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# The Poetic Nature of Political Disclosure: Hannah Arendt's Storytelling

Hannah Arendt always chose to emphasize what could be considered her negative identity (she was neither a philosopher, nor a feminist, nor a Zionist, nor a liberal, nor a positivist, nor a pragmatist[1]) rather than explain or define herself. Her purpose was to be "independent" even though, as she noted in a letter to Gershom Scholem, this was likely to engender "trouble."[2] Her independence or marginality is expressed in three interrelated areas of her work: her endeavor to elaborate "distinctions" that historical and political sciences were unable to make; her thinking from a position distinct from the traditional philosophical vantage point; and her writing of political theory through storytelling. The last, her "old-fashioned storytelling,"[3] has given rise to many hypotheses and commentaries, from

1. See Hannah Arendt, " 'What Remains? The Language Remains.' A Conversation with Günter Gaus," *Essays in Understanding: 1930-1954* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1994), 1, and "A Reply" [to Eric Vogelin's review of *Origins of Totalitarianism*], *Review of Politics* 15 (1953): 80. I am indebted to Maureen Whitebrook, Fabrice Larat, Margaret Canovan and an anonymous reviewer of *Clio* for suggestions and support.

2. Hannah Arendt to Gershom Scholem, July 24, 1963, *The Jew as Pariah* (New York: Grove P, 1978), 250.

3. Hannah Arendt, "Action and the Pursuit of Happiness," 1960, Library of Congress, MSS Box 61, 1.

Ernest Vollrath's early and still most pertinent article,[4] to Lisa Disch's acute understanding of Arendt's thought in her book *Hannah Arendt and the Limits of Philosophy*.[5] According to Vollrath, stories gave Arendt a sense of belonging, unattainable in objective theory, and allowed her better to apprehend political phenomena. David Luban analyzed Arendt's storytelling as an antipositivist methodology permitting her to understand the period that she called "dark times" and that includes totalitarianism.[6] Both Vollrath and Luban argued that in dark times, when political action and understanding are in danger of being annihilated, only storytelling has the capacity to provide the political thinker with an access route to the political. Seyla Benhabib showed that, for Arendt, stories were a "redemptive narrative," allowing the thinker to fill the gap between past and present, a gap caused by the breaking down of tradition: "When tradition has ceased to orient our sense of the past . . . the theorist as storyteller is like the pearl diver, who converts the memory of the dead into something 'rich and strange.' "[7]

More recently, Lisa Disch proposed a different interpretation of Arendt's work. She characterized Arendt's critical thinking position as "situated impartiality," or "visiting" that avoided the Archimedean vantage point as well as concrete political involvement. Disch's notion of "situated impartiality" denotes "a critical decision that is not justified with reference to an abstract standard of right but by visiting a plurality of diverging public standpoints." In this context, "the process of visiting might be conceived as telling oneself the story of a situation from the plurality of its constituent perspectives" (162-63). Disch argued that storytelling was Arendt's way of renewing the definition and the task of the political thinker, moving away from

4. Ernest Vollrath, "Hannah Arendt and the Method of Political Thinking," *Social Research* 44 (1977): 160-82.

5. Lisa Disch, *Hannah Arendt and the Limits of Philosophy* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1994).

6. David Luban, "Explaining Dark Times: Hannah Arendt's Theory of Theory," *Social Research* 50 (1983): 218.

7. Seyla Benhabib, "Hannah Arendt and the Redemptive Power of Narrative," *Social Research* 57 (1990): 188.

mainstreams of political thought, and expressing her own critical understanding of public life.

In this essay, I seek out the meanings of Arendt's narrative method in her specific conception of the political; that is, I attempt to show that this conception led her to a particular kind of writing, namely the telling of stories. Previous commentators have noted the close relationship between Arendt's concept of politics and her storytelling. Arendt herself wrote that action " 'produces' stories with or without intention as naturally as fabrication produces tangible things."[8] In spite of all that Arendt had to say about action and the conditions under which action becomes possible, she never really specified what she meant by "the political." In this essay, I posit that Arendt's storytelling provides clues regarding her understanding of the political, and I offer an interpretation of her thinking which, although not pretending to synthesize all of its facets, at least breaks out of two channels of inquiry that have boxed it into a somewhat stale opposition. The first of these channels focuses on the nature of political action and tries, in vain, to determine whether Arendt's public space should be seen as an arena of competition or the site of association and communication. The second, related to the first, attempts to ascertain whether or not Arendt was antimodern and nostalgic for ancient Athens, with its unjust treatment of women, slaves, and strangers.[9]

My reading of Arendt's work will, I hope, lead to a different spectrum of interpretations. I argue that, according to Arendt, the political means an expanding web of relationships between various *fields* of public life, a web that extends beyond our usual restrictive concept of politics to poetry, literature, religion, and so forth, and in which people have the opportunity to play a role, participate, and be responsible. Moreover, in my view, Arendt assumes that what characterizes political life is the constant *passage from*

8. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (New York: Anchor Books, 1959), 163-64.

9. In a recent essay, Kimberley F. Curtis attempted to undercut these debates and reached conclusions that are sometimes very close to mine. See "Aesthetic Foundations of Democratic Politics in the Work of Hannah Arendt" in *Hannah Arendt and the Meaning of Politics*, ed. Craig Calhoun and John McGowan (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1997), 27-52.

*field to field*—from action in common to art enjoyment, from art enjoyment to thought, from thought to poetry, from poetry to action—each "passing-citizen" appearing and playing his or her own role. I propose that these active *revealing* passages through these communicating domains offer the individual the opportunity to meet others, be related, and share the world, in plurality. Accordingly, I suggest that Arendt conceived the political in terms of an active web of *correspondances*, in Baudelaire's poetic sense, in which the citizen passes through realms that "respond" to each other and, in doing so, "responds" to his or her fellow citizens.

