, however, was not concerned with cultural grieving but with understanding the quality of Eichmann's guilt."<sup>28</sup> Her purpose 'was not to commemorate the defeated and the dead, but *to write from their* standpoint and, hence, to display their absence, their invisibility'.<sup>29</sup> She wrote from within the catastrophe, from the point of view of the defeated, making no apology for them. By using the resource of the *oratio obliqua*,<sup>30</sup> Arendt allowed the voice of Eichmann to be heard and judged through the perspective provided by the context. She was thus inviting judgement and discussion, and proposed an indirect way of judging: the reader was allowed to enter the story, that not only combined and organised a large number of different details, but also allowed the reader to maintain a certain distance, address various issues as they happened and not be overwhelmed by the pain and suffering of victims.

Texts such as *The Origins of Totalitarianism* or *On Revolution* show us how Arendt confronted historical events or those of her present –the emergence of totalitarian regimes ("Human history has known no story more difficult to tell")<sup>31</sup> and the modern revolutions– and wrote about them as unprecedented phenomena. To do this, Arendt turns to what, following to Judith N. Shklar,<sup>32</sup> I have characterised as a kind of monumental history: a kind of history that teaches us to praise and condemn, and which is very similar to the songs of the epic poets.<sup>33</sup>

However, in her book on Rahel Varnhagen or in the *silhouettes*<sup>34</sup> of Brecht, Benjamin, Broch, Dinesen or Luxemburg that she would include in *Men in Dark Times* actions, (perhaps exemplary ones), of the great Greek heroes<sup>35</sup> are not written but, rather, the

27 Ágnes Heller: *Hannah Arendt on Tradition and New Beginnings*, op. cit., p. 21.

28 Dagmar Barnouw: "Speaking about Modernity: Arendt's Construct of the Political", in: *New German Critique*, No., 50, 1990, p. 22. On the role of *storytelling* in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, see also Annabel Herzog: "Reporting and storytelling: *Eichmann in Jerusalem* as Political Testimony", in: *Thesis Eleven*, 2002, vol. 69 no. 1, pp. 83-98

29 Annabel Herzog, "Illuminating Inheritance: Benjamin's Influence on Arendt's Political Storytelling", in: *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, No. 26, 2000, p. 3.

30 See Arendt's letter to Gershom Scholem (July 24, 1963) in Hannah Arendt: *The Jewish Writings*, New York: Schocken Books, 2007, p. 468.

31 Hannah Arendt: "The Image of Hell", in: *Essays in Understanding, 1930-1954*, op.cit., p. 199.

32 "Rethinking Past", in: *Social Research*, 44, 1977, pp. 80-90 (currently compiled in Judith Shklar: *Political Thought and Political Thinkers*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998).

33 Fina Birulés: *Una herencia sin testamento: Hannah Arendt*, Barcelona: Herder, 2007.

34 This is how Arendt characterises these articles in a letter to Mary McCarthy (December 21, 1968), *Between Friends*, London: Secker&Warburg, 1995. In this volume she brings together the figures who "could hardly be more unlike each other, and it is not difficult to imagine how they might have protested, had they been given a voice in the matter, against being gathered into a common room, as it were", she comments in the "Preface" of *Men in Dark Times*, op. cit., p. 7.

35 According to Françoise Collin: "The sense of Arendt's story is rooted in the origins of Greek thought, but may also come from Jewish culture, whose truth is a Book that is not just a "great story" but a multitude of small

actions of the beaten, the antiheroes, the excluded; the actions of those who are aware of the opacity of their present.

We have seen that action without a name, without a 'who' attached to it, is meaningless, and that one of the ways through which the *who* can reveal is the retrospective story. To illustrate this point, in *The Human Condition* Arendt alludes to the Book VIII of the *Odyssey*, in which the hero finds himself face to face with the bard and, upon hearing the story of his own actions, deeds and sufferings, cannot hold back the tears; the story had converted a mere event in 'history'.<sup>36</sup> Arendt views this fragment of the *Odyssey* as the beginning, poetically speaking, of the category of history. Every story tells how a life has answered the call and care of the world, how it has been exposed, how it has decided to appear, so that to recite, to tell, is to witness what is experienced, to resist; it is giving voice to the defeated as the poet Homer did when decided to sing about the deeds of the winners **Trojans** no less than about those of the defeated.

