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In Memoriam Elisabeth Young-Bruehl (03/03/1946 – 01/12/2011)

On Thursday the 1st of December 2011, on her way home from a concert with her wife Christine Dunbar, Elisabeth Young-Bruehl suffered a pulmonary embolism and died soon afterwards in hospital.

In an interview a week later, the feminist philosopher Rosi Braidotti summarized poignantly how most of us first encountered Elisabeth: "When I read the Arendt biography I was stunned by the portrait of such a great woman. But it immediately became clear to me that there was another great woman there, the author of this amazing book, Elisabeth Young-Bruehl herself" (http://elisabethyoung-bruehl.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/12/OBIT-ELISABETH-YOUNG-BRUEHL_2447339.mp3). This is a striking observation, because in her two monumental biographies (one on Hannah Arendt and one on Anna Freud) Elisabeth wrote with an erudite and contained voice, not putting herself on the stage she laid out for her subjects. However, in a subsequent essay collection entitled *Subject to Biography* (1999), Elisabeth gave a highly interactive account of the biographer's experience which also provided a sketch of her general theory of the self: a dialogical structure between subject and object of biography, replicated within the mind itself, provided the base for the narrative. As Rosi Braidotti observed, Elisabeth was right there on the pages of her biographies, because they outlined what had been integrated into her very own character.

Elisabeth was born on the 3rd of March 1946 at Branwood, her mother's family's estate in Maryland. The dairy farm had been in the Scottish Presbyterian family for more than two centuries. Elisabeth was named after her grandmother Elisabeth Bulkley Smith Williams, who came from a much more urban and urbane background. Her ancestors descended from Mayflower pilgrims and resided in Brooklyn, where her great-grandfather Cyrus Porter Smith had been the first elected mayor and helped establish the public school system. Elisabeth Young-Bruehl's mother Lois married a man from Virginia, a 1936 Olympian athlete, Herbert Gibbons Young, who was enrolled in the Marine Corps. Soon after their wedding he left for the war: he was the only member of his unit to survive. Elisabeth grew up in Newark, Maryland, where her father worked as a golf teacher and pursued all sorts of sporting activities. Her mother ran the household, which also consisted of Elisabeth's older brother and younger sister. At the same time, Lois Young took up acting and provided the cornerstones for Elisabeth's education. For her sixteenth birthday, she gave Elisabeth a photo book by Steiglitz, entitled *The Family of Man,* and joked: "Being a good member of a single family is very difficult, being a good member of the human family verges on the impossible, but you must try."

Elisabeth started studying poetry writing at Sarah Lawrence College, but dropped out into the counterculture scene of New York in the 60s. At the émigré-run New School she found the kind of cosmopolitan education she desired and resumed her studies. She went

on to be Hannah Arendt's only ever PhD student. After her initial proposal – tracing Persian Zoroastrian influence on the Presocratic philosophers – was deemed "revolutionary if right, but unfortunately wrong" by her supervisor, she wrote her dissertation on the work of Karl Jaspers and completed it in 1974. The year after, while Elisabeth was teaching philosophy in the Humanities Program at Wesleyan College, Hannah Arendt's death hit her at a time when her life was already difficult. After divorcing her husband, Elisabeth's mother had suffered a psychotic episode and was temporarily hospitalized (she eventually recovered and found a second spouse in Ernest Sutton with whom she lived in a truly happy marriage until her death, aged 89, in October 2011). It was Arendt's friend and (together with Mary McCarthy) literary executor Lotte Köhler who bestowed on Elisabeth the task of writing what became the definite biography. *For the Love of the World* (1982) was immediately acclaimed by critics and won, among other prizes, the first Harcourt Award. Elisabeth was then asked by the Vienna-born Lottie Newman whether she would write another life: that of Anna Freud. With a little prompting from her psychoanalyst Hans Loewald, she set herself to the task, which was complicated by the fact that she found this women far less akin to herself in character. She was also not expected to breach the silence about the lesbian nature of her subject's "Boston Marriage" with Dorothy Burlington. *Anna Freud. A Biography* appeared in 1988.