If Arendt saw the political as a web of *correspondances* between fields of public life revealed by appearing individuals, the question of finding a truthful way to recount it would necessarily be of primary importance for her. In Arendt's work, "storytelling" proved to be the most appropriate writing form for the recounting of the political because it is the only writing form that faithfully reports individual wanderings in the world. Furthermore, not only are stories a suitable medium for relating disclosure, they are, in themselves, a kind of political revelation; hence, they can be seen as representing an integral component of the web of political *correspondances*. In this sense, they can be seen as political in nature and as having a political role—to *illuminate* dark times—and not, as has been argued, to commemorate glorious actions of the past.

On October 28, 1964, Hannah Arendt explained to journalist Günter Gaus that she was not a philosopher and wished "to look at politics, so to speak, with eyes unclouded by philosophy" (2), wanting no part in the traditional philosophical enmity toward all politics. The full meaning of this statement is revealed later on in the same interview when she tells Gaus that she came to politics because of her German intellectual friends' cooperation with the Nazi regime in 1933: "In the wave of *Gleichschaltung* (co-ordination), which was relatively voluntary—in any case, not yet under the pressure of terror—it was as if an empty space formed around one" (11). Her friends' *Gleichschaltung* led Arendt to draw two interrelated conclusions, both of which feature extensively in her work: first, that since Socrates' death sentence, philosophers have feared free political action and "naturally" tend toward tyranny in the

belief that it will provide them with the peace and security required to think; and second, that disdain for public affairs and attraction to a system that transforms free action into obedience make the search for a non-philosophical form of political thought necessary.[10] In this context, it is worth mentioning Arendt's comment to Gaus, namely, that in 1933 she had felt herself surrounded by *emptiness*. Somewhat surprisingly, she begins the preface to *Between Past and Future* with the same metaphor to recount the coming to politics of the French poet René Char and other European writers:

> The collapse of France, to them a totally unexpected event, had emptied, from one day to the next, the political scene of their country, leaving it to the puppet-like antics of knaves or fools, and they who as a matter of course had never participated in the official business of the Third Republic were sucked into politics as though with the force of a vacuum. (3)

Arendt, before feeling surrounded by emptiness, knew that Jews had enemies and that Hitler was one of the most serious of these. However, at the time, this knowledge did not force her to emerge from her philosophical passivity and embark on a "work of a practical nature," just as the knowledge of Europe being menaced by war did not force René Char into politics before politics meant absolute emptiness.[11] For Arendt, as for Char and others, the sense of emptiness in the public space was a sign that this emptiness had to be filled—by action. In the context of Nazism, this meant to defend oneself and resist. Arendt's "work of a practical nature" was manifested in her brief encounter with Zionist action in Paris, where she worked for Youth Aliyah and the Jewish Agency,[12] and ended with her leaving for the United States in 1940. In New York, in a country where, she thought, the public space would

10. Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future* (Cleveland: Meridian Books, 1963), 17-18, 107; "On the Nature of Totalitarianism - An Essay in Understanding," in *Essays in Understanding*, 360; *Hannah Arendt-Karl Jaspers Correspondence* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1992), 160.

11. Arendt, " 'What Remains? The Language Remains,' " 11.

12. See Elisabeth Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt: For Love of the World* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1982), 138-48; and Dagmar Barnouw, *Visible Spaces: Hannah Arendt and the German-Jewish Experience* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1990), 95.

undoubtedly be filled with political action,[13] she stopped "acting" and embarked on her endeavor to develop a new kind of political *thinking* which would explain the signification of emptiness and evoke ways to neutralize it: this thinking would avoid the philosophers' disdain for public affairs and, thereby, be truly linked to politics.

The theme of emptiness is echoed in Arendt's elaboration of Brecht's metaphor, "dark times." Arendt's definition of this metaphor is introduced in "On Humanity in Dark Times: Thoughts about Lessing," written in 1959, one year after the publication of *The Human Condition*. "History knows many periods of dark times," she writes, "in which the public realm has been obscured and the world become so dubious that people have ceased to ask any more of politics than it show due consideration for their vital interests and personal liberty."[14] Dark times are periods in which the distinction between public and private spaces loses all significance or, at least, weakens dramatically. Recall that in *The Human Condition*, Arendt bases her understanding of human activity on a distinction between public and private domains, a distinction that stems from the ancient Greek separation between the public realm, in which male citizens freely discussed political issues and marching war heroes were cheered by throngs of onlookers, and the private realm, in which women, slaves, and animals assured the citizen-master his economic survival and allowed him to find time to enjoy "leisure for politics." The aim of Arendt's detailed description of the Greek system was to show that only within a space of common visible activity can authentic freedom and equality emerge. By this she meant that real freedom and real equality are characteristics of what is shared in common and appears publicly, *insofar as* a space of privacy that is itself not immediately defined by freedom and equality also exists. She did not mean that the private space has to be a place of slavery, injustice, and inequality, or even that it would not matter if it were, but rather that this "obscure" space is not the *specific* site of equality. What

13. "People here feel themselves responsible for public life to an extent I have never seen in any European country," *Hannah Arendt-Karl Jaspers Correspondence*, 30.

14. Hannah Arendt, *Men in Dark Times* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1968), 11.

was primarily important for Arendt was not *who* stands in the public and private spaces or what activities belong to these people (and these "omissions" have been extensively commented on and criticized),[15] but rather the requirement of a separation between a world of appearance and a world of privacy: "the most elementary meaning of the two realms indicates that there are things that need to be hidden and others that need to be displayed publicly if they are to exist at all. If we look at these things, regardless of where we find them in any given civilization, we shall see that each human activity points to its proper location in the world" (65). Thus, the modern "rise of the social" had negative aspects because "since the admission of household and housekeeping activities to the public realm, an irresistible tendency to grow, to devour the older realms of the political and private as well as the more recently established sphere of intimacy, has been one of the outstanding characteristics of the new realm" (42). The destruction of the distinction between private and public is what leads to the "emptiness" of dark times, a confused situation in which people no longer know how to act and what to expect from publicity or from privacy. When this happens, the world of disclosure, which "lies between people," and which is an "in-between," starts to disappear and become empty: "what is lost is the specific and usually irreplaceable in-between which should have formed between this individual and his fellow men."[16] Thus, the concept of disclosure had to be renewed in a way that would fit modern times: war and resistance had come to an end, but the need for a world of revelation, distinct from a world of privacy, was still urgent.