Far from considering that an individual life is determined by a period, Arendt suggests that we should understand it as being able to illuminate it. Often, we know what has been given to us rather than chosen, what is common to us –in Arendt's case, being a Jew–, through the ways of responding to it and, possibly, this is what Arendt attempts to show in essays like *The Hidden Tradition* or those in which she studied figures like Rosa Luxemburg, Isak Dinesen, Bertolt Brecht and Waldemar Gurian. At birth, everyone receives something contingent and not chosen, a political *present*, a particular configuration of the world. Every life begins at a definite moment in time, in a particular place, in the context of a particular community and with some particular physical or psychological characteristics, and this beginning is not voluntary. To be born is to join a world of relationships, discourses and norms that we have not decided and that, to some extent, constitutes us. What is given to us is not, however, a neutral fact but, rather, is presented as a display of differences that intertwine in each one of us. However, this that we are given imposes on us, it does not confer, in itself, any kind of singularity. This would be shaped in taking the differences as our own, in taking the initiative: re-present them, put them into play through words and actions.<sup>37</sup>

As noted by Young-Bruehl, despite the fact that what Arendt calls her *old-fashioned storytelling*<sup>38</sup> has never been accurately characterized by the author and which we even find in various forms, I would like to dwell, at this point, on the importance that Walter Benjamin and Karen Blixen have. In fact, with respect to Benjamin, it has frequently been noted that Arendt inherited from him the conception that once the thread of tradition has been irreversibly broken, stories and tales have the ability to save the world. Benjamin, aware of the decline of the experience transmitted during the interwar period, backs the

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stories in which characters proliferate." In "Filosofía y biografía o pensar/contar según Hannah Arendt", in: *Praxis de la diferencia. Liberación y libertad*, Barcelona: caria, 2006, pp. 202-203).

<sup>36</sup> Homer: *The Odyssey*, verses 83-95. For a review of Arendt's interpretation of this episode see François Hartog: *Des régimes d'historicité. Présentisme et expériences du temps*, Paris: Seuil, 2003, pp. 1 and ss.

<sup>37</sup> In this part I follow Martine Leibovici: *Hannah Arendt, une Juive*, Paris: Desclée De Brouwer, pp. 72 y ss.

<sup>38</sup> Hannah Arendt: "Action and the Pursuit of Happiness", in: Hannah Arendt, Alois Dempf and Friedrich Engel-Janosi (eds.), *Politische Ordnung und menschliche Existenz. Festgabe für Erich Voegelin*, Munich: Beck, 1962, p. 10. Arendt doesn't clearly define the term *storytelling*, so there are various interpretations of the same thing, for example, Elisabeth Young-Bruehl: "Hannah Arendt's Storytelling", in: *Social Research*, No. 44, 1, 1977, Seyla Benhabib: *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt, op. cit.*; Lisa Jane Disch: *Hannah Arendt and the Limits of Philosophy*, New York: Cornell University Press, 1994.

figure of the collector who collects fragments and fragments from the ruins of the past, emphasizes in his work the modern role of quotes, and writes from the conviction that while the idea of continuum destroys everything, discontinuum is the foundation of an authentic tradition. In Arendt we also find an attention to fragments that is not intended to reconstitute a whole, as well as a look at the past and at political freedom in terms of stoppage or possible interruption of the historical continuum, although she says that in each present breaks or gaps are always possible and natality, thinkable, while Benjamin's breaks leave the Messianic hope vibrating.<sup>39</sup>

For Arendt, narrating would become an act of the imagination that shaped elements from the past without trying to restore it. Thus, in her reflections on literary works, she emphasises the *loss* of any reliable relationship, the nature of which is to take in finite things and release them of their transience; she is interested in those works which in their historical context make 'this opening of an abyss' visible and that, despite this, they are not dedicated to *lamenting* but, rather, they are 'the expression of loss itself'.<sup>40</sup>

"I am not homesick enough, in any event because I don't believe in a World, be it a past World or a future World, in which man's mind, equipped for withdrawing from the world of appearances, could or should ever be comfortable at home",<sup>41</sup> she wrote in her last book. Her concern is to avoid losing our entire past along with our traditions; thus, she looks for a thought that, fed in the present, works with fragments taken from the past that, torn from their original context, which may have the strength of new thoughts. After this attempt at a non-traditional form of relationship with the past is the belief that although the world gives way to ruin, crystallisations are generated. This seems to make clear the fallacious nature of the opposition between ruins and progress; perhaps this is what she wants to illustrate when commenting on the *Ballad of the Waterwheel* by Bertolt Brecht and pointing out that while the wheel turns so that what is on top today will not always stay there, it is also true that 'every paddle comes to light'.<sup>42</sup>

The reference to Ariel's song from the second scene of the first act of Shakespeare's *The Tempest* is well known, which Arendt uses to talk about Benjamin: "Like a pearl diver who descends to the bottom of the sea, not to excavate the bottom and bring it to light but to pry loose the rich and the strange, the pearls and the coral in the depths and to carry them to the surface."<sup>43</sup> We know: a world without past or future is a natural world, not a human one, so that 'the rich and the strange' are rescued, treasures of experience which would otherwise be lost. By linking memory to the image of the pearl diver, Arendt prioritises the initiative of who narrates and the emphasis on particularity and detail. In this regard, it is also worth remembering a passage from *The Diver*, a tale by Isak Dinesen: "For many things happen to those who dive to the bottom of the sea. Pearls in themselves are things of mystery and adventure; if you follow the career of a single pearl

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39 Martine Leibovici: "En la grieta del presente: ¿mesianismo o natalidad? Hannah Arendt, Walter Benjamin y la historia", in: *Al margen*, nº, 21-22, 2007, p. 195.

