



# storylines

*Politics, History and Narrative from an Arendtian Perspective*

Olivia Guaraldo

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University of Jyväskylä 2001

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# ABSTRACT

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Proceeding from Arendt's idea of storytelling as a way of representing political reality by preserving the contingency and the freedom that characterize the realm of the *vita activa*, the present work intends to detect how and why storytelling or narrative practices guarantee a better understanding of politics and political realities in their manifold aspects. The aim of this research is to criticize the political-philosophical discourse of the Western tradition and its manipulating and ordering character as regards the realm of human affairs. Storytelling as a mode of analysis, and also as a different way of looking at politics, should emphasize the violent and possessive approach of traditional political science and philosophy and guarantee a new and perhaps better understanding of the human condition of plurality.

The aim of this entire research is to follow the Arendtian path in the quest for a new understanding of politics, which, in order to be assessed, requires a re-definition of values, aims and methods. I argue that the Arendtian narrative, as both a mode of thinking about the world of human affairs and an analytical tool in understanding history, may offer a very interesting contribution to an alternative way of conceiving both politics and history, as well as related questions such as identity issues, modes of political agency, the comprehension of new political realities and the critique of the category of historical inevitability.

The Arendtian perspective is analyzed in its displacing aspects, insofar as it enables a critical reading of the 'verticality' of universal philosophical truths. A horizontal narrative perspective is 'metaphorically' opposed to the cogent dimension of the *vita contemplativa*. In the first chapter, Homer, Herodotus and Thucydides are taken as examples of narrative and horizontally situated perspectives that allow a plural version of truth and reality, whereas the modern notion of history implies a sort of 'eye of God' perspective which is not able to account fairly for the political dimension of plurality.

Narrative representations of a lived and shared reality are also taken into account in their 'fictive' aspect, insofar as I believe that a well crafted story is better equipped to account for politically meaningful phenomena in all their novelty and unpredictability. The works of Joseph Conrad and Primo Levi are analyzed as politically meaningful narrative recounts that can expose the fragility of all historical justifications and hint at a newness which they do not want to neutralize.

The question of the historical understanding of the totalitarian phenomenon is therefore considered to be politically interesting insofar as it must not rely on linear and progressive visions of history, but, rather, should assume the gap, the abyss that has taken place as unavoidable yet unbridgeable that history cannot heal. For Arendt, understanding does not mean the reduction of the past to a matter of consequential history, but the acceptance of the ethical and epistemological task of understanding without justifying.

My thesis is that Arendt's notion of storytelling is a fruitful means of analysis for questions related to the understanding of both history and politics. It allows us to view the political realm as a realm that is linked to neither nation nor race, and is characterized by a plurality of 'incoherent' political actors that 'produce' innumerable stories. The unpredictability and uniqueness of these words and deeds can be preserved along with their 'political significance,' their freedom, although only by means of a mode or way of representing them that does not abstract from its constitutive contingent character. In other words, the displaced notion of politics is a related web of stories that cannot be subsumed under any higher concept. The meaningfulness of the political, and subsequently also a better and fairer understanding of it, can be achieved and preserved by a narrative approach to politics.

The realm of human affairs, therefore, cannot be 'handled' – that is, possessed conceptually and therefore manipulated. Human plurality – that is, the reality of uniqueness – resists all conceptual representations and exceeds all definitions.

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Verona, May 2001

Olivia Guaraldo

*A Vittorio, mio padre*

*“If I have, as I said many times, a topic for the story and a desire to write the story, and I’m convinced that it’s my story, I don’t worry about the message. If I have a choice between a message and a story I always take the story and let the message go to hell. If you would ask me what kind of message there is in this story, I would say, I don’t see the message. What is the message? That a man liked the girlfriend of his youth in spite of the fact that she was half retarded? There is simply no message in it. What was the name of the scholar who said that the media is the message or something like that...”* Isaac Bashevis Singer

# ABBREVIATIONS

## 1. Hannah Arendt

- AJ** *Hannah Arendt Karl Jaspers, Correspondence 1926-1969*, New York: Harcourt Brace & Company 1992.
- BPF** *Between Past and Future. Six Exercises in Political Thought*, New York: Viking Press 1961 (Reprint New York: Viking Penguin 1977).
- EIC** *Eichmann In Jerusalem. A Report on the Banality of Evil*, New York: Viking Press 1963. (Reprint New York: Viking Penguin 1977).
- EIU** *Essays in Understanding. 1930-1954*, New York: Harcourt Brace & Company 1994.
- HC** *The Human Condition*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press 1958.
- LOK** *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press 1982.
- LOM** *The Life of the Mind*, San Diego, New York, London: Harcourt Brace & Company 1977.
- MDT** *Men in Dark Times*, New York: Harcourt Brace and Company 1968.
- OR** *On Revolution*, New York: Viking Press 1963. (Reprint New York: Viking Penguin 1977).
- OT** *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, San Diego, New York, London: Harcourt Brace & Co 1951.

## 2. Joseph Conrad

- HOD** *Heart of Darkness and the Secret Sharer*, with an introduction by Albert J. Guerard, Harmondsworth: Penguin 1983.



# PREFACE: ASCENT AND WALKABOUT

## 1. A Myth to Begin

This book is about stories. As a matter of fact it indeed recounts many stories. Since the task of my research is to uncover the political importance of storytelling, its impact on the very notion of politics, I would like to begin by telling not a single story, but two different and distant ones.