Elisabeth, who had started training as a psychoanalyst herself, went on to write a collections of essays, *Mind and the Body Politic* (1989) which dealt with "aftereffects" and "metareflections" of writing those two monumental biographies. The pieces collected in it contained more personal reflections on her subjects as well as fascinating further philosophical discussions especially of Arendt's later work. A first book exploring characterology – *Creative Characters* (1991) – had gone without much critical acclaim, but its sequel, the *Anatomy of Prejudices* (1996) won great attention and the Association of American Publishers' *Best Book Award* in psychology. It carefully traced the intersectionality of discrimination – the different structures of antisemitism, sexism, racism and homophobia as well as their different modulations according to which character type used them as defensive mechanism. Elisabeth opened her own psychoanalytic practice and moved from Philadelphia to New York. She also spent several years parenting one of her nephews – who just made her a proud step-grandmother last year.

The other main strand of Elisabeth's theorizing, an elaboration of ego-psychology, was first presented in her book *Cherishment: A Psychology of the Heart* (2000; co-authored with her partner of the time, Faith Bethelard). She further explored this theme in several of the essays that comprised the wonderful 2003 collection *Where Do We Fall When We Fall in Love*. While *Cherishment* had been an attempt to counter the androcentric academic tone even stylistically, feminism was a core concern throughout all of Elisabeth's writing. Like Juliet Mitchell (who later became a close friend), Elisabeth advocated the reconciliation of feminism and Freudian psychoanalysis and lobbied against the more-or-less latent homophobia within both. But her emancipatory perspective didn't end with the negative work of criticizing sexism, but also envisioned a revolutionary change of the whole culture towards caring instead of punishing, receptivity instead of aggression, communication instead of competition and equality instead of authority.

In recent years, all of these themes reappeared. Elisabeth wrote a shorter volume on Arendt, *Why Arendt matters* (2006), which was at the same time an introduction to Arendt's work and a manual for the education of young citizens.

She carefully prepared what she saw as the third chapter of her life – retiring from her practice, moving to Toronto, building two shared households (one in town and one in the Ontario countryhouse, a beautifully converted former school house) with her new spouse Christine. She joined the Canadian Green Party, but remained in touch with US politics via the blog-project "www.whosafraidofsocialdemocracy.com", a weekly commentary that amounted to nothing less than giving psychoanalysis to the troubled political psyche of Elisabeth's native country. Together with Christine, she created another piece on the history of psychoanalysis: the beautifully designed time line of the century since the appearance of Freud's *Traumdeutung* (demonstrated and available at: http://www.cavershamproductions.com/general/100-years-a-timeline.html). Having found and constructed an ideal space to resume her theoretical work, Elisabeth completed her book *Childism*, which will be published by Yale University Press this January – Elisabeth had just sent out invitations for the book launch party a couple of days before her death. *Childism* provides what she regarded as the fundamental missing piece of her work on prejudice and extends her developmental theories. According to its analysis, much of the violence distorting the growth and development of children in some societies – including ours – springs from misconceptions of what they and their needs are. Instead of being conceived as new beginnings, children are cast as property, competitors or copies of their caretaker's selves, thereby deprived of the conditions that would enable their flourishing – first of all, a systematic and democratic education. The next great task, dedicated to another advocate of "good care" had already been taken up: Elisabeth was appointed to be the general editor of the D. Winnicott papers.

Elisabeth cultivated a large terrain of topics, weaving thematic threads back and forth between Philosophy, Politics and Psychology. Like a true enlightenment thinker, she disciplined herself to write with the utmost clarity and accessibility and, with her appreciation for socratic dialectics, avoided ever putting something in print that she hadn't tried out in conversation. In a characterization of independent thinking by means of Arendt's example, Elisabeth outlined what was to become so true of herself:

> The creative tension of thinking as partnership has its corollary in a restlessness and need to go from one focus to the next, to grow always taking fundamental ideas and commitments into fresh arenas, topics, media, cultural fields, or parts of the library. The independent-minded are foxes, to use Isaiah Berlin's Shakespearean analogy, not hedgehogs, they are explorers, not so much interdisciplinary as extradisciplinary, and the charge most frequently brought against them is that they venture into specialized areas without being specialists, that they are dilettantes, which they are, except that their freshness and lack of any sense of possessiveness over the territory usually puts them on a level far beyond what most experts achieve. (*Subject to Biography*, p. 158)