40 Introduction of Hannah Arendt: *Reflections on Literature and Culture*, ed. by Susannah Young Ah-Gottlieb, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007

41 Hannah Arendt: *The Life of the Mind*, t. 2: *Willing*, p. 158.

42 Cited by Susannah Young-Ah Gottlieb, p. XVIII of her introduction to the work cited in note 40. Young-Ah Gottlieb took this comment from the German translation of *Beyond Personal Frustration. The Poetry of Bertolt Brecht*, a text previously used for the chapter included in *Men in Dark Times*, *op. cit.*

43 Hannah Arendt: *Men in Dark Times*, *op. cit.*, p. 203.

it will give you material for a hundred tales. And pearls are like poets' tales: disease turned in loveliness, at the same time transparent and opaque, secrets of the depths brought to light."<sup>44</sup>

This passage leads me to emphasize that the technique of extracting fragments is used by Arendt in her own thinking and not only in the often-mentioned case from her reading of Kant's third Critique, but also and especially in its references to the writings of Karen Blixen. There are many references to the Danish writer throughout her work: to characterize the place of narration, the 'who' of the action,<sup>45</sup> the relationship between *storytelling* and truth in her political theory. According to Lynn R. Wilkinson,<sup>46</sup> Arendt's work is punctuated by quotes, not always accurate, from Dinesen's stories, while incorporating elements from the writings of this author, so she establishes a kind of dialogue with her similar to that established with Benjamin, although not as explicit. Perhaps the best known reference to Isak Dinesen are the words listed as the opening quote in the section on action in *The Human Condition* – "All sorrows can be borne if you put them into a story or tell a story about them" –, a quote we also find in *Truth and Politics* (1967) and in the review on Parménie Migel's biography (1968), and which Arendt included in *Men in Dark Times*. These are words attributed to Dinesen but nobody has been able to find them in the work of the Danish writer and whose origin, as Wilkinson says, could be a phone interview published on 3 November 1953 in *The New York Times Book Review*.<sup>47</sup> Curiously, in her correspondence we only find a letter in which she speaks about Dinesen: in November 1958, Arendt remarks to Gertrude Jaspers that she has just read a marvellous book, *Anecdotes of Destiny*, and says that its Danish author is a great *storyteller*, a great lady, and an elderly and wise woman.<sup>48</sup> We know that, a year later, Arendt attended one of the readings that Dinesen did of her work on her first visit to New York.<sup>49</sup> Because of the texts quoted directly or indirectly, Arendt seems to have read many short stories by Dinesen. In *The Human Condition* she clearly refers to *The Dreamers* and *Converse at Night in Copenhagen* and in her 1968 essay *Isak Dinesen 1885-1963* she refers to *Out of Africa*, *The Immortal Story*, *The Poet* and *Echoes*. She seems to find two issues that she considers essential for her old fashioned storytelling in all of them.

The first is the idea that 'the story reveals the meaning of what otherwise would remain an unbearable sequence of sheer happenings.'<sup>50</sup> So, in 1967, in *Truth and Politics*, she speaks of Dinesen as follows: "Not only was [she] one of the great storytellers of our time but also –and she was almost unique in this respect– knew what she was doing. She could have added that joy and bliss, too, become bearable and meaningful for men only when

44 Isak Dinesen: *Anecdotes of Destiny*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, p. 12. One must keep in mind that Dinesen also refers to Ariel's song in Shakespeare in another tale: *Tempests*.

45 See note 11.

46 Lynn R. Wilkinson: "Hannah Arendt on Isak Dinesen: Between Storytelling and Theory", in: *Comparative Literature*, 2004, 56(1), pp. 77-98

47 'I am not a novelist, really not even a writer; I am a storyteller. One of my friends said about me that *I think all sorrows can be borne if you put them into a story or tell a story about them*, and perhaps this is not entirely untrue. To me, the explanation of life seems to be its melody, its pattern. And I feel in life such an infinite, truly inconceivable fantasy'. Interview with Bent Mohn, *The New York Times Book Review* (November 3, 1957). Italics by FB.