The first story is a very well known myth that lies at the foundation of our culture, namely Plato's myth of the Cave. It is the story of the enfranchisement of the philosopher from the chains of the world of appearances. Symbolized by an underground cave, the worldly dimension in which we are all born is depicted as the enslaved situation of a group of people who are living inside the cave, "chained by the leg and also by the neck, so that they cannot move and can see only what is in front of them" (514a). Their gaze is therefore forced to see what is projected onto the wall in front of them, namely the shadows projected on that same wall by figures passing outside the cave. In fact, behind them there is a fire burning, and between them and the fire there is a track "with a parapet built along it, like the screen at a puppet-show, which hides the performers while they show their puppets on the top" (514b). Behind the parapet are people carrying artificial objects, "figures of men and animals in wood or stone or other materials, which project above the parapet" (514c-515a). It is quite a complicated mechanism (the very technique of cinema, it has been noted), but efficacious in illustrating the falsehood of what the prisoners believe to be their only available reality. "In every way, such prisoners would recognize as reality nothing but the shadows of those artificial objects" (515c). Through the application of heroic gestures one of them succeeds in freeing himself from the chains and thus is able to turn his back to the wall and direct his gaze to the exit of the cave, now realizing that the shadows he once considered to be the only reality are in fact the shadows of objects passing outside the cave. The direct sight of the



fire-light causes his eyes to ache and he is tempted to return to the cave, to those objects he was able to see clearly. He is then dragged further, forcibly taken “up the steep and rugged ascent” (515e) until he exits the cave. The direct contact with sunlight causes “pain and vexation” and he cannot see “a single one of the things that he was now told are real” (516a). He needs some time to become accustomed to that “upper world,” his eyes first adjusting to the shadows and reflections in the water and later the things themselves. “After that, it would be easier to watch the heavenly bodies and the sky itself by night, looking at the light of the moon and stars rather than the Sun and the Sun’s light in the daytime” (516a-b). Finally, after the eye is properly trained, “he would be able to look at the Sun and contemplate its nature” (516b).

The hero of this myth, then, is the philosopher, who is able to free himself from the appearances of reality (shadows) and gain a privileged perspective. He realizes what others are not able to see, what he thought was his only reality is in fact the copy of a copy. If he were to go back to the underground cave, the reverse process of entering the dark would be as painful to his eyes as the first process of adjusting to the light, and it might take some time to once again become used to the darkness. Moreover, his former companions would laugh at him, saying that “he had gone up only to come back with his sight ruined; it was worth no one’s while even to attempt the ascent” (517a).

Only the philosopher, then, within the Platonic scheme of the *Republic*, is able to free himself from the chains of reality of the senses, the world of mere appearances, and the ascent into the upper world means “standing for the upward journey of the soul into the region of the intelligible” (517b). Only from the above perspective can the philosopher enter the world of knowledge, in which “the last thing to be perceived and only with great difficulty is the essential form of Goodness”. “Without having had a vision of this Form no one can act with wisdom, either in his own life or in matters of state” (517c). Not only does the philosopher gain an upper perspective on matters of truth and goodness, but he also has to apply them to the lower world. This is the mission of the philosopher, who would love to remain in the regions above the miseries of men, but who sacrifices his contemplative pleasure for the sake of unenlightened humanity. “[...] it is no wonder if those who have reached this height are reluctant to manage the affairs of men” (517c). The vertical direction of truth, the essential path that leads to the upper region, is reached at the expenses of suffering and misunderstanding on the side of those who remain in the cave: “If they could lay hands on the man who was trying to set them free and lead them up, they would kill him” (517a).

## 2. In the Australian Outback

The other story is very distant from the first, both in terms of time and space. It has neither the authority nor the antiquity of the aforementioned story. As a matter of fact, it was written more or less 2000 years after the Platonic myth, and it takes place in Australia. The storyteller of this recent tale is Bruce Chatwin (Chatwin 1987). It starts off with a description of contemporary Australian Aboriginals, of the difficulty of their integration within the norms of a colonizing culture, of their nevertheless interesting way of transgressing the rigid and ideal boundaries imposed on their land by the white man. According to an ancient practice, Aboriginals often abandon their present activities and set off on a long walk through the immense territory of central Australia: this is the "Walkabout". "They would step from their work clothes, and leave: for weeks and months and even years, trekking half-way across the continent if only to meet a man, then trekking back as if nothing had happened" (10). Freed from the chains of duty, leaving behind just the "shirts and hats and boots sticking up through their trousers" they walk through the land of their ancestors, repeating their original gesture, that is, singing and telling that land into existence through the acts of both singing and walking.

The dreamtime ancestors, who created themselves from clay, gave birth to infinite totemic species, each one of which has its "Dreaming," that is, its totemic animal. Every living form has its Dreaming: "A virus can be a Dreaming, you can have a chickenpox Dreaming, a desert-orange dreaming, a lice Dreaming" (12).

Each of these totemic ancestors "while traveling through the country, was thought to have scattered a trail of words and musical notes along the line of his footprints, and [...]these Dreaming-tracks lay over the land as 'ways' of communication between the most far-flung tribes"(13). The distracted Aboriginal worker, who abandons his cattle-station and his clothes to walk in the footprints of his dreamtime ancestor, simply recreates the World through his song and walk. "In theory, at least, the whole of Australia could be read as a musical score. There was hardly a rock or creek in the country that could not or had not been sung.[...] 'Anywhere in the bush you can point to some feature of the landscape and ask the aboriginal with you, "What's the story there?" or "Who's that?" The chances are he'll answer "Kangaroo" or "Budgerigar" or "Jew Lizard" depending on which ancestor walked that way"(13).

The song is therefore both a map and a compass. If you know the song you will be able to find your way across the country. The space in this 'earthbound

philosophy' is of a totally different quality: the contrasts between Aboriginals and the Australian government are constantly reiterated by the fact that for the Aboriginals every rock and tree in Australia is sacred, it is part of a Song-line, of the magical and poetic song of their ancestors. The Government authorities, however, would prefer instead to simply identify and enclose certain sacred sites, such as reservoirs, remaining free to build their roads and railroads around them. The problem is that for the Aboriginals there is no delimitation of space between an inside and an outside, they "could not imagine a territory as a block of land hemmed in frontiers: but rather as an interlocking network of 'lines' or 'ways through'". All their words for 'country' are the same as the words for 'line' (56). The story of walking Aboriginals narrated by Chatwin is full of suggestions; he explores the Australian outback and reports old legends. What is interesting in this story of the ancient customs of the Aboriginals is the horizontal perspective of their 'earthbound philosophy'.

