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Totalitarianism, Narration, Identity
Hannah Arendt's Philosophy of History
(fragments)

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The key to understanding the fragmentary thought of Hannah Arendt is the philosophy of history, both in its speculative and critical dimension. Arendt's response to totalitarianism - to the triumph of physiology over politics - is both calculated and radical. Totalitarianism is not only a system of governance, but also an extreme form of storytelling, a false-form of making a narrative that gets deep into individual identity. Every story is an instrument for dealing with the contingencies of the world and of the self that likewise may bring about catastrophic effects. Although continuity is necessary for the constitution of subjectivity and political action, the interpretation of the past might easily turn into retrospective prophecy, in which the past serves as a promise of the future. Scientific historiography follows this trail, thereby continuing an infamous tradition of substituting work for action, a practice which renders an erroneous image of political community and its power and tasks.. The proper response to totalitarianism is fragmentary historiography, which is grounded in a new metaphysics of history. The past may be a pile of debris, yet it might still be rendered in a completely novel fashion - as an aesthetic subject.

This book is a comprehensive analysis of Hannah Arendt's oeuvre, interpreted in a context provided by authors belonging to both the continental (Walter Benjamin, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Martin Heidegger, Immanuel Kant, Reinhart Koselleck, Paul Ricoeur) and analytic traditions (Frank Ankersmit, Arthur Danto, Carl Gustav Hempel, Karl Raimund Popper, Jerzy Topolski, Hayden White).

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CHAPTER 1

Totalitarianism and the End of History

An Amateur Historian: The Reception of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*

First published in the United States in 1951, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* remains the most widely read contribution of Hannah Arendt to the field of history. Her work on the text began at the end of the war, if not earlier, precisely as many of the events under discussion were only beginning to come to light. The book itself is dedicated to Heinrich Blücher, the second husband of Arendt, who actively contributed to its completion.¹ Given the controversial nature of its conclusions and subject matter, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* was subject both to zealous praise and devastating criticism. As was often the case with Arendt, there were few moderate or balanced judgments.²

The Origins of Totalitarianism consists of two volumes – each being almost a book in its own right – and provides answers to two basic questions. In the first place, what is totalitarianism – an unprecedented and historically novel form of government, as Arendt claims, and, furthermore, how did it emerge and become viable? The first question leads Arendt in the direction of the present, whereas the second question necessarily directs her to the past, toward examining the influence and ramifications of previous events. However, as I will argue, Arendt's temporalities are not held together by any classical causal relation. Rather, they resemble a relation between what is unconscious and conscious. In this sense, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* is not a standard historical work. In point of fact, the first two divisions form a historical collage of more or less closely related fragments and observations of a metaphysical character, mixed with short biographies, anecdotes and subjective views.

Some of the reviews of the book were almost like a worship. Dwight MacDonald cited Arendt's work as the greatest achievement of social thought since Karl Marx.³ In *The Listener*, Al Alvarez declared the book to be “the only work of real genius to have appeared this decade.”⁴ An endorsement by H.A. Reinhold in *Commonweal* went so far as to declare the following: “Her deductions are so pregnant with thought and fact that only an equal of hers could dare condense the book.”⁵ In addition, Arthur Darack in *The Cincinnati Enquirer* characterized the book as a “a massive searching and altogether stunning performance in which the most intimate mastery of European history is combined with a probing, brooding

¹ See E. Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt: For Love of the World*, Yale UP, New Haven-London 1982, pp. 199-211. for the development of Arendt's ideas on the book.

² The reception of the German edition of the book (first edition, 1955) constitutes a separate issue, which is not discussed here.

³ D. MacDonald, “A New Theory of Totalitarianism,” *New Leader*, vol. 34 (1951), pp.17-19.

⁴ A. Alvarez, *Art and Isolation*, *The Listener*, 31 January 1957, p.183. According to the reviewer, the publication of *Origins* initiated the 50s in the American literature, even though the book is nonfiction.

⁵ H.A. Reinhold, “The State as Monster,” *Commonweal*, 8 June 1951, p. 218.

intelligence.”⁶ Having read the manuscript, David Riesman, a well-known sociologist and friend of Arendt, declared in private correspondence that he was “overwhelmed” by her vision which “touches genius.”⁷ The book was likewise privately praised by Carl J. Friedrich, a leading post-war authority on totalitarianism.⁸ Lastly, an almost idolatrous statement was issued in the opinion-making *Times Literary Supplement*: “There are books which are in themselves historical phenomena, and mark some important phase or turning-point in human thinking.”⁹

On the other hand, numerous divergent and critical reviews appeared. For the sake of clarity, I have grouped these opinions into three basic categories, reproaching Arendt’s work for (1) its exaggerated coherence and logic - criticism that was largely directed at the theoretical model of the third part of the book; (2) its supposed interpretive incoherency between the methodology adopted in the first two parts of the book, respectively devoted to anti-Semitism and imperialism, and the aforementioned third part. This line of criticism was largely attributed to the fact that Arendt, “to put it mildly, is no historian,”¹⁰ as was asserted by the respected historian of ideas, Georg Lichtheim; (3) its overly emotional attitude toward the subject matter, combined with an unprofessional moralizing.

We ought to scrutinize these generalizations, one by one, and thereby uncover the basis on which they each rest. The first, most striking and controversial element of Arendt’s work was her thesis emerging from her comprehensive analysis of Soviet and Nazi totalitarianism, which argued that both developments constituted common forms of government with structurally identical worldviews and analogous power structures. Arendt’s narrow definition and use of the term totalitarianism differed also in ways from its common usage which made it potentially inapplicable for comparative research, diminishing its scientific validity or utility. Moreover, many researchers disapproved of her selective choice of sources and excessive focus on Nazism, at the expense of additional work on Stalinism. In part, this imbalance could be attributed both to unavailability of extensive literature on the Soviet Union in the 1940s, along with her more intimate grasp and attachment to circumstances and events within Germany.¹¹

One of the most eminent French political scientists of the 20th century, Raymond Aron laid out a clear critique of the excessive coherence and logic of Arendt’s theory of totalitarianism. The author of *The Opium of the Intellectuals* (a work critical of sympathies for Marxism within the Western academy) underlined the fact that in trying to capture the essence of totalitarianism, Arendt was necessarily driven to exclude or marginalize facts that did not fit

⁶ A. Darack, *A Plunge into Hell, The Cincinnati Enquirer*, 13 May 1966.

⁷ HAP, *Correspondence File, 1938-1959*, Letter of 13 June 1949.

⁸ Ibid. Letter of 15 November 1951.

⁹ “The Times Literary Supplement”, 18 August 1961.

¹⁰ G.Lichtheim, *The Concept of Ideology and Other Essays*, Random House, New York 1967, p. 119, as cited in: S.J. Whitfield, *Into the Dark: Hannah Arendt and Totalitarianism*, Temple UP, Philadelphia 1980, p. 53.

¹¹ In a preface to part three of the third edition (1966), Arendt argues that new, if still insufficient, materials prove her earlier statements to be correct. See OT, p. xxiii-xl.

with her model.¹² A similar charge was made regarding her thesis on the supposedly unprecedented nature of totalitarianism - she simply ignored relevant details that challenged her argument. Indeed, this assertion has proven to be a major point of contention in the book's lasting reception, and remains an unresolved dispute among historians and theorists of the period. The most dramatic evidence of this inconclusiveness resurfaced in the so-called *Historikerstreit* [Historian's Dispute], which began in Germany in the 1980s. It should be noted that the historical specificity of totalitarianism was highlighted by various thinkers prior to Arendt. In *Escape from Freedom* (1941), Erich Fromm argued that modern capitalism played a uniquely important role in ensuring the rise of fascism. Franz Neumann likewise pointed to the uniqueness of Nazism in *Behemoth* (1942), indicting the significant roles played by both big business and bureaucracy. Arendt herself never claimed that the scale of the terror and total ideology of totalitarianism was unprecedented in history; she maintained, however, that a qualitative difference between previous regimes and modern totalitarianism did exist, particularly with respect to the genocides committed in their names.¹³

Robert Burrowes leveled related criticism, accusing Arendt of reductionism and producing an "essentially fantastic construct,"¹⁴ overly coherent and ignoring the real diversity of the facts in question, and thereby reducing a multi-dimensional form of governance to the concentration camps. The criticism was largely focused on the third part of the book and sought to discredit the professional competence of the author. The aforementioned reviewer wrote as follows: "Arendt does not confront reality with the tentativeness and skepticism of the scientist," as a result, her theory of totalitarianism is "brilliantly wrong" and its "chief virtue - its logicity - is also its chief vice"¹⁵

The reception of the book was least favorable among professional historians. They accused Arendt of scientific inadequacy and a lack of professionalism. While completely unconventional, the first two parts of *Origins* dealt with concepts and questions that seemingly demanded professional historical reflection. However, the reviewers could not see an innovative approach to scientific historical method. Instead, they only saw chaos. This fact is hardly surprising, given that the book challenged various prevailing ideals in the social and historical sciences.