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15. See, among the extensive feminist critique of Arendt: Elisabeth Young-Bruehl, "Hannah Arendt among Feminists" in *Hannah Arendt: Twenty Years Later*, ed. Larry May and Jerome Kohn (Cambridge: MIT P, 1996), 307-24; Seyla Benhabib, "Feminist Theory and Hannah Arendt's Concept of Public Space," *History of the Human Sciences* 6, no. 2 (1993): 97-114; Mary G. Dietz, "Hannah Arendt and Feminist Politics," in *Feminist Interpretations and Political Theory*, ed. Mary Lyndon Shanley and Carol Pateman (University Park: Pennsylvania State UP, 1991), 232-52; Nancy Fraser, *Unruly Practices: Power, Discourse, and Gender in Contemporary Social Theory* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1989); Hanna Fenichel Pitkin, "Justice: On Relating Private and Public," *Political Theory* 9 (1981): 327-52; *Feminist Interpretations of Hannah Arendt*, ed. Bonnie Honig (University Park: Pennsylvania State UP, 1995).

16. Arendt, *Men in Dark Times*, 4-5.

In her article "On Humanity in Dark Times," Arendt uses another metaphor to explain the nature of dark times, that of *broken pillars*: "the 'pillars of the best-known truths' (to stay with [Lessing's] metaphor), which at that time were shaken, today lie shattered; we need neither criticism nor wise men to shake them any more. We need only look around to see that we are standing in the midst of a veritable rubble heap of such pillars." For a long time, she explains, political order depended on pillars of truth. But now that they have been shattered, it is useless to restore them repeatedly, for they collapse again and again: "in the political realm restoration is never a substitute for a new foundation" (10). For Arendt, dark times are a broken edifice that cannot be restored.

Elsewhere in *Men in Dark Times*, there is a resurgence of the pillar metaphor, albeit hidden *behind the text*. In the chapter on Walter Benjamin, which was first written to introduce *Illuminations* (Arendt's English edition of some of Benjamin's essays), Arendt stresses that Benjamin used metaphors as a method of writing. She explains that the metaphor "establishes the *correspondances* between physically most remote things." The term *correspondances* weaves a web of intertextuality to which Arendt does not explicitly call our attention. It is an allusion to Baudelaire's poem *Correspondances*, a poem which Benjamin himself analyzed in "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire."

Here we are confronted by Arendt's reading of Benjamin, which refers to Benjamin's reading of Baudelaire, in which Arendt compares Benjamin's "poetic thinking" to Baudelaire's poetic theory. In the literary world, Baudelaire's poem is famous mainly for revealing the basic assumption of poetry, namely, the existence of secret and intimate relationships between things and, in particular, between senses. This is Baudelaire's poetic theory of "synesthesia." Because there are affinities between the senses, the senses can communicate and respond to each other: "Les parfums, les couleurs et les sons se répondent" (Perfumes, colors and sounds commingle).[17] These same correspondences were to be reiterated by Rimbaud in his poem "Voyelles," where each vowel is associated to a color,

17. Translated in Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, (1969; reprint, New York: Schocken Books, 1988), 181-82.

and by Proust in the remembrance process that emerges spontaneously when the narrator of *A la recherche du temps perdu* tastes "*une petite madeleine*." In this respect, poets are those gifted individuals who are able to fathom the secret nature of the world through *metaphors* which, by transferring to one thing the name of another, bring to light the affinities between things. *Correspondances* teaches us that the traditional distinction between form and content is irrelevant because metaphors are direct vehicles and expressions of natural affinities. To think poetically is to think metaphorically, or associatively, thereby discovering the correspondences between the various experiences of the world and between the different feelings of these experiences. In her essay on Benjamin, Arendt claims that "without being a poet [Benjamin] *thought poetically* and therefore was bound to regard the metaphor as the greatest gift of language" (166). Thus, it seems that Arendt uses the term *correspondances* to call attention to the meaning of poetic thinking and its possible relevance in nonpoetic fields.

The intriguing aspect of these intertextual relations is that, in the first lines of *Correspondances*, nature is defined as a "temple" with "living pillars":

> La Nature est un temple où de vivant piliers
> Laissent parfois sortir de confuses paroles;
> L'homme y passe à travers des forêts de symboles
> Qui l'observent avec des regards familiers.
> Comme de longs échos qui de loin se confondent
> Dans une ténébreuse et profonde unité,
> Vaste comme la nuit et comme la clarté,
> Les parfums, les couleurs et les sons se répondent.[18]

As noted by Benjamin, Baudelaire's poem is "devoted to something irretrievably lost." In it, the poet describes the experience of an anterior time, previous to memory and history itself—"not historical data but data of prehistory." Benjamin also recalls the twelfth sonnet of Baudelaire's *Spleen et Ideal* (*Correspondances* is the fourth), called *La Vie anterieure*, in which Baudelaire reinforces the metaphor of pillars of the past: "J'ai longtemps habité sous de vastes

18. "Nature is a temple whose living pillars / Sometimes give forth a babel of words / Man wends his way [y passe] through forests of symbols / Which look at him with their familiar glances. As long-resounding echoes from afar / Are mingling in a deep, dark unity / Vast as the night or as the orb of day, / Perfumes, colors, and sounds commingle [se répondent]."

portiques / Que les soleils marins teignaient de mille feux, / Et que leurs grands *piliers*, droits et majestueux, / Rendaient pareils, le soir, aux grottes basaltiques" (emphasis added).[19] The "living pillars" of *Correspondances* are those of a lost, broken world. Baudelaire, as a modern man, is a witness of breakdown: the modern world is full of ruins, but "the murmur of the past can be heard in the correspondences."[20] Thus, according to Baudelaire as read by Benjamin, poetic thinking *in modern times* involves a confrontation with collapse and a longing for early times of edification. *Correspondances* describes the essence of modernity as the connection between metaphoric thinking and consciousness of devastation. My claim is that the role of *Correspondances* in *Men in Dark Times* is far more significant than that suggested by Arendt's short mention of it. The notion of *Correspondances* underlies Arendt's metaphoric writing as well as her understanding of modernity as a breakdown of tradition; she uses both the colored metaphor of darkness and the architectural metaphor of broken pillars to describe a political situation "inhospitable to human needs" (11).[21] She associates Brecht's darkness with Lessing's pillars and claims that this connection constitutes the essence of modern times. Her metaphoric writing *corresponds* inextricably to Baudelaire's *Correspondances*.