Similarly to the Platonic prisoner, modern Aboriginals 'turn around' and leave their enslaved status as colonized people and re-appropriate their own dimension of truth, regardless of the consequences. Conversely from the Platonic hero, however, their path does not ascend toward a higher truth, vertically opposed to the falsehood of the world of appearances. The Song-lines they walk through are horizontal paths that build up their land, where, as we have seen, the immaterial flow of singing words nominates and re-nominates the accidents they encounter during their walkabout: the rock, the brook, the Spinifex, the Cacatua, naming and exploring the land at the same time.

"Each Ancestor opened his mouth and called out, 'I AM!' 'I am – Snake Cockatoo...Honeyant...Honeysuckle'...And this first 'I am', this primordial act of naming, was held, then and forever after, as the most secret and sacred couplet of the Ancestor's song.

Each of the Ancients (now basking in the sunlight) put his left foot forward and called out a second name. He put out his right foot forward and called out a third name. He named the waterhole, the reedbeds, the gum trees – calling to right and left, calling all things into being and weaving their names into verses.

The Ancients sang their way all over the world. They sang the rivers and ranges, salt-plains and sand dunes. They hunted, ate, made love, danced, killed: wherever their tracks led they left a trail of music.

They wrapped the whole world in a web of songs" (73).

### 3. At the Pheacian Court

To complicate the story further, I should like to return to Greece for a moment - not the Greece of philosophy, but the Greece of poets, the legendary land of heroes and gods, the land of Homer. In the *Odyssey*, in one of the many banquets in which the unfortunate yet resourceful Ulysses participates, the fascinating and godlike words of the bard entertain the guests. It was common practice to praise the bard and offer him food, while he sang the deeds of heroes and gods.

Imagine the following scenario: Ulysses is about to hear his own life-story as told by Demodokos, the bard at the Phaeacian Court. Although he is unaware of it at the present moment, he is about to cry while listening to the song of his own deeds in the voice of another person. Unaware, at that moment, Ulysses glorifies the bard and offers him food:

“Then Odysseus cut off a piece of roast pork with plenty of fat (for there was abundance left on the joint) and said to a servant, ‘Take this piece of pork over to Demodokos and tell him to eat it; for all the pain his lays may cause me I will salute him none the less; bards get honor and respect throughout the world, for the Muse teaches them their songs [oimas Mous’ edidaxe] and loves them” (Hom. *Od.*8.477-481).

One must respect and honor the bard because he is the one to whom the Muse consigns human deeds in the form of a song. The well-known blindness of most bards (and poets) indicates their overdeveloped acoustic sense: they are able to ‘listen to’ or ‘hear’ the Muse, the omniscient spectator of human and divine deeds, and reproduce the stories in the form of a song. The Greek word for ‘song’ in the above mentioned passage is **oimē**, (“oimas Mous’ edidaxe”) which originally meant *both* ‘path, road’ and ‘song’<sup>1</sup>. That is to say that the song of the bard, the song inspired by the Muse, is also a path or a road, as if, by a magical abolition of space, the songs of the Homeric tradition would be similar to those Songlines through which Australian Aboriginals spatialize their experiences and interpret the world. Could this displace the vertical notion of truth any further? I should like to think it could.

## NOTES

- 1 **oim-ē**, hê, = oimos : metaph., *way of song, song, lay*, oimas Mous' edidaxe Hom. Od. 8.481 ; theos de moi en phresin oimas pantoiias enephusen au=Hom. Od. 22.347 ; oimês tês . . kleos ouranon eurun hikane au=Hom. Od. 8.74 **oimos** (**hoimos** S. *Ichn.*168, Call. *Aet. Oxy.*2079.27, Parth. *Fr.*31, Epigr. Gr. (v. infr.), Hdn. Gr. 1.546, cf. phroimion ), ho, also hê (v. infr.), *way, road, path*, Hes. WD 290, Pind. P. 4.248 ; leuron oi. aitheros Aesch. PB 396 ; haplê oi. eis Haidou pherei IDEM=A. *Fr.*239 ; orthên par' oi., hê 'pi Larisan pherei Eur. Alc. 835 ; es têtên paraplêsiên oi. empiptousin Hp. *Decent.*4 ; ton auton oi. poreuomenoi Plat. Rep. 420b. Liddell-Scott-Jones, *Lexicon of Classical Greek* in Crane, Gregory R. (ed.) 1997.

# INTRODUCTION

## 1. Philosophy and Politics

The stories narrated above introduce the ‘spirit’ of this work – namely, its attempt to question the linearity and verticality of philosophic metaphors and propose horizontal and intertwined paths of stories as precious means of signification within a political context. In other words, stories as multiple and horizontal, metaphorized as a web of intertwined and interdependent ‘ways through,’ serve here to question, displace and mobilize the vertical (or often simply linear) paths of the philosophic imagination, considered to be inadequate – because they are detached, abstract, manipulative and violent – to understand the political realm, or, reality from a political perspective.<sup>1</sup>

Contesting the predominance of a specific biased tradition of thought, my analysis will explore Arendt’s thought – following, in this respect, the well-known distinction she made, between philosophy *and* politics – as regards both the question of action and its representation.

In the first chapter I will focus on the question of politics as the realm of the unexpected and the contingent. In my reading of the Arendtian narrative, this very realm is not simply the dream of a lost pureness, that of Greek antiquity. Rather, it involves a totally new problematization of the subject. I dare to propose that Arendt, in thinking about politics, provides us with a radically new notion of subjectivity, deprived of the abstract and totalizing features of the philosophical hero. The radical nature of her proposal must not afflict philosophy (or post-philosophy): it is neither the discovery of a new ‘law’ nor of a more refined anti-law. While contesting the arbitrariness of the metaphysical tradition, its abstractness and detachment, I would like to detect, starting from an Arendtian perspective, different modes of political interaction, of political agency, of political understanding. To contest the nomological approach of social science in general, or the purely instrumental views dominating academic political science, Arendtian paradigms concerning action, storytelling and politics as the realm of contingent appearances and history as a “togetherness of stories” should reveal their value.