As Charles H. van Duzer wrote in a review appearing in *The American Historical Review*, Arendt's work, "in part brilliant and suggestive [...] as a whole conveys an impression of miscarriage".¹⁶ In *The American Economic Review* we read that "the unsatisfactory methods

¹² R. Aron, *The Essence of Totalitarianism According to Hannah Arendt*, "Partisan Review", vol. 60, Iss. 3 (1993), translated by M. Le Pain, D. Mahoney, pp.366-376 (text published initially in 1954).

¹³ Hans Morgenthau, an American political scientist, shared Arendt's convictions. See H. Morgenthau, *Hannah Arendt on Totalitarianism and Democracy*, "Social Research", vol. 44, iss. 1 (1977), pp. 127-131. In subsequent reflections upon the issue, John L. Stanley argued - following Arendt - that King Shaka, who at the beginning of 19th century united the Zulu tribes, also had a totalitarian character (in Arendt's understanding of the term). See J.L. Stanley, *Is Totalitarianism a New Phenomenon? Reflections on Hannah Arendt's "The Origins of Totalitarianism"*, "Review of Politics", vol. 49, iss. 2 (1987), pp. 177-207.

¹⁴ R. Burrowes, *Totalitarianism: The Revised Standard Version*, "World Politics", vol. 21, iss. 2 (1969), p.279.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 280.

¹⁶ C.H. van Duzer, *Review of "The Origins of Totalitarianism"*, "The American Historical Review", vol. 57, iss. 4 (1952), p.934.

used by the author make the book of little value as a contribution to the taxonomy of comparative political and economic systems."¹⁷ Another reviewer negatively surmised: "The book is 477 pages wrong."¹⁸

Such critical remarks were principally directed at an apparent incoherence, "an ever-shifting eclecticism," as Thomas Cook put it in *Political Science Quarterly*. Cook rightly observed that "the pattern, the trend, the relation of cause and consequence, are not always clear."¹⁹ Van Duzer further expressed his disapproval in terms of a "disregard for the concept of historical continuity."²⁰ Hans Kohn, the historian and author of comparative analyses of totalitarianisms of the 1930s, rather predictably stated that Arendt provided "no clear and convincing pattern of the origins of totalitarianism in anti-Semitism and imperialism."²¹ All of these authors were right that the coherence of the book was elusive. Yet, all of them were convinced that such a definitive scheme explaining the origins of totalitarianism should have been developed.

Reactions focused on the methodological idiosyncrasies of the book likewise followed the book's release in the United Kingdom. James Parker captured this overriding sentiment, writing that Arendt's book "is not a historical study" because "historical material is not presented in a way to give a clear picture of the sequence of events." In addition, he argued that Arendt, enthralled with existential philosophy and subjectivism, demonstrated a "lack of concern with the past and future [that] involves the substitution of subjective patterns for an attempt at an objective estimate of facts."²²

The title of the book in English was and remains misleading. Initially, Arendt planned to entitle the work *The Elements of Shame: Anti-Semitism - Imperialism - Racism* or *The Three Pillars of Hell: Anti-Semitism - Imperialism - Racism*.²³ Both titles pointed to the "elements" or "pillars," and not to causes, in so far as the work did not intend to provide a genealogical investigation into causes or origins. The editor of Houghton & Mifflin publishing house, Paul Brooks, stated that the manuscript contained "material for several books,"²⁴ and rejected it in the end. . In 1949, the book was referenced simply as *A History of Totalitarianism*. Half a year later, Robert Giroux, an editor of the Harcourt publishing house which finally accepted the text for publication, suggested the title *The Burden of Our Times*, rejecting Arendt's own

¹⁷ W. Baer, *Review of "The Origins of Totalitarianism"*, "The American Economic Review", vol. 42, iss. 3 (1952), pp. 437-438.

¹⁸ See J.F. Brown, *Review of "The Origins of Totalitarianism"*, "The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science", vol. 277 (1951), p. 272.

¹⁹ T.I. Cook, *Review of "The Origins of Totalitarianism"*, "Political Science Quarterly", vol. 66, iss. 2 (1951), p. 291.

²⁰ C.H. van Duzer, op. cit., p. 934.

²¹ H. Kohn, *Where Terror is the Essence*, "Saturday Review", no. 34 (1951), p. 10.

²² J. Parkes, *Present Discontents*, "The Jewish Chronicle", 6 November 1951.

²³ Arendt considered these possibilities in a draft of the book she was preparing for the Houghton & Mifflin Company publishing house. See attachment to the letter to Mary B. Underwood of 24 September 1946; HAP, *Speeches and Writing File, 1923-1975*, n.d. (*Miscellany, Outlines and Research Memoranda* 1946, n.d., folder 1).

²⁴ P. Brooks, a letter of 23 October 1949, [in:] HAP, *Correspondence File, 1938-1976*, n.d., Publishers, Houghton & Mifflin 1946-1949.

proposal, *The Twin Myths of Destruction*. It was in September of 1950 that the title *The Origins of Totalitarianism* started to appear in correspondence with the publishers.²⁵ The motives of the author were mirrored more precisely by the British title *The Burden of Our Time*²⁶ and, first and foremost, the German title *Elemente und Ursprünge Totaler Herrschaft* [*Elements and Origins of Totalitarian Rule*].²⁷

The criticism of methodological incoherence, eclecticism and discontinuous narratives were paradoxically justified. And one of the reviewers was right in writing that "the book as a whole is not really scholarly despite the wealth of footnote references and a large bibliography. Again and again, the author makes the most surprising statements without giving us her own reasoning, or that of anyone else, upon which such statements are based."²⁸ In his estimation, the book was not a scientific work, but rather "a large essay or series of essays in the tradition of the *littérateur*."²⁹ Isaiah Berlin, for his own part, allegedly regarded the book as "sheer metaphysical free-association."³⁰ Paradoxically, both reviewers were right. But the conclusions they drew from their correct premises were wrong.

Raymond Aron was in limited company in positively remarking on the work's unscientific character. Concluding that an overly coherent attempt to capture the essence of totalitarianism would clash with the methods applied in the historical portion of the work, he appreciated the variety of methods and modalities of elucidation employed in the text. What especially agreed with his taste was the avoidance of social and economic determinism and a departure from "pragmatic" interpretations of totalitarian terror - "pragmatic" understood as rational behavior with respect to set goals.

The overall picture emerging from the reviews is thus ambiguous and inconsistent. David Riesman, whose name I have already cited, considered the book "extraordinarily penetrating" and "densely imaginative," at the same time critically noting that Arendt sometimes "assumes historical rationality and inevitability" in the development of historical events³¹ – an opinion, I believe, that is completely inaccurate. Particularly important in this range of responses was the voice of Eric Voegelin, an American political philosopher born in Germany, an immigrant with a life-trajectory not unlike Arendt. He was the only reviewer to receive a reply directly from Arendt, in which she explained the heuristic assumptions underlying her research. Like Riesman, Voegelin accused Arendt of endowing "historical causality with an aura of fatality,"

²⁵ HAP, *Correspondence File*, 1938-1976, n.d., Special Correspondence, Publishers, R. Giroux, letters of 3 October 1949, 16 May 1950, 11 September 1950 and 18 September 1950. Its Polish title, a metaphorical translation [*Korzenie totalitaryzmu*, literally: *The Roots of Totalitarianism*] turns out to be surprisingly well-chosen. After all, roots do not denote origin, but rather something masked, dispersed, and tangled, yet providing a basis for what is visible on the surface.

²⁶ H. Arendt, *The Burden of Our Time*, Secker & Warburg, London 1951.

²⁷ Eadem, *Elemente und Ursprünge Totaler Herrschaft*, Piper, München-Zürich 1991.

²⁸ K. Knorr, *Theories of Imperialism*, "World Politics", vol. 4, iss. 3 (1952), p. 424.

²⁹ Ibidem.

³⁰ In a conversation with Bernard Crick. See B. Crick, *Hannah Arendt and "The Burden of Our Times"*, "Political Quarterly", vol. 68, iss. 1 (1997) p. 78.