Why did Arendt not refer explicitly to Baudelaire's conception of modernity—so evident in *Men in Dark Times* as in many of her other works? It seems that she desisted from explaining her own writing. As noted by Vollrath, Benhabib, and Disch, she considered it self-indulgent to concentrate on methodological approaches.[22] However, there

19. "For years I've dwelt beneath the high and mighty vault / Which ocean's gleaming suns paint with a thousand fires, / Which its majestical and rising pillars / Each evening turn into caves of basalt."

20. Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 181-82.

21. About Arendt's possible "nostalgia" and the resemblance between Benjamin's thinking and her own, see my "Illuminating Inheritance: Benjamin's Influence on Arendt's Political Storytelling," *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 26, no. 5 (2000): 1-27.

22. See Hannah Arendt, *Rahel Varnhagen: The Life of a Jewess*, trans. Richard and Clara Winston (London: East and West Library, 1957), xi; *The Life of the Mind: Thinking*, (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1977), 211; Vollrath, "Hannah Arendt and the Method of Political Thinking," 162; Benhabib, "Hannah

may be another reason. In her interview with Günter Gaus, she confessed that she had always switched between *two* languages, English, which she used to write political *theory*, and her mother tongue, German, which had remained "somehow in the back of my mind,"[23] as *poetry*. Arendt knew German poems "by heart," thought through them and, therefore, could write about them. It seems that writing and thinking in German, and spontaneously transferring and translating from German to English, left no room for a French poem.[24] Indeed, Arendt hardly ever quoted in French, although she spoke and read the language very well.[25] I do not claim that Arendt wrote about Baudelaire but consciously chose not to acknowledge doing so. I claim that due to her *poetic thinking*, her work, especially *Men in Dark Times*, reveals an affinity between Baudelaire's conception and her conception, which she may or may not have been aware of. *Correspondances* was intimated in her work insofar as it expressed the essence of all poetry. Indeed, Arendt's remark that although Benjamin was not a poet, he thought poetically was also true for herself, and not only because the "back of [her] mind" was full of "a rather large part of German poetry."[26] Not only did she never share "the unfounded disdain of poetic insight on the part of those who extol the exactness of 'scientific' truth claims,"[27] but, as I will show now, she was spontaneously discovering unexpected *correspondances* in the world.

In her phenomenological statements at the beginning of *The Life of the Mind*, Arendt wrote:

> Nothing perhaps is more surprising in this world of ours than the almost infinite diversity of its appearances, the sheer entertainment value of its views, sounds, and smells, something

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Arendt and the Redemptive Power of Narrative," 171; Disch, *Hannah Arendt*, 108.

23. Arendt, " 'What Remains? The Language Remains,' " 13.

24. However, it has to be stated that in *Men in Dark Times*, Arendt did not refer to Goethe's concept of *Wahlverwandtschaft*, "elective affinity."

25. Two noteworthy exceptions are Paul Valery's sentence "Tantôt je pense et tantôt je suis," which appears at the end of *The Life of the Mind*, 197, and Paul Eluard's "Notre héritage n'est précédé d'aucun testament," which he quotes at the beginning of *Between Past and Future*, 3.

26. Arendt, " 'What Remains? The Language Remains,' " 13.

27. Vollrath, "Hannah Arendt and the Method of Political Thinking," 166. For Arendt's poetic thinking, see also Disch, *Hannah Arendt*, 155, 172.

> that is hardly ever mentioned by the thinkers and philosophers . . . This diversity is matched by an equally astounding diverseness of sense organs among the animal species, so that what actually appears to living creatures assumes the greatest variety of form and shape.[28]

Thinkers and philosophers have traditionally been blind to the variety of modes of appearance; not Arendt. My contention is that with the help of metaphors which, according to her, constitute thoughts and "convey cognition,"[29] she revealed in her work some of these modes and some of their interrelations—some of their *correspondances*. This is clearly demonstrated when she successively relates modern times to emptiness, darkness, and broken pillars. According to Arendt (and to Baudelaire), the various domains of the world seem to communicate. There are no barriers that define them separately and, therefore, they overlap naturally and produce "passages" among themselves. This means that what happens in one sphere may influence other spheres and sometimes radically transform them. In *The Human Condition*, for example, Arendt establishes a relation between "the situation created by the sciences" and the political area (4). She argues that not only have the discoveries of modern science affected the political area, but also they may have changed its very nature. However, such influences can occur only because the different domains were previously connected by *affinities*, which means that the events of one realm always echo the events of another and share the same structure, the same meaning, or the same purpose. The world consists of bridges between its different realms, bridges that can be revealed by metaphors. In *Between Past and Future*, Arendt suggests a paradoxical connection between the power inherent in freedom and religious faith, "which, in the words of the Gospel, is capable of removing mountains" (168) and an affinity between politics and the performing arts, both of which need a publicly organized space in order to present their "performance" (154). In her "Reply" to Eric Voegelin's review of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, she stresses that her book "gives a historical account of the elements which crystallized into totalitarianism, this account is followed by

28. Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, 20.