The aim of this work is neither to propose an Arendtian orthodoxy, nor a specifically faithful account of her thought. My intention is not to write about Arendt as such but to consider, starting from an Arendtian horizon, possible developments in matters of identity, politics and history. My hope is that this will lead me to sometimes think *with* Arendt but most of the time to think without her, or, put differently, to begin from her perspectives in order to move away from them, or simply to use them as stepping stones (to use an Arendtian image) to drawing different conclusions.

In this context, the Greek example offers not only a lived and remembered experience of political action, but also a sort of counter-factual model against which we can measure the distance between a political experience (that of the *polis*, but also that of Homeric tales and Herodotus' and Thucydides' stories) and a philosophical neutralization of that experience. I shall use this example as a frame of reference for my hypothesis: to oppose a horizontal, displaced and chaotic metaphor for political truth to the vertical, linear and abstract metaphor often used by philosophers as symbolizing philosophical truth.

In the second chapter I propose the consideration of stories, the practice of a narrative recount, or, if you like, a narrative form of representation, not simply as a purer, better medium, but as what concepts and theoretical thinking have irremediably tried to conceal, to cover, to freeze.

By refusing the notion of storytelling as essentially ideological and closure oriented, and also by partly criticizing the ontological 'goodness' of narrative, I position my analysis neither on the side of the so-called anti-narrativists nor on the side of narrativists. The debate between these two different positions, as it is very well argued in the 1980 volume *On Narrative* (Mitchell 1980), can assume Hayden White and Paul Ricoeur as the two representatives of the opposite sides. In my analysis I specify my position in relation to this debate by assuming that narrativity is politically interesting insofar as it does not elicit temporality from its form: it would seem to be a form of representation more suitable to recounting a dimension (politics) in which temporality, in the form of contingency, plays a crucial role. This position, nevertheless, does consider narrativity to be a form of representation, and as such it is considered as plausible as any other. Moreover, narrativity is a code, and it does not possess more 'naturalness' than others. Nevertheless, the very plausibility of concepts, of a vertical dimension, has been considered for centuries to be the only legitimate one. In the second part of this chapter I contest this plausibility and legitimacy by deconstructing some of the most popular vertical metaphorizations of truth (in Plato, Descartes and Kant) by illustrating how at the core of each of them lies the denial of a horizontal, plural and shared dimension of coexistence, the realm of the *vita activa*.

In the third chapter I proceed with an Arendtian reading of Hegel in order to show how the most 'historical' of philosophers bases its system on a radical denial of both history and temporality. The very popular critique of Hegel as the philosopher of history gives way, in the second part of the chapter, to the exposition of Arendt's interesting and challenging approach to history in her book *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. In this work the quest for meaning is sustained and simultaneously put in abeyance by a radical refusal of justification, of consequential history, of the modes of interpretation of traditional historiography. In my reading, Arendt's innovative ideas concerning both time and history, connect very well with Walter Benjamin's *Thesen* on the philosophy of history, in which a new notion of historical temporality and a political approach to history are outlined for the first time.

For both Arendt and Benjamin, to view Totalitarianism as lying on the edge of an historical abyss "which no explanation is able to bridge" means to deny historical inevitability in terms of both its ontological and epistemological aspects. The redemptive force of both authors' mode of analysis lies precisely in the responsible and conscious assumption of the abyss as an irrevocable condition for both understanding and acting.

Chapter four deals with literary attempts to represent and understand unheard of phenomena: Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* is presented as a good example of a literary recount of the unimaginable, and, as such, it is analyzed and commented on in order to illustrate how in some cases literature, or narrative fictive representations of phenomena can better account for political novelties. 'Better' does not necessarily mean that literature can substitute for historiography nor that it could become a new epic of history. In my view, it means that it can perhaps facilitate a means of "understanding without justifying" that nomological knowledge and causalistic historiography do not even conceive of.

The second literary text I analyze in this chapter is Primo Levi's *I sommersi e I salvati*, a collection of essays on different aspects of life inside and after the *Lager*. Levi attempts to understand "the undecipherable" by means of a language, which, over the course of the book becomes less and less objective and detached and acquires an increasingly poetic, literary connotation. I shall leave to the reader the pleasure of discovering for herself the interesting and bewildering twists and turns in both Conrad's and Levi's prose - after all this is a book about stories, and to reveal the end at the beginning is to condemn all stories to a premature death.

The aim of my treatment of storytelling and literary narrations does not pretend to offer a substitute for historiography, to reduce all historical representations to a matter of literature. My aim is to provide alternative forms of comprehending the past insofar as conventional forms of understanding have been proven insufficient, to say the least. Moreover, it seems to me that



these alternative forms of historical understanding (narrative configurations of meaning, fictive or 'real') tend to address the ethical question of "understanding without justifying" in a more fruitful way.

Finally, the last chapter of the book deals with a more specific feminist issue: narrative and female identity. By juxtaposing Arendt with three major contemporary feminist thinkers (Butler, Honig and Cavarero) I attempt to develop a different notion of identity and subjectivity, which might be useful in rethinking the status of feminist theory and practice today, torn as it is between constructed identities and essentialism. Storytelling and the corresponding notion of the Arendtian "who" as the protagonist of an always re-tellable story qualifies the political space of representation neither as a realm of ever-repeatable "whats," nor as the realm of exceptional, authoritative and metaphysical female subjects. The political space that is enlarged and constantly amended by stories and narrative practices qualifies itself, once again, not as a contained or excluding space, but as an infinite web of relations the essence of which resides simply in the capacity to expand and connect stories and "whos".