Elisabeth's own independent-mindedness is perhaps best proven by the fact that she embraced and pursued precisely those topics and movements that Arendt herself repudia-

ted most categorically: feminism and psychoanalysis. But there is an underlying continuity that Elisabeth herself stressed. Having revealed in her biography of Arendt the centrality of *amor mundi*, a love for and trust in the shared world of human relations, Elisabeth continued the trajectory Arendt proposed in her late work *The life of the mind*. While Arendt had attempted to give a phenomenology of the activities crucial to uphold a responsible and political relation to the world, Elisabeth pushed for their precarious conditions. In her "trancendental Arendtianism" she not only enquired which psychological factors distorted judgement – the defensive mechanisms evident in prejudices – but also enquired into the positive resources enabling and sustaining responsible love for the world in individual people.

According to Elisabeth, the two fundamental forces underlying a mature and joyful *amor mundi* are "amae" and "eros", ego- and id-instinctual love. She developed the dual drive theory of hunger and sex that Freud had dropped in favor of the Eros-and-Thanatos-model. In the signature essay of the 2003 collection, "Where do we fall when we fall in love", she illustrated the two forces in suggestive mythological terms. Narcissus in his irresistible beauty, overwhelmed by the desire to duplicate himself, stands for the power but also for the tendency to self-enclosure of sex. What keeps the ego alive and open is the original other-relatedness of "hunger". Elisabeth found the best description of this hunger, as ego-instinctual drive, in the work of the psychoanalyst Takeo Doi, who translated the Japanese concept of *amae* as the "expectation to be sweetly and indulgently loved" – rendered as "cherishment" in Elisabeth's own terminology. The classical image Elisabeth chose to symbolize the ego-drive's flourishing is borrowed from Ovid's rendition of Philemon and Baucis:

> Jupiter and his son Mercury, so the story goes, came to earth disguised as mortals and wandered in the Phrygian Hills, expecting to be received hospitably, which is the social equivalent of being sweetly and indulgently loved. At house after house, they were turned away, until they came to the cottage where an old couple, Baucis and Philemon, unhesitatingly, without enquiring who they were, took them in, laid out bedding on a willow couch, set about preparing them simple but delicious food, and engaged them in conversation while the meal was heating (…). The old couple do the hospitality tasks together. Not only are there no servants in their house, but neither is servant to the other. And they do not make themselves servants to their guests – they talk with them, showing them friendship as equals. (*Where Do We Fall When We Fall in Love?*, p. 13)

Now, anyone who ever experienced Elisabeth's hospitality will have to pause over this passage.

Teamed with Christine, Elisabeth featured the ultimate embodiment of this kind of ideal hospitality (though with a slightly less balanced share of cooking, as Elisabeth's contribution to homemaking was mostly based on supplies from her favorite hardware shop). Theirs was a less frugal style, there would have been music along with the pre-dinner-talk and neither of them had lost the shine of what, in Narcissus, is attributed to youth. Elisabeth's overwhelming generosity and pleasure in sharing was just as refined in its receptive

capacity. While she most clearly forbade false modesty on the part of the recipient of her gifts (“Don't fuss. Enjoy.”), she herself was wonderfully spontaneous and curious in accepting invitations and offerings herself. She celebrated friendship. And just as true hospitality wouldn't merely share the food but prepare the most excellent treats for guests, the sharing of the soul in friendships, in the Aristotelean mode Elisabeth practiced, meant to grow into your very best self to display this to the others and bring about in them what was most praiseworthy. “*Amicitia anima una”* was the line with which Elisabeth dedicated her *Mind and the Body Politic* to her lifetime friend and confidant Jerome Kohn (who was Arendt's last research assistant and became the general editor of her estate). Unlike Aristotle, though, Elisabeth would never have thought that the completion of this journey was one where a person, as a perfected virtuous character, didn't need others any more. For her, the essence of a person always remained relatedness.

Besides the fulfillment of human needs for cherishment, Elisabeth saw such relatedness as the foundation of “good judgement”. She dedicated herself to embody what Arendt hinted at with her interpretation of Kant's *sensus communis*. To educate our sense of judgement, we need to send our imagination “on visits”. Only through intense cosmopolitan communication can we learn to anticipate the opinion and perspective of others, amending our own judgement by weighing it against theirs in the agora of our minds.