29. Arendt, *Men in Dark Times*, 166.

an analysis of the elemental structure of totalitarian movements and domination itself" (78). The metaphor of chemical analysis and crystallization shows that, in Arendt's view, totalitarianism is a "reaction"—the effect of the synchronic meeting of various constituent parts resulting from independent processes. This metaphor reveals Arendt's understanding of history as nonlinear, and of historical writing as an account of this nonlinearity. Metaphors unveil the profound meaning of reality because they shed light on the correspondences between its different domains.[30]

According to both Arendt and Baudelaire, the notion of *correspondances*—influences and affinities—between domains implied the movement of people from one domain to another. Like Baudelaire, I believe that Arendt perceived mankind as passing, wandering through the world: "this collection of essays and articles is primarily concerned with persons—how they lived their lives, how they *moved in the world.*"[31] In "On Humanity in Dark Times," she refers to the people who "inhabit [the world] and move freely about in it" (10). The explicit aim of *Men in Dark Times* was to relate the biographies of men and women who had changed their spatial position in the world, such as Rosa Luxemburg, Waldemar Gurian, Walter Benjamin, Isak Dinesen, Bertold Brecht, and others. Their spatial movements and their "passages" were not summed up in their many flights from enemies or international trips because they drifted from place to place inside their countries or cities as a way of life. For someone who experienced forced exile from Germany at the beginning of her career as a political thinker,[32] Arendt's positive notion of wandering in *Men in Dark Times* is quite remarkable. She notes that Hermann Broch's novel *The Tempter* was meant to be called *The Wanderer* (114), and, following Benjamin, she describes Paris as "the only one among the large cities which can be comfortably covered on foot," suggesting that the *passage-ways* that connect the great boulevards are "indeed like a symbol of Paris, because

30. On Heidegger, metaphors and disclosure, see Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, 24, 117-22.

31. Arendt, *Men in Dark Times*, vii.

32. The acute pain of exile is described in her famous article "We Refugees." See Arendt, *The Jew as Pariah*, 55-66.

they clearly are inside and outside at the same time and thus represent its true nature in quintessential form" (175). However, in *Men in Dark Times*, her conception of life as a symphony of worldly movements is not limited to geographical location; it includes wanderings through an array of corresponding realms: poetry and politics in the case of Brecht, religions in the case of Gurian, spiritual trends in the case of Benjamin, social groups (Pope John XXIII), languages (Jarrell), and even sexes (Isak Dinesen). Other examples of this conception are found in *The Life of the Mind* and her lectures on Kant published posthumously. In her reading of the third *Critique*,[33] Arendt discerns political judgment in Kant's theory of the judgment of taste, arguing that political judgment is a kind of taste, and that people somehow enter into the political realm through their judgments of taste. In *Thinking*, the ability to shift between concrete life and the domain of reflection is considered one of the principal characteristics of the political thinker's model, embodied by the "ideal-type" of Socrates, who "unified two apparently contradictory passions, for thinking and acting ... [in the sense of] being equally at home in both spheres and able *to move from one sphere to the other* with the greatest apparent ease, very much as *we ourselves constantly move back and forth* between experiences in the world of appearances and the need for reflecting on them" (167, emphasis added).

The original element of Arendt's conception of worldly "wanderings" is contained in her emphasis on their phenomenal *publicity*. All of the characters in her stories had been committed to *show*,[34] through their moving in the world, who they were and what they were able to do. The passages through different geographical and nongeographical spaces of the public world (e.g., from literature to politics or from poetry to thinking) form the basis of disclosure. Again, this idea shares an affinity with the assumption of poetry: just as metaphors reveal the secret sense of experience, in Arendt's view, wanderings in the world reveal the character of people. "Moving through"

33. Hannah Arendt, *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1982).

34. Arendt, *Men in Dark Times*, 5, 59, 75, 79, 95, 224, 252, 266.

makes people public, which means that it makes them *real* (viii). Kimberley Curtis writes, "it is a central contention on [Arendt's] part that the reality-engendering and reality-confirming capacities of life in the public realm are the highest."[35] Curtis notes that, according to Arendt "things and creatures of the world are appearing in nature such that what appears is 'meant to be' perceived—seen, heard, touched, tasted, and smelled—by sentient creatures" (38).[36]

As extensively emphasized in the literature, the concept of public revelation developed in *The Human Condition* lies at the core of Arendt's political theory and of her definition of the political. As a result, public wanderings should be regarded as essentially political. However, in *The Human Condition*, disclosure is also identified with noticeable "actions and speeches." (This issue forms the starting point of the "interpretive battle"[37] about Arendt's thought, some commentators emphasizing the *free intersubjective communication* allowed by deeds and words, others focusing on the *competition or performance* apparently inherent in Arendt's concept of political publicity.) However, if we turn back to *Men in Dark Times*, we have to admit that, except for Rosa Luxemburg, none of the persons described as revealing himself or herself in the world had ever been a political character or acted politically. None of them had ever appeared in the public space in the manner of Greek heroes or modern politicians. If there is any coherence in Arendt's work, Benjamin's, Dinesen's and Jarrell's lives have to be regarded in some way as political, even though they did not disclose themselves through political words and deeds and were not involved in politics. Is there a way out of this paradox?

Maybe there is: I suggest that this apparent paradox is resolvable if we take into account the (often overlooked) fact that *The Human Condition* is an unfinished project. Arendt intended to write a book in German (she discussed the idea with her publisher, R. Piper), which would have been called *Introduction to Politics*. It was meant to start where *The*

35. Curtis, "Aesthetic Foundations of Democratic Politics," 35.

36. See the opening words of *The Life of the Mind*, 19.

37. Dana R. Villa, "Hannah Arendt: Modernity, Alienation, and Critique," in *Hannah Arendt and the Meaning of Politics*, 181.

*Human Condition* ends,[38] and in it she planned to provide a comprehensive definition of the political. The work was never completed and we are left with a description of the human condition which, in my view, does not provide any definitive concept of the meaning of politics. It does establish a framework, namely, the need for a distinction between public and private spaces in order to achieve freedom and equality, but it does not determine the concept of the political for modern people. This determination is missing not because Arendt, overcome by the difficult conditions of "dark times," would have been an antimodern theorist longing for Greek heroic politics but, in my view, because she did not write the *theoretical* book that would have defined it.