Seen from this perspective, Arendt's notion of the "who" offers an interesting example of "performative" identity and the politics of performativity, one that is more radically 'enacted' than Judith Butler's. Still, my interest in this chapter has definitely not been the formulation of yet *another* critique of Butler's thought, which I consider to be among the most theoretically interesting and challenging topics. Instead, I simply attempt a displacement of the verticality of the tradition from a feminist perspective, and Butler's ideas have been of indispensable guidance in this task.

The status of theory today, both within the fields of social sciences and humanities, is testimony of the existence of a multifaceted landscape of positions often quite critical toward the claims of a comprehensive and neutral possibility of (theoretical) knowledge. In 1976, Michel Foucault celebrated the "inhibiting effect of global, *totalitarian* theories," that is, the fact that "the theoretical unity of these discourses" was in some sense "put in abeyance – or at least curtailed, divided, overthrown, caricatured, theatricalised, or what you will." Against the universalizing (and therefore totalizing and totalitarian) claims of theory, Foucault preferred the "local character of criticism," namely the possibility of operating on a local level in order to reveal what the universal claims of theory suppress, cover or conceal. "In each case, the attempt to think in terms of a totality has in fact proved a hindrance to research." The fundamental link between truth and power detected by Foucault in every given system of order must be criticized from a local, partial perspective. Any attempt to oppose to the ruling truth regime another equally exhaustive domain of truth would be questionable in terms of its very claim to universality (Foucault 1981:80-81).

The idea of renouncing a global theory that yields a global truth regime has been advocated from a number of different perspectives: feminist, post-colonial, post-modern, deconstructive, rhetorical etc. If the possibility of referring to 'theory' in a non-dogmatic sense still exists today, this possibility is linked to the local character of critique that Foucault advocated over 20 years ago.

Theory can still be deployed to explore the very legitimacy of its own foundations (Butler & Scott 1992). A theory that does not question its basis would be considered lacking, incomplete. To question theoretical foundations, to mobilize the 'given' within any system or method, is considered an indispensable political and critical gesture.

My aim is to 'mobilize' concepts, to displace the conceptual mastery of the tradition of political thought by questioning its verticality and abstractness. To expose the contingency of a system means to show that its exclusions and definitions are not irresistible and necessary. According to Bonnie Honig's (Honig 1995:136) interesting interpretation of Arendt, *resistibility* is the very core of politics. In other words, politics qualifies as the realm of the contestable, the amendable, the changeable. Politics conceived as the realm of contingency therefore implies a political critique of the foundational premises of philosophical discourse, and it mobilizes, contests and resists the truths (and exclusions) performed by that system.<sup>2</sup>

A further task of this work, as I noted above, is to apply Arendt's recovered notion of narrative identity (as the result of action) to a larger, more historical context. History as a "togetherness of stories," as a realm of partiality and situative perspective, can perhaps offer a path to the understanding of the great tragedy of our century, the Shoah. I shall not claim to offer a better, more recent interpretation of Totalitarianism, but instead simply propose a way to examine the unprecedented with political eyes, namely, the eyes of understanding and the eyes of remembrance.

The displacement of both philosophy and history in order to 're-configure' politics is the aim of this work; to dislocate the sites of strong oppositions – among abstract definitions – and to criticize the 'world order' that takes its bearings from those oppositions. In other words, my aim here is to displace the supposed universality of norms and principles in order to reenact stories that for some reasons did not comply to the history of the victors; to save those stories from being forgotten and to acquire a vantage point from which to look at our past, our present and our future with more than one possible path traced or to be traced before our eyes.

When Hannah Arendt, in her last book, *The Life of the Mind*, felt the need to situate her work and herself within the intellectual panorama of the time, she pronounced the following words, which, in this context, can be clarifying:

“I have clearly joined the ranks of those who for some time now have been attempting to dismantle metaphysics, and philosophy with all its categories, as we have known them from their beginning in Greece until today. Such dismantling is possible only on the assumption that the thread of tradition is broken and that we shall not be able to renew it. [...] What you then are left with is still the past, but a *fragmented* past, which has lost its certainty of evaluation” (LOM I, 212).

Still, the disappearance of certainty, wholeness and continuity must not disrupt the quest for meaning:

“Hence, the possible advantage of our situation following the demise of metaphysics and philosophy would be twofold. It would permit us to look on the past with new eyes, unburned and unguided by any traditions, and thus to dispose of a tremendous wealth of raw experiences without being bound by any prescriptions as to how to deal with these treasures. ‘Notre héritage n’est précédé d’aucun testament’” (LOM I, 12).

## 2. Storytelling: a New Approach

“Stories have been told as long as speech has existed, and *sans* stories the human race would have perished, as it would have perished *sans* water.” Karen Blixen

Hannah Arendt speaks about storytelling as the narrative practice that is active within political space. By using the ancient model of the Greek *polis* she enhances the importance that a narrative account of glorious enterprises had for the community. Both political actors moving in the *agora* and the legendary heroes of the Trojan War relied firmly on their capability to produce great stories, that is, their ability to give birth to memorable deeds and words that could easily be told by poets or historiographers.

What Arendt points out is the political significance of such a narrative practice; the contingent realm of politics could attain immortality only through the words of the poet. The narrative practice is further contextualized by Arendt as follows: by assuming the ideal typical hypothesis of a political space, in which each single person displays her/his uniqueness, storytelling becomes the adequate means of understanding the contingent space of action, a medium that guarantees meaningfulness to political space.