48 Hannah Arendt-Karl Jaspers: *Briefwechsel 1926 bis 1969*, edited by Lotte Köhler and Hans Saner, Munich-Zürich: Piper, 1985, p. 359.

49 Elisabeth Young-Bruehl: *Hannah Arendt*. Barcelona: Paidós, 2006, p. 81.

50 Hannah Arendt: *Isak Dinesen 1885-1963*, op. cit., 106.

they can talk about them and tell them a story as (...). The political function of the storyteller-historian or novelist-is to teach acceptance of things as they are. Out of this acceptance, which can also be called truthfulness, arises the faculty of judgment –that, again in Isak Dinesen's words, 'at the end we shall be privileged to view and review it – and that is what is named, the Day of Judgment.'"<sup>51</sup>

Second, Arendt finds in Dinesen samples of the dangers of trying to live life as a story, of turning the stories into reality instead of telling them. Thus, in *The Poet*, in *Echoes* or in *The Immortal Story* she sees a consideration on the sin of intervening in life according to a preconceived model or an idea. At this point, the similarities with Arendt and Benjamin are remarkable: what intensely fascinated Benjamin from the outset was never an idea, it was always a phenomenon. It is not, therefore, about explaining or building theories, but the realization that "without repeating life in imagination you can never be fully alive"<sup>52</sup>.

There is a story, to which I have already referred, *The Diver*, which is very present in Arendt's texts on *storytelling*, although it is never mentioned explicitly. In this story, as is characteristic in all Dinesen's stories, the matter of loss, of exile, appears and, at the same time, the excavation of the sedimentary treasures of tradition as avenues for renewing and illuminating life in the present. The protagonist is an exile in a fishing village, who works as a diver. Through diving for pearls, the diver has entered into relationship with the underwater world and met a cowfish which, through her words, has shown him that the fish is, of all the creatures, that which has been created with the most care to resemble the image and likeness of God. The inhabitants of the underwater world, unlike angels, birds and humans, have the virtue of not having suffered any 'fall'. The fish protagonist says: "We run no risks. For our changing of place in existence never creates, or leaves after it, what man calls a way, upon which phenomenon –in reality no phenomenon but an illusion– he will waste inexplicable passionate deliberation." The cowfish continues with his speech on a marine species, to which it would say it is characterized by its conformism or, to put in the terms we have used, by its absolute historical present, and it again compares it with the human species: "Man, in the end, is alarmed by the idea of time, an unbalanced by incessant wanderings *between past and future*. The inhabitants of a liquid world have brought past and future together in the maxim: *Après nous le deluge*."<sup>53</sup>

This fragment sends us to the title of the compilation that Hannah Arendt published in 1961: *Between Past and Future*, and also to the words written in 1947 in her *Dedication to Karl Jaspers*<sup>54</sup> in which she urges that "human beings ... speak with each other, despite the prevailing conditions of the deluge".

What is more, it seems that Arendt coincides with one of Dinesen's mottos, 'Je responderay'<sup>55</sup>; a slogan which refers to responsibility. Arendt's work can be understood as a strong call, in the contemporary world, to political responsibility. It is a responsibility that aims to reshape the world even though it is unable to control it. In other words, the

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51 Hannah Arendt: *Truth and Politics*, op. cit., p. 262. Arendt quotes *The Cardinal First Tale*, op. cit.

52 Hannah Arendt: *Isak Dinesen 1885-1963*, op. cit., p. 99.

53 Isak Dinesen: *Anecdotes of Destiny*, op. cit., p. 20.

54 Hannah Arendt: "Dedication to Karl Jaspers", in: *Essays in Understanding, 1930-1954*, op.cit., p. 216.

55 Isak Dinesen: "On the Mottoes of my Life", in: *Complete Essays*, Madrid: Losada, 2003, p. 371. "On the Mottoes of my Life" is Dinesen's Dinner Meeting Address at the annual celebration held by the Institute of Arts and Letters in New York on January 28, 1959.

issue of responsibility jointly responds to the aspiration to find a point of agreement between receptivity and action, between accepting and changing. That is, to say yes or no to abjection. *Storytelling* gives us resources to do so. According to Arendt, we live and think in the shadow of a great catastrophe, but we must pay attention to the human ability to begin, since "a being whose essence is beginning may have enough of origin within himself to understand without preconceived categories and to judge without the set of customary rules which is morality".<sup>56</sup>

(English version by Andrea Lomas)

This text was presented in a shorter version at the conference "La filosofía de Ágnes Heller y su diálogo con Hannah Arendt" in Murcia/Spain Oct. 13-15, 2009.

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<sup>56</sup> Hannah Arendt: "Understanding and Politics", in: *Essays in Understanding, 1930-1954*, op. cit., p. 321.