I suggest, however, that a clue regarding Arendt's definition of the political is provided in "What is Freedom?" This essay is part of *Between Past and Future*, the volume of articles that Arendt published after *The Human Condition* and that, according to Elisabeth Young-Bruehl, "fulfilled, though not entirely" the never written *Introduction to Politics*.[39] *Introduction to Politics* was intended critically to reexamine political concepts, and then political institutions. This second purpose was not fulfilled, but in "What is Freedom?" Arendt states: "Whatever occurs in this space of appearances is political by definition, even when it is not a direct product of action" (155). All modes of public appearance are political, irrespective of whether they are or are not related to political action. What makes "words and deeds" political is that they are visible, not that they are related to what we generally understand as glorious political activity. Arendt's summary of Waldemar Gurian's "theatrical" conception of the political seems to fit her own: "his political sense therefore became essentially a sense for the dramatic in history, in politics, in all contacts between man and man, soul and soul, idea and idea."[40] In a letter to Karl Jaspers written in 1955, in which she confesses her

38. See documents related to the book's project: Rockefeller Foundation, Library of Congress, Container 23 (formerly 20), 0132872; published in German in *Was ist Politik?* (Munchen: R. Piper GmbH & Co, 1993) and in French in *Qu'est-ce que la politique?* (Paris: Seuil, 1995).

39. Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt*, 325.

40. Arendt, *Men in Dark Times*, 259.

discomfort with academic life, Arendt writes, "I don't ever want to go through that again! Curiously enough, the thing about it I really can't tolerate is, of all things, *the political aspect—being in the public eye* every day."[41] Life on a university campus and teaching are considered political because they imply publicity. For Arendt, the political is the web of all the visible passages through the various realms of the public world.

Arendt never wrote the theoretical book that would have defined the essence of politics in terms of such "passages." However, she did seek out a writing form capable of giving an account of "political" wanderings in dark times—"Storytelling."

In a famous chapter of *The Human Condition*, Arendt explains that storytelling is the most relevant way of relating politics because action produces stories: "the reason why each human life tells its story and why history ultimately becomes the storybook of mankind, with many actors and speakers and yet without any tangible authors, is that both are the outcome of action" (164). Stories result from actions and speeches, and then relate them, so that the actions and the speeches become the content of these stories. It may therefore seem that stories charting words and deeds constitute recollections of active involvement in politics. However, actions and speeches are not the primary condition of stories. With no particular words and deeds, there would certainly be no story at all, yet the *possibility* of stories would still exist. Arendt stresses that something comes before words and deeds, as their principle and, as such, as the essence of stories. This principle is *courage*, the *willingness to disclose*:

> The hero the story discloses needs no heroic qualities; the word "hero" originally, that is, in Homer, was no more than a name given each free man who participated in the Trojan enterprise and about whom a story could be told. The connotation of courage, which we now feel to be an indispensable quality of the hero, is in fact already present in a willingness to act and speak at all, to insert one's self into the world and begin a story of one's own. And this courage is not necessarily or even primarily related to a willingness to suffer the consequences; courage and even boldness are already present in leaving one's private hiding place and showing who one is, in disclosing and exposing one's

41. *Hannah Arendt-Karl Jaspers Correspondence*, 260 (emphasis added).

> self. The extent of this original courage, *without which action and speech and therefore, according to the Greeks, freedom, would not be possible at all*, is not less great and may even be greater if the "hero" happens to be a coward. (166, emphasis added)

Action, speeches, and, therefore, freedom produce stories, but the willingness to expose oneself comes first and, as such, is the true condition of everyday politics and of stories that relate actions.[42] Arendt suggests that the political exists independently of *specific* actions and speeches, even "if the 'hero' happens to be a coward," as long as he or she has the initial courage to go out of his or her private space. Indeed, "to leave one's private hiding place" does not immediately involve acting and speaking. Arendt's mythological example demonstrates dramatically that to expose oneself consists first in taking part in "the Trojan enterprise" which, even before being a war, is an expedition, a *trip*, no matter how one eventually behaves on the battlefield. Disclosure lies in the acceptance of leaving the home (the "private hiding place") behind in order to move into the world. Accordingly, a "political" story can be told of anyone who discloses himself or herself through wandering in the world: "in Homer, the word *heros* has certainly a connotation of distinction, but of no other than every free man was capable."[43] It is in this sense that stories can be seen as a medium for political disclosure.

In this context, I suggest that *Men in Dark Times* should be regarded as dealing more specifically than *The Human Condition* with what Arendt considered to be the *concept* of the political in modernity because it consists of stories of wanderers in dark times. It is a "political writing" (and not the conventional "analysis of political institutions" that Arendt never wrote) because it explicitly follows the "moving disclosure" of "heroes" who participated in the public world through their passages between its different realms. Politics is participation in trips through the web of worldly *correspondances*, and the stories that describe them are the writing of politics. Arendt's poetic thinking acts on two distinct levels, "before" and "after" her storytelling. Upstream, like Baudelaire in his poem, it perceives the existence of passages between the various realms of the

42. See Curtis, "Aesthetic Foundations of Democratic Politics," 42.

43. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 351.

world. Downstream, it presents publicly, in written narrative, the worldly wanderings of modern heroes.

But why stories? Why should stories fit politics more than theory or modern poetry? Stories are the proper way to draw the political trajectories of people in the world and to relate what Arendt understands as the political because they are themselves one of the worldly realms of revelation. People's lives have to be "seen, heard, touched, tasted, and smelled," *told and read*. In revealing heroes, stories turn out to be a sphere of disclosure through which heroes—appearing people—wander. They are not an objective "method" but the phenomenal appearance on paper of political lives. Telling about heroes' lives provides a public aspect of these lives. By giving individual life a realm in which to appear, stories are not only a medium for revelation but prove to be ontologically political. Arendt wrote in the Preface to *Rahel Varnhagen* that "It was never my intention to write a book *about* Rahel . . . What interested me solely was to narrate the story of Rahel's life as she herself might have told it" (xi). Her biography of Rahel was intended as an *autobiography*, an auto-revelation on paper of Rahel's own life. Storytelling allows the activity of writing to become political without constituting action. Storytelling is the disclosure of all disclosures and, as such, it also forms part of these disclosures. Homer emphasized the political nature of stories when he told stories about heroes who were true "politicians." According to Arendt, all stories are political in nature.