³¹ D. Riesman, *Review of "The Origins of Totalitarianism"*, "Commentary", vol. 11 (1951), p. 392, 398 and 393.

and suggesting that the "gradual revelation of the essence of totalitarianism"³² was the central thread of the book. Though he praised the merits of the work, Voegelin criticized the lack of a defined research methodology, just as the historians cited above. He argued that instead of explaining human behavior through a reference to subjective and spiritual factors, Arendt, a representative of philosophical anthropology, turned to a kind of institutional determinism. Undoubtedly, Voegelin overestimated the role of the bureaucratic factor in Arendt's line of reasoning. But what is essential to note is that the opinions of the reviewers were clearly contradictory, as though reflecting inner contradictions of the work itself.

Lastly, the third and final category of criticism faulted Arendt for superfluous and unprofessional moralizing. Very few adopted an affirmative attitude toward this moralizing, like Philip Rieff, who in the *Journal of Religion* argued that Arendt is "moralizing history as the burden of our time," without falling into "pseudo-objectivity which masks itself as the moral achievement of modern social science."³³ Stephen Whitfield put things slightly more provocatively in saying that "given a choice, Arendt would rather have been original than right,"³⁴ while Raymond Aron added that often "Arendt affects a tone of haughty superiority."³⁵ While correctly observing that she did not shy away from moral judgments, David Riesman drew a far-fetched conclusion referring to moral historical necessity in the work. The author of *The Lonely Crowd* misinterpreted Arendt's negative evaluation of the 19th century bourgeois as a suggestion that it deserved destruction. However, Arendt's judgments did not result from the confusion between scientific analysis and moral judgment, but from an intentional and considered strategy based on her convictions concerning political entanglement and political mission of historiography.

³² E. Voegelin, "The Origins of Totalitarianism", "The Review of Politics", vol. 15, iss. 1 (1953), p. 70 and 73.

³³ P. Rieff, *The Theology of Politics: Reflections on Totalitarianism As the Burden of Our Time*, "Journal of Religion", vol. 32, no. 2 (1952), p. 121.

³⁴ S. J. Whitfield, op. cit., p. 255.

³⁵ R. Aron, op. cit., p. 367.

CHAPTER 4

Politics of History

The Idea of Genius and Political Action: Kant

An action, just like a stage performance, reveals the individual identity of actors, in a way that is unpredictable even for the actors themselves. *Sensus communis* [community sense], usually interpreted in the context of a political action, is in my opinion significant in terms of judging the past, and not directly an action. As will be made clear in chapter five, the potential consensus of others associated with *sensus communis* does not relate to the future, but precisely to that which is the past. In political action plurality and performative originality are a value superior to consensus for Arendt. This plurality excludes an absolute or metaphysical point of reference. It is also aesthetic rather than ethical, since it does not require any existing patterns of behavior.³⁶

When Julia Kristeva states that for Arendt "political life resists its own aestheticization", she rightly points toward her resistance to find and implement something permanent into the fragile sphere of political plurality.³⁷ At the same time, thinkers who maintain that Arendt aestheticizes politics are also largely right. Working out of the tradition of critical theory and skeptical toward existential "jargon of authenticity," the American historian of ideas Martin Jay polemicized with Arendt, claiming that autotelic politics is in its very essence elitist, class-bound and autonomous. Moreover, it is supposed to render the achievement of any practical aims impossible.³⁸ Richard Wolin, in turn, implicated Arendt in the anti-democratic effects of aestheticization, being of the opinion that theatrical qualities of action preclude interpersonal solidarity and drift dangerously close to fascism.³⁹

The apparent discrepancies between the conclusions of Kristeva and those of Jay and Wolin result from the equivocal nature of the term "aestheticization," which could be related both to the category of *homo faber* as well as to *zoon politikon*. Creative arts consisting in reification are more closely linked to the category of work, whereas performing arts, such as music or dance, which also involve spectators, are more closely linked to the category of action. As

³⁶K. F. Curtis, *Aesthetic Foundations of Democratic Politics in the Work of Hannah Arendt*, [in:] *Hannah Arendt and the Meaning of Politics*, eds. C. Calhoun, J. McGowan, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis–London 1997, pp. 27-52; idem, *Our Sense of the Real: Aesthetic Experience and Arendtian Politics*, Cornell UP, Ithaca–London 1999, pp. 1-22.

³⁷J. Kristeva, op. cit., p. 43.

³⁸M. Jay, *Hannah Arendt: Opposing Views*, "Partisan Review," Vol. 45, Iss. 3 (1978) pp. 348-368. Jay changed his mind and ceased to interpret aestheticization in Arendt's works in a total manner after reading what her reflections on the *Critique of Judgment* were. See idem, *The Aesthetic Ideology as Ideology: Or What Does It Mean To Aestheticize Politics*, [in:] idem, *Force Fields, Between Intellectual History and Cultural Critique*, Routledge, New York–London 1993, pp. 82-83; idem, *Songs of Experience: Modern American and European Variations on A Universal Theme*, University of California Press, Berkeley–Los Angeles–London 2005, pp. 176-177.

³⁹R. Wolin, *Heidegger's Children: Hannah Arendt, Karl Löwith, Hans Jonas, and Herbert Marcuse*, Princeton UP, Princeton–Oxford 2003, pp. 31-69.

Arendt notes, "in the sense of creative arts [...], politics is the exact opposite of an art."⁴⁰ The similarity to performing arts, by contrast, consists in the fact that as in the case of political action, analogically requiring an audience, "accomplishment lies in the performance itself."⁴¹ Just as political action, performing arts do not lead to the creation of tangible products, nor do they include an element of violence.

If the aforementioned findings are justified, we ought to retrace the trope of the aestheticization of action, first invoking the interpretation of Kant's *Critique of Judgment* by Arendt. In the following fragment, I put forward a thesis that the notion of action as a purpose in itself may be conceptualized by analogy to objects of art, purposeful without purpose, as viewed from the perspective of taste. The performance character of identity can thus be additionally described by conjuring the notion of presentation [*Darstellung*, also referred to as "exhibition"], the product of Kantian genius. Such a depiction, I believe, enables a better grasp of the relation of identity (in other words, an exhibition), which reveals itself in action, to the acting subject (or that which is exhibited). Ultimately, it will further illustrate the role played by judgment in historical interpretation.

I am inclined to believe it was precisely the influence of the notion of genius [*Genie*] to which Arendt's interpretation of *Critique of Judgment* may be attributed. This interpretation, it should be recalled, substitutes for the third volume of *The Life of the Mind*. Arendt refers to the notion of genius briefly in her tenth lecture, but only in the context of its relation to judgment. What is key for Arendt is the subordination of genius to judgment/taste, which is analogous to the actor-spectator relation. In what follows, I attempt to take her analysis a step further, investigating the Kantian notion of genius and proposing the following theses: (1) Genius functions as a talent in service of the "fine arts", which are analogous to proper political action, as understood by Arendt; (2) This resemblance had an undeniable – or, taking into consideration Arendt's inattention to the beauty of nature, which is central or even the main subject of the *Critique of Judgment*, even decisive – influence on her reading of the third critique. In which case, we can assume that the issue might have been further clarified by Arendt herself in the intended third volume of *The Life of the Mind*.

The notion of genius appears in *The Analytic of the Sublime* when the fine or "beautiful arts" are discussed. In the light of the *Critique of Judgment* as a whole, one may note the fine arts are subordinated to the beauty of nature. They are beautiful, in so far as they appear to be natural.⁴² Genius, as a source of fine arts, is a natural gift, "the innate mental disposition [*ingenium*] through which nature gives the rule to art."⁴³

⁴⁰ *Between Past and Future*, p. 153.

⁴¹ *Ibidem*.

⁴² This also could be reversed: nature is beautiful, when it appears to be art, i.e. purposeful, though without any definite purpose. In this sense, Kant's aesthetics poses a passage from the aesthetics of nature to the aesthetics of art. The subordination of the latter to the former is not obvious, the beautiful nature seems to be a work of art of a genius. See D. Burnham, Immanuel Kant (1724-1804). *Theory of Aesthetics and Teleology* ("The Critique of Judgment"), [in:] *The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <http://www.iep.utm.edu/> (accessed 2nd June 2008).

⁴³ *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, § 46, 150.

At the same time, art differs from nature by the fact that "representation of it in its cause must have preceded its actual existence."⁴⁴ Thus understood, an act of the "will" is a condition *sine qua non* for works of art, whereas it is redundant in the case of works of nature. A work of art is always the work of a human being. Kant distinguishes art from "science" and "handicraft" the former being a theoretical faculty, the latter not necessarily being pleasant and performed only for the sake of its effect, for example wages. These issues are of minor importance to Kant himself, who placed greater significance on divisions within the arts themselves.