The ideal typical notion of a political space is used by Arendt to map out the sites of possible resistance still available in modernity. By assuming that political space, action and storytelling are ‘the norm,’ Arendt is able to detect how and to what extent the history of the West has concealed, mistreated and abandoned

the public and shared dimension of the *vita activa*. What emerges from this practice of detection is that *praxis* has been replaced by *poiesis*, and therefore politics has been reduced to a *techne*, to an ability (HC: 222-223). Action has been replaced by government, rule and administration; stories of unique and glorious deeds have been replaced by the notion of 'History' as a universal matter. In order to be able to control the production of meaning through theory, an entire realm of narrative practices and political actions has been forgotten. What Arendt wants to recover or rebuild is not a strong notion of the political, but a possibility of re-thinking our human condition, by attempting to see it from a different perspective and tell it with a different voice.

It is not by opposing the Greek origin to a misinterpreting tradition that Arendt recovers authentic political experience. In my view, her backward glance toward pre-Platonic Greece functions as a mobilizing practice - it is the attempt to grant visibility not necessarily to the 'correctness' of the *polis* experience but to the plurality of traditions, therefore exposing the contingency of one single heritage.

The same can be said about Arendt also in relation to her interpretation of the modern era, to which she denies the character of an epoch. In other words, by mobilizing the borders of a theoretical/historical perspective, and doing so within an Arendtian frame of reference, the present work denies the irresistibility to the direction taken by the Western *Geist*.<sup>3</sup>

That which is resistible is renegotiable, or, in other words, it questions its very conditions of possibility. Arendt thought that the American Constitution offered a prime example of this, because its authority "resides in its very capacity to be amended and augmented,"<sup>4</sup> to be able to receive future modifications as a part of its 'nature'. Openness to modification, alteration or amendment means a denial of any claim to orthodoxy, but also an acceptance of the contingent foundations of legitimacy.

By opposing a horizontal narrative practice to a vertical speculative one, this work will mobilize the foundations of the conceptual, (phal)logocentric tradition in a way that allows resistance to that tradition. Moreover, the politicization of the philosophical implications of theory has the potential to offer plausibility to the dimension of narrative relations and understanding, where what is at stake is not the "what-ness" of being but the "who-ness" of doing, not the constative dimension of the "what" (qualities, talents, features of the subject) but the performative dimension of the "who" (doer of unpredictable deeds).<sup>5</sup>

## NOTES

- 1 As Michael Shapiro (Shapiro 1997) has pointed out, the boundaries traced by modern reason, as it became embodied in the geography of the modern state, are characterized by “the persistence of a unitary and exclusively vertical view of space as well as an uncritical reading of history” (64). Shapiro’s most interesting point here is that the violence inherent in the spatiality of the West is much more ambiguous than the violence at work in native cultures, where war against neighbors is not connected to the imposition of a unitary and vertical view of spatiality, but is a means of self-expression and “an activity through which they completed, reproduced, and enhanced the self” (67). What is vital to the theoretical ‘nature’ of Western discourse is that it loses legitimacy if it does not aspire to totality and completeness, to an Imperialism not only of culture but also of epistemology. This is the crucial point of Derrida’s critique of Levinas and his aversion for conceptual mastery: Shapiro deals with this issue in the last chapter of his book: ‘The Ethics of Encounter’ (171- 209).
- 2 Contingency, in this context and throughout this work, indicates both the contingency of political appearances in Arendtian terms and also the contingency of history, an aspect which in my view connects directly, also in Arendt’s work, to the former. To view political agency as *performative* (this term shall be employed later in the book by ‘contaminating’ the existentialist terminology of Arendt with a popular term now used by feminists – see Butler 1990 & 1993) is to displace a strong notion of identity and subjectivity. To view history as contingent means to displace correspondent notions of historical inevitability and necessity, and, in doing so, to mobilize given frames of interpretations considered as accepted, unequivocal and undisputable.
- 3 I absolutely agree with the position of Carlo Galli, who notes that for Arendt secularization in the modern age was determined by facts rather than ideas, or *Weltgeist*. The very birth of the modern subject, its alienation and loss of the world is explained by the recurrence to a constellation of concrete and contingent facts: see HC, “The *Vita activa* and the Modern Age” pp. 248-325. Galli affirms: “La secolarizzazione non descrive un’epoca in senso forte, per la Arendt, proprio perché ‘epoca’ implica rottura e sospensione di un ordine preesistente - colpa, necessità o libertà che ciò significhi - : l’analitica esistenziale di *Vita activa* (la distinzione tra le funzioni del contemplare, del lavorare, del fare e dell’agire ) vale invece a retrodatare l’essenza della modernità, a collocarla come *possibilità* antropologica e a toglierle quindi il carattere sia di cesura sia di necessità.” (Galli 1987: 24).
- 4 This passage is from Arendt OR: 202, quoted by Honig (Honig 1995: 138).
- 5 Bonnie Honig carries out this interesting reading of Arendtian categories through Derridean distinctions between constative and performative utterances (derived from Austin 1983). She finds an interesting connection between Arendtian action (both as disclosure and foundation of a new order) and the performative,

as a sort of act that does not presuppose an identity, a being. She, in fact, connects the notion of action as unpredictable and irreversible to the Nietzschean motto “there is no ‘being’ behind the doing. The doing, the performance is everything” (Honig 1995: 138).



# CHAPTER ONE

## 1. Vita Activa

### *1.1 The Arendtian Politics of Uniqueness*

In her well-known book on the “human condition,” Hannah Arendt formulates a notion of politics that goes against the mainstream of political thinking and philosophy. According to Arendt, the dimension of the *vita activa*, that is “human life in so far as it is actively engaged in doing something” (HC: 22), has always been ignored by philosophy. Thinkers and theorists have mistreated the realm of human affairs ever since the beginning of philosophy, inasmuch as the contingent and chaotic status of human reality does not fit within the theoretical order of philosophical discourse. In other words, the concrete and plural essence of human reality has always been manipulated by philosophy so as to deprive it of its contingent character and force it to fulfill abstract criteria of order. Arendt criticizes the violent intentions of philosophy as regards the realm of human affairs, and tries to present a different notion of it, a notion that would better respect the plural and contingent character of life as lived among men and women. She refers to this dimension as ‘politics’ and attributes to it several features that had traditionally been excluded from it, or that do not strictly belong either to political theory/science or to professional politics.