What did Arendt hope to achieve with the help of political stories? In attempting to answer this question, David Luban's "Explaining Dark Times" summarizes Arendt's analysis of the concept of history and divides it into four ways of immortalizing glorious actions, "four ages of immortality." The first is ancient Greek poetry, singing the deeds of mythological heroes. The second is Athenian political life, the *polis*, commemorating its heroes. The third is historical narrative, which "becomes essential when the political community cannot keep memory alive." The fourth is modern scientific theory, attempting to discover the laws that govern historical processes (219-24). Arendt, Luban argues, used a narrative that differs from all these methods and particularly from historical narrative, because it does not aim at extracting "scientific" meanings from particular

events. Arendt's storytelling, although it reveals "the inner truth of the event," does not carry with it any lesson (241).[44] Luban does not really succeed in furthering his understanding of Arendt's original narrative because he narrows the field of political writing to commemoration and remembrance of "great deeds" (219). In other words, like other commentators, he misinterprets Arendt's concept of the political as a concept of *heroic performance*.

Nevertheless, I suggest that Luban's four "ages" can be usefully applied to our analysis. Greek poetry, historical narrative, and scientific theory obviously share the notion of commemoration, each representing a different way of writing history for posterity. As noted by Arendt in her "Reply" to Voegelin, "all historiography is necessarily salvation and frequently justification" (77). In *Men in Dark Times*, she also observes that poetry "in a very general sense" and historical narrative attempt to "master" the past (21). The Greek *polis*, however, was not a writing form, but a concrete political space, the site of public presentation and appearance. These appearances simply occurred, even before being immortalized. Indeed, people who disclosed themselves were sometimes cowards who could boast no glorious action to be commemorated. It should be noted that, although Arendt sometimes describes Athens with Hegelian nostalgia for glorious sacrifices of the individual to the community, and that in "The Concept of History" she refers to the Greek concepts of glory and greatness, she also mentions the public realm as the domain of *simple* and *real* public life.[45] Hence, the center of Athenian public life was no more a battlefield than a market place or an amphitheater. This life was made of passages through these different realms, which only sometimes resulted in glorious actions and speeches. What was so special in Athens, according to Arendt, was that people could freely participate in these domains and activities precisely because they were only simple citizens and not immortal heroes.

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44. On the difference between scientific objectivity and truth, namely between historiography and storytelling in Arendt's thought, see my "Illuminating Inheritance," 14-15, and my forthcoming "Reporting and Storytelling: *Eichmann in Jerusalem* as Political Testimony."

45. See for example Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 45-53.

I posit that Arendt's endeavor to catch the personal participation in the world through political stories, namely "*who* somebody is or was," and not *what* he or she was,[46] has nothing to do with commemoration of glorious events. Hence, in spite of its poetic assumption, it is distinct from Greek poetry as well as from any kind of historiography. The purpose of political stories, says Arendt, is to *illuminate* and not to commemorate:

> That even in the darkest of times we have the right to expect some illumination, and that such illumination may well come less from theories and concepts than from the uncertain, flickering, and often weak light that some men and women, in their lives and in their works, will kindle under almost all circumstances and shed over the time span that was given them on earth—this conviction is the inarticulate background against which these profiles were drawn.[47]

Although she denied doing so, Arendt did explain her method or "the basic assumption of [her] investigation" at the end of the first part of *The Life of the Mind*. There she quoted a few lines of Shakespeare's *The Tempest* in order to clarify her purpose: to deal with fragments of the past after their sea-change into pearls and coral (212). She used the same quotation and the same metaphor in her chapter on Benjamin in *Men in Dark Times*, thus seemingly identifying her writing with his (ix). However, she never said that Benjamin, or she herself, descended like pearl divers to the bottom of the sea "to pry loose the rich and the strange, the pearls and the coral in the depths and carry them to the surface" (205) in order to commemorate them. She *did* say that in Benjamin's case, "the main work consisted in tearing fragments out of their context and arranging them afresh in such a way that they illustrated one another and were able to prove their *raison d'être* in a free-floating state, as it were" (202). Reinforcing the metaphor of light and illumination, her reference to mutual "illustration" indicates that the activity of a pearl diver through stories reveals elements which illuminate each other and, through these "echoing" lights, illuminate the whole world.

Political by nature, stories have a political role: to illuminate dark times. They have the capacity to do so

46. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 166.

47. Arendt, *Men in Dark Times*, ix.

because the people they tell about are a light into the world. They came out of their hiding place and showed themselves—put themselves under the light of publicity, like Rahel: "Rahel acquired to the point of mastery the art of representing her own life: the point was not to tell the truth, but to display herself . . . If she wanted to live, she had to learn to make her presence felt, to display herself."[48] These people showed us that there is a place and a way to appear. They *reflected* to us the light of the worldly public spaces, the whole structure of the corresponding world. Political stories, then, are the reflection of this reflection through writing. This is why they are *illuminations*. They lighten dark times and show that even in such times, there still is room for disclosure—for the political.

However, one of Arendt's "stories" seems to contradict this view: *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. Eichmann was far from being a light into the world, yet Arendt chose to focus on "the person of the defendant, a man of flesh and blood with an individual history, with an always unique set of qualities, peculiarities, behavior patterns, and circumstances."[49] What could such person illuminate? I see *Eichmann in Jerusalem* as having a function akin to that of Arendt's other stories. Let us recall that on her arrival to Jerusalem, Arendt still understood the Jewish genocide in the terms used in her wartime and postwar articles and in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*: the killers were monsters, and what had been perpetrated was "radical evil."[50] However, when she *saw* Eichmann, these categories proved to be irrelevant in her mind:

> However, what I *was confronted with* was utterly different and still undeniably factual. I *was struck by a manifest* shallowness in the doer that made it impossible to trace the incontestable evil of his deeds to any deeper level of roots or motives. The deeds were monstrous, but the doer—*at least the very effective one now on trial*—was quite ordinary, commonplace, and neither demonic nor monstrous. There was *no sign in him* of firm ideological convictions.[51]

48. Arendt, *Rahel Varnhagen*, 94, 96.

49. Arendt to Scholem, *The Jew as Pariah*, 249.

50. See *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (Cleveland: Meridian Books, 1963), 443.

51. Arendt, *The Life of The Mind*, 4 (my emphasis).

Confronted by Eichmann's presence, by his physical and verbal appearance, Arendt attempted to deduce the meaning of his acts. In her book, she tried to "report" how Eichmann *appeared* really to be—hence, that for which he really had to be judged. His offense was identical with what he appeared to be: someone who became one of the most heinous criminals of his time because of pure absence of thinking (which, she argued, was very different from stupidity).[52] Through the "revelation" of his shallow presence, Arendt realized that Eichmann should be considered like anyone else revealing himself or herself, and be judged only for his acts. To regard him as a monster was to play his game, namely, a refusal to reveal his motives and be *responsible*. In her opinion, therefore, the trial failed in its most important task: to recognize the meaning of Eichmann's disclosure.