What is crucial for our purposes is the Kantian distinction between the mechanical and aesthetic arts. Mechanical arts are based on purposeful action, which leads to a certain predetermined product of art. It is "adequate for the cognition of a possible object" and "performs the actions requisite therefore merely in order to make it actual."⁴⁵ Aesthetic arts, in turn, have pleasure as an aim, pleasure that could be of a twofold kind. In the case of the pleasure of the senses, accompanying mere sensations [*Empfindungen*], we find pleasant art, whereas in the case of the "pleasure [...] derived from reflection," which is "universally communicable," we properly speak of fine or beautiful art. It is the latter that principally interests Kant.

As far as mechanical art is concerned, judgment or taste does not correspond to the pleasure derived from reflection, it depends solely on the accordance of a product with its concept, on whether its purpose has been adequately achieved. The mechanical element also constitutes a necessary element in the fine arts: "For some purpose must be conceived; otherwise we could not ascribe the product to art at all; it would be a mere product of chance."⁴⁶ Hence, in fine arts there is likewise space for purposeful action, if understood in a slightly different sense.

To briefly summarize, the defining characteristic of the fine arts is the fact that they appear or seem to be natural. Despite the fact that we recognize that the fine arts are the purposeful products of human beings, they appear to be "free from all constraint of arbitrary rules."⁴⁷ Thus, what is "purposive" [*zweckmäßig*] or "designed" [*absichtlich*] seems to be the exact opposite - purposeless and not designed for us. We neither admire them with respect to concepts (or, in other words, their internal purposiveness), nor - as with pleasant arts, on the basis of mere senses, that is sensations. The fine arts appeal to us exclusively in the act of reflection.

Let us note, therefore, that the disparity between fine and mechanical arts could be captured as the difference between the categories of action and fabrication, *zoon politikon* and *homo faber*. I will invoke an additional etymological argument. Kant writes that in the case of art, we experience "doing" [*facere*] and its result in the form of a "work" [*opus*]. In the case of nature, we experience "acting" [*agere*] and its resultant "working" [*effectus*].⁴⁸ At this point, I may mention what Arendt noticed, namely that the notion of *homo faber* is derived from the

⁴⁴ Ibidem, § 43, p. 146.

⁴⁵ Ibidem, § 44, p. 148.

⁴⁶ Ibidem, § 47, pp. 153.

⁴⁷ Ibidem, § 45, p. 149.

⁴⁸ Ibidem, § 43, p. 145.

Latin word *facere*, in its meaning as making something,⁴⁹ whereas *agere* (proper action), denotes the actual act and is an equivalent of the Greek word *archein*, which in its original sense, before it came to be used in the context of ruling, meant "to set something into motion."⁵⁰ If we consider these facts in relation to the argument concerning the purposiveness of art and the purposiveness without a purpose of nature, we get a hint that proper action should be interpreted as a counterpart to Kantian nature. I claim this parallel is correct, but only in so far as it is applied to the fine arts, which bear resemblance to nature, rather than to nature itself.

We ought to recall that the fine arts, understood in this way, stem from genius. Kant distinguishes four characteristics of genius, all, with the exception of the fourth, surprisingly resembling characteristics of Arendt's concept of action.⁵¹ To begin with, there is originality - genius creates without any rules [*Regeln*] of creation, but at the same time "presupposes a definite concept of the product as the purpose"⁵² Secondly, there is the exemplary character of the products. Their originality notwithstanding, works of fine art may serve as standards and rules for judgment. Thirdly, there is a separation of the product of genius and the notion of purpose; the presentation of a given aesthetic idea surpasses the concept.⁵³ Genius does not mean an accomplishment of the purpose, but an expression of the aesthetic idea. An artist does not possess the knowledge of his own product, "does not know himself how he has come by his ideas; and he has not the power to devise the like at pleasure or in accordance with a plan."⁵⁴ Fourthly, there is the grounding of genius in nature. Since fine arts are not based on concepts, they cannot have any predetermined rules. On the other hand, they cannot lack these rules, with nature is its source. The fine arts therefore belong to nature, in that genius is preserved in them.

It must again be said that it is this latter characteristic which is of preeminent importance to Kant. At least indirectly, it allows for the preservation of the idea of the supremacy of the pure beauty of nature over the beauty of man-made products, rendering the whole *Critique of the Power of Judgment* as a more logical and coherent work. Arendt does not mention this characteristic, unless we determine that the faculty of action is ontologically rooted in "natality" which is equivalent to being rooted in nature.⁵⁵ However, this point is not directly relevant, given that Arendt deals with human actions and not with the beauty of nature. It is human actions that she bears in mind in her *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy* when describing the idea of the power of judgment.

The remaining properties of genius are reflected in the profile of political action. They include, first of all, originality in the form of "unprecedentedness." Secondly, an exemplary

⁴⁹ *Human Condition*, 2nd edition (1998), Chicago & London, University of Chicago Press, p. 136, footnote 1.

⁵⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 177 and 189.

⁵¹ *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, § 46, pp.186-187.

⁵² *Ibidem*, &49, 161.

⁵³ Here, in order to render the German word *Darstellung*, the term "presentation" is used.

⁵⁴ *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, &46, 151.

⁵⁵ Arendt disagrees explicitly with this characteristic of Kant's definition: "genius is, rather, the disposition through which Mankind [and not nature – MM] gives the rule to Art", *Essays in Understanding 1930 - 1954*, (2005) Schocken Books, New York, p. 79.

character of action, which may serve as an inspiration for future actors. And thirdly, a discontinuity between the will of an actor and action itself, that is between an impulse toward disclosing oneself in a specific way and the identity actually being revealed.

In summary, it is worth underlining that action, like the products of genius, is always something new and consists in breaking the chain of historical continuity - it cannot be repeated, but only "re-enacted."⁵⁶ Moreover, it transgresses purposeful intention of the will, as no one is able to design him or herself, and the identity of the actor is always dependent on others. Just as in the fine arts, political action does not exist potentially before it is actualized. Its meaning is supposed to be independent of its intentions and consequences, it is supposed to be *ateleis* i.e. to lie in the activity itself.⁵⁷ Disclosing an identity is analogous to the presentation of an aesthetic idea by genius. A political action in this context turns out to be a "performative work of art"⁵⁸ Art and politics have a strong affinity, " both are the phenomena of the public world."⁵⁹

⁵⁶ *Human Condition*, p. 187.

⁵⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 206.

⁵⁸ *Between Past and Future* (1961) New York: The Viking Press, pp. 153-154. In *The Human Condition*, Arendt perceives the notion of genius with regard to *homo faber* rather than to *zoon politikon*. Such an approach results from her conviction of the tangibility of its product. As the author observes, however, the product of genius differs from that of a craftsman in that it is greater than the creator himself. Viewed in this way, it "appears to have absorbed those elements of distinctness and uniqueness which find their immediate expression only in action and speech [...] the artist transcends his skill and workmanship in a way similar to the way each person's uniqueness transcends the sum total of his qualities", *Human Condition*, p. 210.

⁵⁹ *Between Past and Future*, p. 218.

CHAPTER 6

The Fragmentary Story

Story as Redemption and Oppression: Aporiae of Meaning

Scholars disagree over what a fragmentary storytelling means for Arendt and precisely how it functions. The reason for this uncertainty rests with a certain conceptual ambiguity which is linked to a basic aporia, concerning the ambiguity of meaning itself in Arendt. I would like to begin by investigating this problem, taking into account how it is related to the two functions of storytelling.

As a practical tool of fragmentary historiography, storytelling performs two functions for Arendt. (1) Storytelling is meant to provide redemption from contingency; (2) It can likewise provide redemption from necessity.⁶⁰ Commentators have generally recognized this latter function - in which the fragmentary story redeems the illusion of necessity of the past. The inherent tension between both functions rests on the fact that both types of redemption can turn into opposing forms of repression.⁶¹ Arendt's principal objective, the redemption from contingency, may result in oppression by necessity, and the redemption from necessity may likewise result in oppression by contingency. The first function is associated with fictional aspects of a story, whereas the latter emerges from the real elements of a story. This reciprocal relationship can be represented as follows:

Redemption from Contingency (Fictional Story) → Oppression by Necessity

Redemption from Necessity (Real Story) → Oppression by Contingency

The result of a fictional story would necessitate reference to a real story, and a real story would likewise require a fictional story. In which case, both forms of narration are dependent on reciprocal redemption. In the work of Arendt, the opposition between the two is not particularly clear, but I would like to further explore this opposition, even if it produces a slight over-simplification, as it will lead us to the essence of the basic aporia in question.