Politics is, in Arendt’s terms, primarily the dimension of living and acting together, as well as where the disclosure of the “who” is vital to it. In other words, politics is a stage on which each singularity gets the chance to expose her/his “who”, or her/his own uniqueness to the other actors.<sup>1</sup> An innovative and often paradoxical notion of political action emerges from Arendt’s unorthodox re-reading of *praxis* which, in my opinion, serves the aim of displacing a traditional ends-means notion of the political sphere, but also emphasizes the importance of thinking and interpreting that which such an



instrumental, technical notion of politics leaves out. To cast a light of ineffability or unimportance over contingency means to repeat the traditional metaphysical gesture of positing a universality and essentiality that do not exist.

According to Arendt philosophy has always dealt with an abstract definition of 'Man' which assumes the existence of a common nature among all human beings, regardless of the uniqueness that characterizes each one. Philosophy deals with the *chimera* of 'human nature' that posits an abstract subject –'Man'– the features of which should be common to all human beings. Moreover, political philosophy, beginning with Plato's *Republic*, has attempted to 'work' with this abstraction in constructing political models. By creating a subject with few but universal features and by tailoring to it political modes of interaction, political philosophy has banned human freedom from the earth. According to Arendt, the abstraction of 'Man' in fact implies a total misunderstanding of human plurality, that is, the fact that each human being is distinct from others.

"Human plurality...has the twofold character of equality and distinction. If men were not equal, they could neither understand each other and those who came before them nor plan for the future and foresee the needs of those who will come after them. If men were not distinct, each human being distinguished from any other who is, was, or will ever be, they would need neither speech nor action to make themselves understood. Signs and sounds to communicate immediate, identical needs and wants would be enough" (HC: 175–176).

Human beings are equal inasmuch as they have the capacity to understand each other, but their distinctness performs this equality in the most infinite way. In other words, human beings have the constitutive opportunity to understand each other through speech, but, at the same time, the way we dispose of this faculty of the production of meaning is different for each one of us. It is through action and speech that human beings actualize this possibility. Action and speech obviously presuppose an audience, and human beings disclose their uniqueness by acting and speaking in front of (or among) other people. It is thanks to this public and shared dimension that single unique beings can 'appear' to each other in their distinct uniqueness. The possibility to distinguish oneself from others is, according to Arendt, not eventual, but vital to our existence as human.

"Speech and action reveal this unique distinctness. Through them, men distinguish themselves instead of being merely distinct; they are the modes in which human beings appear to each other, not indeed as physical objects, but *qua* men...it is an initiative from which no human being can refrain and still be human. This is true of no other activity in the *vita activa*".

The uniqueness of each human being becomes visible and audible – and therefore real – when it is 'enacted' in the presence of other people. "A life without speech and without action...is literally dead to the world; it has ceased to be a human life because it is no longer lived among men" (HC: 176).

Human beings are from birth ‘new beginnings,’ ‘*initium*’, that is, their status as creatures, gives them the impulse to begin, to start, to set something in motion. Birth entails the element of a new beginning, but it is only through action and speech – a sort of second birth – that the novelty of our being – our uniqueness – enters the world and therefore becomes real.

The surpassed vocabulary employed by Arendt in order to cast her provocative approach to the “human condition” perhaps does have the potential to disturb, insofar as there is a great deal of “phenomenological realism” in it that she takes for granted and does not problematize. I think that what needs to be kept in mind is the fact that when Arendt was writing *The Human Condition* (the book was first published in 1958) she was seeking modes of both thinking and understanding that would help her to re-cast the problem of human existence and co-existence in connection with the possibility of the radical elimination of the very basis of existence. Philosophy had traditionally been the discipline devoted to posing such questions, but, as the recent experience of war and destruction together with the emergence of the possibility of total annihilation showed, there seemed to be not only a radical incapability of philosophical categories to understand, but also their partial involvement in what had happened. In a letter to Jaspers, in 1951, Arendt affirms: “If an individual man qua man were omnipotent, then there is in fact no reason why men in the plural should exist at all – just as in monotheism it is only God’s omnipotence that makes him ONE. So, in this same way, the omnipotence of an individual man would make men superfluous. (Nietzsche, it seems to me, has nothing to do with this, or Hobbes either. The will to power always wants simply to become more powerful and so remains within the comparative, which still respects the limits of human existence and does not push on to the madness of the superlative.)

I suspect that philosophy is not altogether innocent in this fine how-do-you-do. Not, of course, in the sense that Hitler had anything to do with Plato. (One compelling reason why I took such trouble to isolate the elements of totalitarian governments was to show that the Western tradition from Plato up to and including Nietzsche is above any such suspicion.)

Instead, perhaps in the sense that Western philosophy has never had a clear concept of what constitutes the political, and couldn’t have one, because, by necessity, it spoke of man the individual and dealt with the fact of plurality tangentially” (AJ: 166).

I think that both Arendt’s reflections on the elements and events that led to the outburst of Totalitarian rule and her later re-casting of the question of the human condition have a great deal in common, insofar as they both stem from a need to re-interpret history and politics from a totally different perspective. The need to re-cast the question of the human condition is linked to the need

to provide a new terminology, to test the boundaries or philosophical language and attempt to attain the ‘realism’ option, not to expect it to mirror reality. On the contrary, all of the provocative assumptions that are taken for granted in *The Human Condition* (the tripartite division of Labor, Work and Action, the division of private and public, the opposition between Ancient and Modern ) work as counter-factual models, as possible and equally plausible terms of analysis that accept the givenness of an irreducible plurality of subjects that is inexplicable through the language of philosophy instead of removing plurality and contingency from their context of appearance and instead of positing the fiction of a human nature – or, for that matter, of human behavior. (On this aspect see also Forti 1994: 93–97).