The trial failed, but *she* tried to succeed. She told the story of Eichmann and his acts, revealed him, and asked her readers to judge. She *forced* him to appear through her storytelling in a stronger way than the prosecution succeeded in doing through the trial. "I have dwelt on this chapter of the story, *which the Jerusalem trial failed to put before the eyes of the world in its true dimensions*, because it offers the most striking insight into the totality of the moral collapse the Nazis caused in respectable European society" (125-26). Her story of Eichmann was precisely the public disclosure that he refused. In showing his real personality against his will, her "report" demonstrated that stories can illuminate even when their "heroes" were the opposite of "rich pearls." The activity of the storyteller, the way she *arranged the facts afresh*, illuminated the world,[53] in spite of the darkening activities of the story's character.

In *Eichmann in Jerusalem* and in *The Life of the Mind*, Arendt focused on Eichmann's refusal to consider himself responsible. In most of the essays of *Men in Dark Times*, responsibility is a central feature of her "heroes." Arendt's

52. Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 288.

53. Not everyone was "illuminated" by her attempt, judging by the virulence of the controversy against the book. See Jennifer Ring, *The Political Consequences of Thinking: Gender and Judaism in the Work of Hannah Arendt* (Albany: SUNY P, 1998), 21-42.

stories show that what is at stake in public wanderings is not only one's ability to appear, but one's ability to be judged for the quality of one's appearance.[54] Moreover, willingness to be judged incorporates the right to "respond" about oneself, to be responsible. In my view, here again, there is a similarity between Arendt's conception and that of Baudelaire, this time between her emphasis on responsibility and his description of aesthetic perception. In *Correspondances*, man wanders in Nature through sensorial experiences that correspond, that is, *respond to each other*. Each experience echoes an earlier experience and implies a reaction, an echo in a future experience. No sensation exists only for itself, with no prolongation in other sensations. According to Arendt, a person's worldly disclosure similarly implies reactions from other participants, *spectators* of his or her actions[55] and, consequently, he or she has to constantly justify or explain his or her own disclosing self. As a result, Arendt's concept of disclosure entails communication between people: revelation means revelation *plus words* about it. The passages through the public realms of the world, or public "roles," include discursive contacts with other people. As they pass through domains that respond to each other, responsible individuals respond to each other about themselves. Curtis rightly focuses on this point, saying that "our perception of the world (which is always the substance of our self-presentation), as much as it is uniquely our own, is profoundly disputable, profoundly and endlessly provoking . . . Intrinsic to our effort at self-presentation is a deliberate responding to and moving towards the plural world of others."[56]

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54. Being part of their heroes' public life, Arendt's stories sometimes seem quite critical toward them, like the biography of Rahel Varnhagen or the essay on Walter Benjamin. Jaspers reproaches Arendt for such "judgments": "again and again you judge isolated actions in a way one should perhaps not judge if one feels one has at some point seen Rahel whole." *Hannah Arendt-Karl Jaspers Correspondence*, 193. According to Francoise Meltzer, "It would take a long time to unpack all the extraordinary claims Arendt makes in her introduction [to Benjamin's *Illuminations*], even longer to assess those claims and the barely controlled irritation behind them." Francoise Meltzer, "Acedia and Melancholia," in *Walter Benjamin and the Demands of History*, ed. Michael P. Steinberg, (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1996), 143.

55. Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, 19.

56. Curtis, "Aesthetic Foundations of Democratic Politics," 41.

If responsible disclosure is communication, then communication is light. This claim appears throughout *Men in Dark Times*. However, it is most dominant in her stories about Jaspers's life and work.

> For him, responsibility is not a burden and it has nothing whatsoever to do with moral imperatives. Rather, it flows naturally out of an innate pleasure in making manifest, in clarifying the obscure, in illuminating the darkness. His affirmation of the public realm is in the final analysis only the result of his loving light and clarity. He has loved light so long that it has marked his whole personality . . . to take it upon oneself to answer before mankind for every thought means to live in that luminosity in which oneself and everything one thinks is tested. (75)

Arendt's "Laudatio" of Jaspers emphasizes not only the identity between disclosure, responsibility, communication, and light in Jaspers's life, but also in her own story of his life. She stresses that her task as a storyteller is to *expose* Jaspers to the public view in the public realm for him to be judged (72). It is true, she adds, that such a story only expresses what people know, but this public expression makes a difference: "the very fact that something is being heard by all confers upon it an illuminating power that confirms its real existence." Being a public *exposition* and *confirmation* of the responsible disclosure of "heroes" stories are in themselves responsible in the public realm.

In her "Laudatio," Arendt concludes that "Jaspers's thought . . . always 'related closely to the thoughts of others,' is bound to be political *even when it deals with things that are not in the least political*; for it always confirms that Kantian 'enlarged mentality' which is the political mentality *par excellence*" (79, emphasis added). She therefore emphasizes that the "enlargement" of thinking that, according to her, constitutes the essence of the political stems from a poetic understanding of the world, a thinking that makes invisible connections between apparently unrelated fields. The political mentality revealed by Arendt *in* and *through* her stories lies in the ability to illuminate, that is, to be responsible, through passages between all existing domains of the public world. This concept of the political has to be understood within the framework of poetic thinking, underpinned by the discovery of affinities between fields "that are not in the least political." Stories render the

relations between poetry and politics meaningful by illuminating the darkness of the world.

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