The ontological foundation of this ambiguity rests on the status of the past, which is both a contingent future that has passed and a necessity for our present existence. In other words, the past needs redemption both in its contingent and necessary variations. As we have partially seen, the function of the redemption from contingency refers also to the construction of narrative identity and seems to be ontologically basic. In the case of the illusion of the

⁶⁰ I use the term "redemption" following Seyla Benhabib, who claimed it is a function of storytelling, a method Arendt employs in her political theory, as long as it refers to the fragments of the past. See S. Benhabib, *Hannah Arendt and the Redemptive Power of Narrative*, „Social Research”, Vol. 57, Iss. 1 (1990) pp. 167-197.

⁶¹ I use the term oppression as a synonym for the violence of representation. In the context of narration, it is directly linked to the verticality of the Western epistemological tradition. The tradition is conclusive-oriented, which in the case of narration is expressed by its closure. See O. Guaraldo, *Storylines: Politics, History and Narrative from an Arendtian Perspective*, University of Jyväskylä, SoPhi 2001.

necessity of coherent life story, as exemplified by Rahel Varnhagen and Karen Blixen, more substantial will be the function of redemption from necessity.

Seyla Benhabib was among those who noted the ambiguity of the status of stories, as employed by Arendt. Yet, her focus was not precisely the ambiguity of storytelling as historical method, but rather of a tension between the method and the legacy of German philosophy within Arendt's work. According to Benhabib, storytelling is a synonym for a fragmentary method, inspired by the methodology of Walter Benjamin and constituting a tool in Arendt's political theory.⁶² This legacy of German philosophy in the form of *Verfallgeschichte* [history of decline] is perhaps most visible in Arendt's *The Human Condition*. Benhabib is primarily interested in this fragmentary approach, which she claims to be superior - even if the tension between the two methods remains unresolved.⁶³ According to Benhabib, the function of storytelling is anti-scientific. It is the redemption from necessity, a break with chronology and historical continuity.⁶⁴ The matter is likewise presented by Olivia Guaraldo, who also employs the notion of redemption, which invokes the methodology of Walter Benjamin. In her view, storytelling guarantees the redemption of continuity and progress and redeems us from the fictional unity of history.

The purpose of storytelling has been likewise approached by Annette Vowinckel, who thinks that Arendt's fragmentary method is principally indebted to Martin Heidegger and his "phenomenology of unconcealment," which tries to unfold the emergence of particulars. The function of storytelling is therefore to break with the rule of causality and strive to reveal what is general through what is specific, in a word - redemption from necessity. In his analysis, Ronald Beiner takes a similar approach, stating that judgment in the form of narrative guarantees the "redemption" of action, appreciating singularity and enabling us to "experience a sense of positive pleasure in the contingency of the particular."⁶⁵ Which is simply a redemption from fatalism and historical necessity. The views cited above are not unsound. The liberation from continuity, understood as a typical tool of the Occidental tradition is indeed a priority for Arendt. The "political principle implied in the enterprise of reclamation" of the past was supplied in a maxim by Cato "*victrix causa diis placuit, sed victa Catoni* [the victorious cause pleases the gods, but the defeated one pleases Cato]," which also appeared as a motto in the volume on judgment.⁶⁶ Admittedly, gods favor the victors. However, as a spectator, the historian ought to favor the defeated. The historian might thereby turn against the Hegelian notion of history - as a court of world judgment - and rescue from the past what is exceptional and extraordinarily, what goes beyond the chain of standard and victorious accounts. By way of judgment and storytelling, the historian will liberate him or herself from

⁶² S. Benhabib, op. cit., p. 186.

⁶³ Ibidem, p. 191.

⁶⁴ Ibidem, p. 182.

⁶⁵ R. Beiner, *Interpretive essay*, [in:] [*Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*] LKPP, p. 118.

⁶⁶ LOM I, p. 216.

historical necessity.⁶⁷ Undoubtedly, the objective in Arendt's storytelling is to avoid, in presenting the past, the "retrospective illusion of fatality" as Raymond Aron put it.⁶⁸

Storytelling was nevertheless meant to perform yet another function. As I have tried to demonstrate in the previous chapter, the negative implications of the fictional story, forcing a strait-jacket of fabrication on historical reality, were moderated by Arendt, who pointed to the positive role of such an interpretation that might coax out a coherence and essence for a life story, which would otherwise be absent. The function of uniting the story of a life appeared to be ontologically primary, whereas the function of redemption from necessity is consequent of an intention to alleviate the potentially oppressive effects of this former operation.

The tension between these functions of storytelling rests with the potential transformation of the redemption from contingency taking the form of the rule by necessity. This is the principal risk of a transformation of historiography into the philosophy of politics, which - from a historical point of view - has often taken place. In *On Revolution*, Arendt analyses a semantic change in the employment of the term "revolution," a change resulting from the storytelling of spectators and largely responsible for the defeat of the revolutionary movement.⁶⁹ This thesis constitutes the critical center of the entire work. It is because spectators' point of view leads to interpretation of history as a means of revealing the truth. In order to maintain its philosophical dignity, this truth must be universal in its ambition.⁷⁰ According to Arendt, revolutionaries were "fooled" by history, in so far as they have failed to view it from the perspective of actors.

With reference to Hayden White's theory of history, we might note that the ideological implications of all stories arise because of their unnatural endings, which present the historical world as finished. Therefore, as White remarks, "narrative discourse serves the purpose of moralizing judgments."⁷¹ Historical narration, unlike medieval chronicles, imposes a fictional coherence on the past, first and foremost, through an unnatural closure not present in the past reality. Despite the fact that Arendt views such evaluation and projection as threatening in principle, leaving reality in its original and contingent state is equally dangerous.⁷² Both extremities, that of total determinism and total contingency, are paralyzing for an action.

⁶⁷ Jakub Szczepański puts a slightly different interpretation on Cato's phrase. See J. Szczepański, *Polityczna władza sądzienia*, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, Kraków 2009, pp. 125-134.

⁶⁸ In his work *Introduction a la Philosophie de l'histoire* (1937), p. 183. As cited in: P. Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, translated by Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004, p.382.

⁶⁹ *OR*, pp. 34-52.

⁷⁰ This is another sign of the *aporia* discussed, insofar as the meaning of developments are not revealed until considered retrospectively.

⁷¹ H. White, *The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality*, [in:] idem, *The Content of the Form, Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation*, Thee John Hopkins UP, Baltimore-London 1987, p. 24.

⁷² White's later experiments with the dialectical images of Walter Benjamin and new forms of representation, serving to express the so-called modern event, may be interpreted as a sign of anxiety about the radical consequences of ideology, which limits possible visions of the future. See H. Paul, *The Masks of Meaning, Existentialist Humanism in Hayden White's Philosophy of History*, Rijksuniversiteit, Groningen 2006, pp. 169-200.

The ground of the tension between these two functions of the story are two notions of “meaning.” As we have already observed, the notion of greatness illustrates the fact that the meaning of an action lies in performance itself, and not in its ungraspable motives or effects. The “innermost meaning” of an act, also referred to by Arendt as the “specific meaning of each deed,” is fulfilled in the disclosure of the “who”, and is purely performative.⁷³ Therefore, meaning does not rest with the intentions of the performer, not with the effects of the performance: “the innermost meaning [...] must remain untouched by any eventual outcome.”⁷⁴

Because an action as a purpose in itself is a proper source of power, the latter needs no justification through an appeal to the future, that is to say, power needs no justification of a given action as a means toward a particular purpose. Power only requires legitimacy that consists in an appeal to consent or an agreement about that which stands behind it - the past.⁷⁵ Nevertheless, when viewed from a historical perspective, an action, the meaning of which was to remain unchanged by its effects, needs to be deprived of contingency and provided with a new meaning. According to Arendt, the “full meaning” of a life story may be given only by a historian looking back at the past:

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. All accounts told by the actors themselves, though they may in rare cases give an entirely trustworthy statement of intentions, aims, and motives, become mere useful source material in the historian's hands and can never match his story in significance and truthfulness. What the storyteller narrates must necessarily be hidden from the actor himself, at least as long as he is in the act or caught in its consequences, because to him the meaningfulness of his act is not in the story that follows. Even though stories are the inevitable results of action, it is not the actor but the storyteller who perceives and ‘makes’ the story.⁷⁶

I read the placing of “makes” in inverted commas to suggest the following: storytelling does not literally mean making something, but representing the past as being made. The quotation above also makes clear that a life story is not equivalent to a story “made” by the historian. The stories of the historian may refer to a single life story, biography, or any other story that takes into account the effects of past actions. A moment later, Arendt remarks that the meaning of the whole is hidden from the performer and is revealed only in the backward glance of a spectator.⁷⁷ In her later works the concept of the spectator is introduced.