Elisabeth's unique passion for the plurality experienced in communication was paired with her conviction of the absolutely crucial role of examples. Identification, for her, was not just sparked by the melancholic's refusal to admit the loss of a loved object but played a positive role for self-formation: ego-driven love, rooted in a self's hunger for cherishment and growth, attaches to its objects in an identificatory mode, integrating them in the own ego ideal which, unlike the more rigid super-ego, encourages rather than trims development.

Nevertheless, when one looks for an emblem of educational relationships in Elisabeth's register, an image more akin to the troubled dynamics of Narcissus comes to mind to complement the Phrygian/Aristotelian idyll. It is perhaps the drives particular to Plato's Phaidros that best describe the strong impact Elisabeth had as a teacher (beautifully rendered in Dominique Browning's moving orbituary: www.slowlovelife.com/2011/12/in-memoriam-elisabeth-young-bruehl.com). Not to mention the impact Arendt had on Elisabeth. Interestingly, one of the very few triggers which reliably made Elisabeth lose her otherwise almost Buddhist nerves was when she saw the example of platonic eros, one generation removed – the relationship of Heidegger and Arendt – distorted by some interpreters into a cliché of female submissiveness which completely obscured the agency and achievement on the younger part. Though just as Elisabeth went beyond Aristotelian friendship to constant relatedness, she outgrew the platonic pedagogical scenario. What she summarized in her essay “The Education of Women as Philosophers” (1989) and exercised throughout her career was a much more egalitarian practice.

Egalitarian respect in her, though, was anything but non-judgmental indifference. Non-judgmentality might have had its apt arenas, for example in the quest of discriminated-against lifestyles who didn't dream of asking for explicit recognition, but it has been accommodated by a neoliberal mainstream into the indifferent and self-absorbed dogma

that no one's business is anybody else's. This was not Elisabeth's attitude. Hers was more modeled after Arendt, the champion of judgement, who didn't herself stick to what some interpreters see as a rigid boundary of private and public when, for example, telling her favorite student Elisabeth: “No wonder you thought you wanted to marry that splendid guy – everybody would –, but this is just not for you, dear”. Well, Arendt was right on this one. And so was Elisabeth, time and again, when she gave her impressive advises on how not to waste a life. Of course, her judgement wasn't infallible – as, for instance, when Elisabeth, upon meeting Christine at a conference, concluded at the sight of her ring: “What an amazing woman. But she's not for me.” Well, she was wrong. And she lived the last six years of her life in constant wonder and enjoyment about precisely this.

There is a scene in *The Hours*, where Virginia Woolf's sister Vanessa ingeniously explains the former's gloomy absent-mindedness to her children by saying: “Look, Auntie Virginia has got two lives. You think she's with us but she might well be somewhere totally different, deep in the stories of her books.” This was precisely not the intellectual temperament Elisabeth displayed. Elisabeth exercised sympathy, generosity, savor and sharing. She had the most striking energy and radiation and was constantly attentive and vigilant about the state of world politics and people around her. She was at her best in conversations and a real Scheherazade, gathering audience in storytelling. Again and again, she demonstrated how sharing was the key to meaningfulness.

Nevertheless, this unique presence, too, might have been owed to a particular absence. Part of why Elisabeth managed to convey a depth and intensity to encounters that might otherwise have passed as profane moments was the broadening of her mind by including in its own conversational structure not just those others who were actually present. She referred repeatedly to the image Arendt used to illustrate Jasper's illuminating powers: that he dwelled in a “realm of spirits” (“Geisterreich”) where a conversation with Kant was as lively as one with an actual teacher, student, friend or partner. She brought the power and wisdom of many absent voices to bear on the importance of actual encounters. In speaking to Elisabeth, one could marvel at an emphasis which was precisely enabled by the fact that she partly was not just there, but also engaged in a much broader conversation.

With all the gratitude for everything she shared with those who knew and read her, a deep and helpless sadness remains that she left our realm so early.

Eva von Redecker

Humboldt University Berlin