The previous chapter shows that the spectator stands outside events, which is a condition both for judgment and understanding, and what enables a recognition of the historical meaning of events. Strictly speaking, the spectator perceives “the meaning of the whole,” the sense of an action in the context of an imagined whole.⁷⁸ This meaning is never final, due to the constant

⁷³ HC, p. 206.

⁷⁴ Ibidem, p. 205.

⁷⁵ CR, pp. 150-151.

⁷⁶ HC, p. 192.

⁷⁷ Ibidem, p. 233.

⁷⁸ LOM I, p. 96.

movement of history, which renders it unavailable as a whole. Nevertheless, it is "the spectator and not the actor [who] holds the clue to the meaning of human affairs."⁷⁹

The meaning of an act is itself related to the function of redemption from necessity, because a deed breaks historical continuity. In turn, historical meaning imposes retrospective continuity and is related to the function of redemption from contingency. The tension between the opposing functions of storytelling may be further exemplified and scrutinized through the concepts of "essence" and "melancholy", as used by Arendt. While "the living essence of a person" emerges only through particular actions and is ungraspable, "the human essence" may be seen from the perspective of the end of life.⁸⁰ In which case, the story of a life as a whole may be perceived solely from the outside, that is when the life in question is finished. This is why no mortal can be called genuinely happy, before his or her death.⁸¹ Both types of meaning as well as both types of essence may be perceived only from the outside, i.e. by spectators. At the same time, only temporal distance distinguishes "political" from "historical" spectators.

In *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, Arendt notes that Kant deemed the idea of progress a "rather melancholy notion."⁸² Additionally, she cites his opinion on progress in *On Violence*, underlining its "melancholy side effects."⁸³ She invokes a fragment of *The End of All Things*, where Kant explicitly states that "the representation of an infinite progression toward the final end is nevertheless at the same time a prospect on an infinite series of ills which [...] do not allow for the possibility of contentment."⁸⁴ It is worth noting that neither in *The End of All Things* nor in the *Idea for a Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Perspective*, the essays by Kant to which Arendt refers, does the notion of melancholy *ad litteram* appear. Arendt employs the term in order to clarify the negative symptoms of progress stemming from its necessary character, i.e. closing the horizon of the future, thus inhibiting novelty and paralyzing authentic action.

In the same lecture where she mentions the melancholy of progress, Arendt also discusses the "haphazard, contingent melancholy" of history.⁸⁵ In the following lectures, she mentions the "melancholy haphazardness" of the world of human affairs.⁸⁶ Kant's response to this state of affairs, his solution to the "deep-rooted melancholy disposition" was an escape into a whole, into a philosophy of history. The gateway for this position was the idea of progress of humankind, understood as a part of nature. Only in this way could history make sense to Kant.⁸⁷ As in the case of the melancholy of progress, the notion of contingent melancholy

⁷⁹ Ibidem.

⁸⁰ HC, pp. 181 and 193.

⁸¹ LOM I, p. 164.

⁸² LKPP I, p. 9.

⁸³ CR, p. 128.

⁸⁴ I. Kant, *The End of All Things*, [in:] Immanuel Kant, *Religion and Rational Theology*, translated and edited by Allen W. Wood, George di Giovanni, Cambridge University Press, pp.227-228.

⁸⁵ LKPP I, p. 8.

⁸⁶ LKPP IV, p.24. The notion of melancholic unpredictability appears repeatedly. See BPF, pp. 82, 85, and 242, LKPP, p. 24, LOM II, p. 154.

⁸⁷ LKPP IV, p. 25.

does not appear explicitly in Kant, but takes the form of the German word *trostlos*.⁸⁸ This second type of melancholy involves a loss of the whole which grants meaning to the particular, whereas the melancholy of progress means precisely the reverse: a loss of the particular for the sake of the progress of the whole.

Pursuant to what Arendt claimed, the inability to harmonize the idea of intrinsic human dignity and the notion of progress of the human species, constitutes the main discrepancy in Kant's philosophy.⁸⁹ Meanwhile, an analogous discrepancy may be found in her own philosophy. It is not the disjuncture between human dignity and progress, but between the dignity or meaning of a deed in itself and the meaning that a deed may assume from the perspective of the spectator. On the one hand, Arendt underlines the necessity of the "redemption from melancholy haphazardness" of a political action, on the other hand, she strives to liberate political action from historical totality or wholeness, especially from melancholy of progress.⁹⁰

In the last of her *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, Arendt states that Hegel is right claiming that the owl of Minerva spreads its wings at dusk. This is supposed to be true "for all stories," but not true in reference to the "deed in itself."⁹¹ In this context, what does storytelling mean, and what does a deed in itself mean? If the story is that of a life story, the meaning of which is not revealed until it is over, whereas a deed in itself is a particular action in this very story, the meaning of the latter is supposed to depend on the entirety of this life story, and be visible only after it comes to an end, as well as be fully independent from such a whole. On the other hand, if this life story functions in a manner analogous to a deed in itself, i.e. has its own internal meaning, the concept of a story in the quote above may denote a historical whole, stories in the plural, while a particular life story may well be a deed in itself.

This is how Arendt perceives a story in the Greek understanding, which is always a "particular story."⁹² Elsewhere, she notes that when life ends, a life story becomes "an entity in itself."⁹³ Thus, a particular story or a story in itself seems to be the same as a single act, which contains its full meaning, irrespective of any future consequences. In such circumstances, the owl of Minerva would give meaning not to a single story, but rather stories in the plural form, the effects of which would change their inner sense. The perspective then would shift toward historical wholes, and would depart from a single act. After all, what would an act be if a single life story also comprised a whole in itself? But the tension in question would remain intact, becoming a tension between a single story containing all its meaning, and larger stories in the plural form, a sense of which, dependent on the unintended consequences perceived by the spectators of history, would never be final.

⁸⁸ The German "*trostlos*" means "bleak" or "miserable," so it reflects a mood, which may be associated with melancholy.

⁸⁹ LKPP IX.

⁹⁰ BPF, p. 85.

⁹¹ LKPP XIII, p. 37.

⁹² LKPP IX, p. 56.

⁹³ LOM I, p. 164.

Instead of unraveling the aporia of two opposing functions of historiography, I would like to emphasize the tension which it constitutes. Anticipating a solution offered later, storytelling combines two kinds of meaning, being at the same time a fabrication and a political action. Its aim lies in redemption from the contingency of the past, which leaves the future intact and untouched. Before we discuss this point, I would like to draw attention once again to the epistemological discontinuity between historical reality and a story being told about this reality, which is particularly significant for Arendt's theory.

The Odysseus' Paradox: The Impossibility of Fulfillment

In an essay entitled *The Concept of History: Ancient and Modern*, Arendt notes that the scene in *The Odyssey* when Odysseus, listening to a story praising his deeds in Troy by the bard Demodocus at a feast at Phaeacians, begins to weep, is “paradigmatic for history.” Knowing the facts from his own past, why does he cry? Had the story included solely facts, he “would have been bored rather than moved.” Yet, “what has been sheer occurrence now became ‘history.’”⁹⁴ Odysseus weeps because he was not quite aware of the sense of his life while it was being lived. It was not the experience of events in the past, but their reconstruction in a meaningful story that moved his emotions and brought him to tears. “Only when he hears the story does he become fully aware of its meaning.”⁹⁵

The meaning of Odysseus' life is first seen by the “eyes of the mind” of the blind poet. He sees the whole that remains invisible for an actor engaged in the events. In his imagination, particular deeds or acts “fit together and produce a harmony.”⁹⁶ This proper meaning is revealed only in a story being told, and not in a life story. . The scene from *The Odyssey* is therefore paradigmatic, in so far as it is not about the cognitive value of a story. The picture of the weeping Odysseus, who knows the facts of his own life, illustrates the principal motivation behind writing history: it is not knowledge but reconciliation with reality, which is conditioned on “reenactment” and “imitation” of action through words and thereby consists in “transforming” the past.⁹⁷

Adriana Cavarero refers to this situation as “a paradox of Ulysses [Odysseus],”⁹⁸ a paradox which lies in the identity of the hero being imposed upon him by someone else. Only having heard the story being told by Demodocus does Odysseus realize “who” he really is. He is thereby freed to start his own autobiographical story about adventures dating back to the time he was leaving Troy. These are chronicled in the four stories of the *The Odyssey* that follow. Much like Arendt, Caravarero notes that the identity of a man, his who, may be made known only through biography, through storytelling concerning a life story. The identity of one's self or the who becomes visible as a “unity,” and a pattern, previously invisible from the perspective of an actor emerges. As far as this remark concerns identity understood as the what, and as long as we remember that it is impossible to capture the who as revealed directly in action, it is congruent with Arendt's thought.

But Caravarero pursues the subject further. According to her, since we are unable to see our who,, our identity it must be imposed on us by the other. She further claims that for Arendt an autobiography would pose an “absurd exercise,” as no one is able to know and recognize his or her own “who.”⁹⁹ In this way, Odysseus allegedly did not know himself, only learning

⁹⁴ BPF, p. 45.

⁹⁵ *The Life of the Mind I*, p. 132.

⁹⁶ Ibidem, p. 133.

⁹⁷ BPF, p. 45.

⁹⁸ A. Cavarero, *Relating Narratives, Storytelling and Selfhood*, translated by P. A. Kottman, Routledge, London–New York 2000. For Cavarero, Arendt is a valuable source of inspirations for her own concept of “narratable self”. See ibidem, pp. 33-34.

⁹⁹ Ibidem, p. 24.

“who” he was in the story of Demodocus, which moved him to tears and in a way prompted or made possible his autobiographical story

Caravaro is right in arguing that Odysseus, like every human being, does not know him or herself, is not conscious of his or her identity, his or her own fleeting who. However, she is wrong in claiming that the protagonist of *The Odyssey* may only be able to see himself through the story of the other. The identity Odysseus perceives in the story of Demodocus is an objectified identity. Objectifying himself, Odysseus may likewise impose an identity on himself. Consequently, he is able to recognize himself in the story of the other, as well as in his own autobiographical story. Yet, in both cases, what he observes is not his political identity, but its representation – an identity objectified.

Hearing the story being told by Demodocus of himself, Odysseus has not perceived his own who, but the who of Demodocus, revealed in front of him while he was objectifying someone else. He could have seen the political sense of Demodocus' action as well as the historical sense of his own biography.

Long before the story of Demodocus was told, Odysseus must have known who he was, insofar as he was able to tell his own story himself. He is Odysseus of Ithaca, who wishes to come back home, to his previous life. Arendt is mistaken in claiming that Odysseus had never previously wept. On the contrary, he had cried often, perhaps too often, but such is the result of his frequent representing himself to himself, i.e. telling himself his own life story. Already when held captive by the nymph Calypso, Odysseus' "heart strain[s] with tears and groans and sorrow".¹⁰⁰ He suffered knowing who he is and being aware of the fact that he lost his home – his "eyes [were] always full of tears, because his sweet life was passing while he mourned for his return."¹⁰¹ While making use both of the love of the goddess and unlimited access to ambrosia, he simultaneously longed for his previous life and Penelope. Later, at the court of Alcinoos, he was aware of his own plight. Even before Demodocus started singing, Odysseus had stated, with tears in his eyes, that he is the unhappiest of men. And he did not cry only once after Demodocus began telling his story. Interestingly, Odysseus was ashamed of his tears and so every time Demodocus started a song, he would hide his face in a cloak, in order not to reveal his who, intensely experiencing the sight of his objectified identity.¹⁰² The next song of Demodocus, this time initiated on explicit request of Odysseus, made him cry even more, which is probably the scene that Arendt had in mind. Homer compares his "face [which] grew wet with tears" to the cries of a woman who prostrates herself on her dead husband.¹⁰³ This marked the intensity of Odysseus' emotions, having witnessed the death of his older self, belonging now to the past, which he could perceive as a whole only from the

100 Homer, *The Odyssey*, translated by Ian Johnston, Arlington, Virginia, Richer Resources Publications, 2006, p. 102.

¹⁰¹ Ibidem, p. 102.

¹⁰² Ibidem, p. 144.

¹⁰³ Ibidem, p. 161.

perspective of consequences. The hero also wept on his arrival home - with his son Telemachus and then with his wife Penelope, as they all "shed tears."¹⁰⁴

Asked why he keeps crying by king Alcinous, Odysseus sighs and introduces himself as "Odysseus, son of Laertes," thereby revealing his what rather than his who.¹⁰⁵ What follows is the long autobiography already mentioned - a story describing the numerous adventures of Odysseus and his "misery." Yet, already prior to this, also at the feast of the Phaeacians, but before hearing the story about himself, Odysseus, when asked to "tell me your country and your people," answered with an autobiographical story about his seven years of captivity on Calypso's island.¹⁰⁶ He knew, then, the "who" that he was, otherwise he would not have been able to undertake action and set out on a journey. Still, he was not aware of everything. At a minimum, his tale itself proves that he had reported on his journey earlier, for instance to the goddess Circe.¹⁰⁷ And thus, he knew who he was and was able to tell his story to others.

Introducing himself to Alcinous as "Odysseus, son of Laertes," he objectifies himself, his name functioning now as a "narrative substance", following the notion of Ankersmit. It is because the name "Odysseus" does not refer to the past itself, but to its representation - to entirety of a biographical story. It is a *linguistic thing*, that is a "what".¹⁰⁸ As Arendt observes, in the story told by the bard, Odysseus is an "object" that everyone, including himself, can hear and see.¹⁰⁹ This status of an object holds in the story told by Odysseus himself. To supplement Arendt's thought - the real Odysseus attributes to "Odysseus" some features, actions, and adventures, which - strictly speaking - do not refer to himself. It is because, in point of fact there was no "Odysseus" in the past. There were only particular actions, disclosures of identity. It is only now, in retrospect and from the perspective of consequences, that a whole in the form of "Odysseus" is constituted.

Given that it is Odysseus, not Demodocus, who is now telling the story, the spectators see both the object - the "what" of "Odysseus" - and the narrating hero. The fullness of Odysseus' identity - his disclosing "who" being a representation of his past disclosures, being in turn the represented object, can only be grasped by listening to his story about himself, the real aspects of which will forever remain hidden from himself. It is because oneself discloses oneself solely to the other, and never to oneself. Irrespective of whether it is a biography or an autobiography, this "who" remains concealed from the narrator. It is exclusively the spectator listening to the autobiographical story of Odysseus who can grasp two kinds of meaning - political and historical - united in a single act of representation, occurring in an extended present.

His who is also revealed in the invented story Odysseus tells in disguise, not wanting to be recognized. Both the fictitious story Odysseus tells the swineherd Eumaeus, introducing himself as a newcomer from Crete, and a story told to Penelope, disclose the "who" of

¹⁰⁴ Ibidem, p. 320.

¹⁰⁵ Ibidem, p. 164.

¹⁰⁶ Ibidem, p.162.

¹⁰⁷ Ibidem, p. 235.

¹⁰⁸ F. Ankersmit, *Danto on Representation, Identity and Indiscernibles*, pp. 236-237.

¹⁰⁹ BPF, p. 45.

Odysseus, even though they are full of false facts and none of the listeners recognize the hero.¹¹⁰ The words being told are a lie, yet they reveal the truth about Odysseus.

The significance of the division into objectified and objectifying identity, into “what” and “who,” is likewise apparent when Odysseus is back in Ithaca. He is recognized as the same yet different by Telemachus, Argus (his dog) and Penelope. The nurse Eurycleia, who has known him since his childhood years, recognizes him when washing his feet, observing a particular wound.¹¹¹ Likewise Penelope knows that spouses will recognize each other through signs - and so she checks if Odysseus knows, what he, being himself, should know. However, this is not enough to determine his current identity. The physical recognition and the test of his knowledge constitute just a threshold to his actual identity. Not knowing who they have become in the time that has passed, Odysseus and Penelope cry. After they "had the joy of making love" - analogous to the feast at Phaeacians, when Odysseus had to consume prior to listening, crying and telling the story - Penelope tells Odysseus about what she had been through and he tells her of his troubles and grief.¹¹² Despite the fact that they had earlier recognized themselves as the same, they had to report to each other everything that had taken place since their last meeting. The story of the bard or anyone else would not suffice, because they wished not only to get to know who they were, in the sense of what was narrated, but also who they are, in the sense established by themselves as narrators of the story. They both desired to experience the inner, political meaning of action, that is to experience life as an act of storytelling.

If life consists in telling stories, if the line between the narrating and the narrated self is blurred, should not also the line between reality and fiction disappear? If everyone is a protagonist (actor) and at the same time a creator (spectator), is not life itself a story? I have attempted to show that this is not how things stand. Narrative representation grants insight thinkable only in retrospect. The transcendental aspect of a narrative lies in the narrative form posing a universal condition of possibility for giving meaning to the past.¹¹³ It may refer both to the past epoch and its actors, and to the narrator himself. In the latter case, narration splits life into two parts - the past and the story - and we ourselves become the historians of our own lives. At the same time, while representing ourselves, we become someone else - someone representing our former, lost identity, objectified into the form of a story about our previous life. In this role of representatives, we are more than what we represent and what we could have earlier represented. We break the continuity which usually accompanies us in everyday life and we reveal ourselves in a completely new way - as representing ourselves in *this*, and not another, manner. What is represented in our story may be observed by ourselves, but we do not experience the very act of representation, which is visible to the spectator of our one-actor performance alone.

¹¹⁰ Homer, *The Odyssey*, p. 276ff. and 376ff..

¹¹¹ Ibidem, p. 389.

¹¹² Ibidem, p. 461.

¹¹³ F. Ankersmit, „Narrative” (unpublished text), p. 5.

Notwithstanding such claims, the aporia of the story is never definitively overcome. In an autobiographical story, the two kinds of identified meaning do not coincide with one another completely. Although we can experience the meaning of an act of representation itself, identity being represented in this act is never the entirety of our life story. As long as life continues, it cannot be captured as a whole. In turn, when it departs, it can be told only by others. A biographic story, even if it objectifies the whole of one's identity, does not show the fleeting who of its hero. On the other hand, an autobiographical story reveals the identity of the narrator, but what is objectified always remains a step behind the act of representation, never giving an account of the whole life story. No one is capable of seeing and telling the whole of his life story. The yearning for ultimate meaning is never completely satisfied. The aporia of the story turns out to be an irremovable feature of the finite human condition.

CONCLUSIONS

A point of departure and an axis of reference for the analysis presented in this book was *The Origins of Totalitarianism* – a fragmentary story being both a diagnosis and a remedy for the crisis of modernity, which manifested itself in the break with tradition rendering a gap between the past and the present. There is a motto that first appears in Karl Jaspers' *Von der Wahrheit* (1947), which we might use to succinctly and accurately capture the fragmentary history of Arendt: *Weder dem Vergangenen anheimfallen noch dem Zukünftigen. Es kommt darauf an, ganz gegenwärtig zu sein* – give yourself neither to the past, nor to the future. What matters is to be entirely present.¹¹⁴ In order to grasp the actual meaning of this phrase, we need to take into account the entire interpretative path that we have gone through – the philosophy of history in its speculative, critical, and historiographical dimensions, linking individual chapters of this book into a whole, and weaving together, like a thread, the phenomenon of totalitarianism with every story about the past and individual identity – and recall its conclusions. Every story being an instrument for dealing with the contingencies of the world and of the self is potentially catastrophic, a fact illustrated in the extreme by totalitarianism. While creating and preserving the narrative continuity that is necessary both for subject formation and undertaking political action, one must be careful not to turn an interpretation of the past into a “retrospective prophecy”, one presenting “the past as a meaningful ‘preparation’ for the future.”¹¹⁵ In order to avoid these catastrophic effects and escape the captivity of a futuristic distortion, as Karl Löwith calls it, we must resign from any linkage of teleology and historiography, a linkage that exploits determinate references to the end and in which the classical *historiein* is distorted characteristically through Jewish prophetics and Christian eschatology.

In the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, when discussing the subjective character of the purposiveness of nature in the reflexive judgment of taste, Immanuel Kant invokes, by a way of an illustration of the free formation of nature, a sudden transition from a fluid to a solid state that is the process of crystallization.¹¹⁶ The process in itself is futile, sudden and fluctuating, and it is only subjectively, through aesthetic judgment, that it is regarded as directed toward achieving an aim. *The Origins of Totalitarianism* provides an example of such an aesthetic judgment, which in this case is expressed by the act of narration. As presented in the book, the past is purposive without purpose. Which is to say that it is purposive insofar as totalitarianism, grounded in free will, while being accidental, and metaphorically referred to by Arendt as a crystallization of elements, producing a new historical quality, which appears to be the purpose of previous events. This aesthetic illusion is necessary to redeem the contingency of the past, while leaving intact an awareness that this road traveled was marked by melancholic haphazardness.

¹¹⁴ *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, p. vii.

¹¹⁵ K. Löwith, *Meaning in History. The Theological Implications of the Philosophy of History*, University of Chicago Press (1949), p. 6.

¹¹⁶ *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, § 58, pp. 221-225.

The notion of totalitarianism is (if only in *The Origins*) reflexive in the broadest sense of the word. It forms a narrative closure that organizes the entirety of this historical narration. It also lacks a definite status, being further broken down into its elements, i.e. reflexive notions of a lower order. Only from the viewpoint of an apparent purpose of totalitarianism are we able to notice the elements forming it. . These elements are “wholes” and include anti-Semitism, racism, and imperialism. Considered separately, these elements can be also seen as purposive without a purpose in the sense described above, and moreover as serving an existential function of narrating history in the form of a non-teleological redemption of the contingencies of the past.

According to many scholars, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* is a perversion of science. According to Arendt, fragmentary historiography is undoubtedly the right method, an illustration of how to tackle the history after the break with the past. With the conviction that there is no predetermined essence of the past, it can only be imposed with the perspective of hindsight, and in so far as the narrative constructions therein take the form of a chaotic collage of micro-stories, Arendt may be regarded as a forerunner of historiographical postmodernism.¹¹⁷ Her book is an example of a disclosive political action – it reveals the sympathies and antipathies of a historian, her subjective preferences, judgments, prejudices and opinions. It is a book which both proposes and undertakes the very work of separating us from the past.

Arendt would probably agree with Isaiah Berlin, who claimed, as previously mentioned, that *The Origins* cannot be considered a scientific work, but a result of free associations. However, she would refute his accusations concerning the metaphysical status of these associations. Through arranging fragments of the past into remarkable new constellations, Arendt wished to expose metaphysics – modern science was for her metaphysical as well as scientific historiography – and thereby draw conclusions from the loss of the past as a coherent whole. *The Origins of Totalitarianism* provides an excellent model of a disturbed narrative, which flinches from any coherence, typical of literary works.¹¹⁸ Interruptions, discontinuity, the effects of disorientation and uncertainty play to the strengths of the book, cutting it off from the ideals of non-contradiction and completeness, which, at any rate, can never be achieved as far as historical work is concerned.

Incoherence for Arendt is an asset, not a failing. The author indicates that incoherence may have an interpretative value, even if it is difficult to establish a borderline between desired incoherence and undesirable nonsense. Hence, it could be stated that fragmentary historiography serves as a praise of interpretative inconsequence.¹¹⁹ When viewed from a theoretical angle, inconsequence is linked to a logical contradiction, whereas in the narrative

¹¹⁷ F. Ankersmit, *Historiography and Postmodernism*, „History and Theory”, Vol. 28, Iss. 2 (1989), pp. 137-153.

¹¹⁸ I borrow the expression disturbed narrative from Kalle Pihleinen. See K. Pihleinen, *On history as communication and constraint*, „Ideas in History”, Vol. 4, Iss. 2 (2009), pp. 63-89. In Pihleinen's interpretation it is the past that creates gaps and disruptions on an aesthetic level of presenting the past, as opposed to the case of literary fiction, in which the picture of the past may remain coherent.

¹¹⁹ L. Kołakowski, *Pochwała niekonsekwencji* [in:] idem, *Pochwała niekonsekwencji. Pisma rozproszone z lat 1955-1968*, pp. 154-160 [In Praise of Inconsistency: Uncollected Writings, 1955-1968] ed. Zbigniew Mentzel. London: Puls, 1989].

practice it enables the avoidance of fictional coherence. Consequentialism is a kind of fanaticism, precluding values incongruent with a given order of representation. The world of values permeating historical narration is not based on binary logical values, various values may be mutually permeating and precluding.

In this sense, fragmentary historiography is undeniably closer in proximity to political action, which consists in speaking in the public sphere composed of the reading and receptive audience, rather than being directed toward the academic values of truth and intersubjective verification. It neither expresses a longing for the past, nor reflects its truth. Furthermore, it does not anticipate, as scientific prognosis attempts, future realities. Its aim is paradoxical, and it consists in creating the space of meaning between the past and the future, and in making oneself at home in the gap in time, which on the one hand enables the redemption of the past, while leaving the autonomy of the future intact. This is significant, since we are all like Odysseus - aware and at the same time unaware of who we really are. Constantly a step behind ourselves, we strive, without any success, to catch our own shadows. In seeking our own paths, not only we should recognize what we have survived but also be ready to encounter the unexpected.