This givenness, which might be a problematic term in times of constructivism could perhaps be seen as the starting hypothesis of Arendt’s voyage into the tradition. For her, Totalitarianism infinitely and unimaginably radicalized the philosophical attitude of reducing plurality to oneness. For all these reasons, I take Arendt’s ‘realism’ as nothing more than a point of departure from which to examine both the past and the future with different eyes.

## ***1.2 The New Beginning against a Dying Philosophy***

*The Human Condition* therefore provokes the reader with images and tones that can at the least be considered unusual in the *genre*:

“With the creation of man, the principle of beginning came into the world itself, which, of course, is another way of saying that the principle of freedom was created when man was created but not before” (HC: 177).

Human freedom is, according to Arendt, the possibility of starting something new, of giving birth to something that did not exist before. The temporal dimension into which human beings are born is determined by this new beginning, that is, by a straight line that breaks through the circular time of nature and the universe. The beginning of this line has a definite origin, birth, while its end is unpredictable except for the fact that it is propelled into the future. Freedom, as the unpredictable actualization of the unexpected, can, at any moment, modify the future-oriented line that represents each individual life. Freedom, as such, it is not an abstract principle, nor an empty category that should define our human nature. Freedom is – or should be – the modality by which our human condition actualizes itself .

Since the human condition is life on earth, under certain specific conditions and in accordance with certain limitations, the inevitable character of birth and death constitutes our human ‘role’ in it. Moreover, it is also determined by the fact that men and women, and not ‘Man,’ live in the world. Natality, mortality and plurality therefore seem to characterize the human condition.

This is when Arendt makes her most interesting programmatic move in relation to her philosophical heritage as well as to her hypothesis. Arendt, in fact, vigorously affirms that death and its philosophical implications have already been analyzed in depth by philosophers, and as such she prefers to concentrate on birth. "...natality, and not mortality may be the central category of political, as distinguished from metaphysical thought" (HC: 9).

Birth, with its obvious implications of future and possibility is, according to Arendt, a more suitable guiding principle of an analysis that favors the unpredictable and plural aspects of reality rather than its predictable and certain aspects. Reality as such, is thus constituted by infinitely improbable 'appearances'. "The new always happens against the overwhelming odds of statistical laws and their probability, which for all practical, everyday purposes, amounts to certainty; the new therefore always appears in the guise of a miracle" (HC: 178).

Natality, therefore, with all its elements of novelty, surprise and wonder is, in the Arendtian perspective, preferred over mortality, which, in the long tradition of philosophical thought, relates to predictability, closure and fear. Death, as the common fate of all human beings, is the perspective of the *vita contemplativa*.

The activity of thinking, viewed from the perspective of the *vita activa*, implies a sort of death, in the sense that it abstracts from life as lived among other men. In Plato, thinking implies a perspective in which the subject, in order to reach the truth of ideas must abstract from the material reality of the 'human condition,' from the bodily and temporal dimensions. Contemplation involves a sort of unreal immobility that is attained by suspending attention toward the material world in order to 'make space' for the immaterial flux of thoughts that unfolds in an extraneous dimension to which the daily life of appearances remains irrelevant.

The philosophical implications of conceiving of human beings as 'mortals' have shaped our tradition so much that it has become difficult to present a thought which, perhaps for the first time, denies and inverts this perspective, opposing birth to death. Arendt wants to account for the plural character of humanity in a way that can allow freedom and political action to be thought outside the metaphysical horizon. The purpose of my reading of Arendt, therefore, goes in the direction of using *some* of her notions in order to detect the level at which it is possible, or even imaginable, to think of politics outside the philosophical tradition, or in a horizon very critical to it.

If death is, according to the mainstream of philosophical discourse, the distinctive character of all human beings, then there is little room left to account for novelty and uniqueness. Death, in fact, inexorably closes all possibilities, in the face of it – it is not only a common place – all human beings are alike. The

equality that death presupposes is different from the biological equality of birth. As Arendt notes, following Augustine, birth is the beginning<sup>2</sup> – it is the opening of a life-span horizon in which each human being can leave a trace, can do and say something that has never been said or done before. “The fact that man is capable of action means that the unexpected can be expected from him, that he is able to perform what is infinitely improbable”. In this perspective the element of novelty and surprise is preferred over the inevitability of death. If compared to the metaphysical perspective of philosophers (in this respect, according to Arendt, there is not much difference between the ‘mortals’ of whom Aristotle speaks and the ‘being-for-death’ theorized by Heidegger) Arendt’s political perspective prefers unexpectedness to certainty, surprise to fate, uniqueness to universality. Death equalizes differences. Birth sets them into motion.<sup>3</sup>

What is interesting in this perspective is the fact that Arendt transforms the facticity of being born into a political pre-condition for action: to be born means to be consigned to the contingency of a human life the richness of which lies exactly in the possibility to dispose of this contingency in order to start something unpredictable. Birth, in this perspective, is a sort of pre-comprehension in which the capacity to act, to begin becomes thinkable.

### ***1.3 The Intangible Identity against a Possessive Thought***

The importance of natality, and the connected aspect of uniqueness which appears in the world of women and men in the form of action and speech in front of others, brings in another crucial element of Arendt’s political theory. Since each human being discloses his/her uniqueness by appearing to others in a public context and since uniqueness is strictly connected to this appearance, what is vital to Arendt is the identification of a means of accounting for uniqueness as it appears.

“What” somebody is involves qualities, talents and inclinations that can also be common to others, that can be accounted for as typical or psychological features. “Who” somebody is escapes these definitions. “Who” somebody is is the distinctive uniqueness, the ‘not-yet’ appeared, seen or heard.

This “who” reveals him or herself to others through action and speech, almost unwillingly from the actor’s side. In other words, we could say that when acting the ‘protagonist’ of her/his uniqueness shows who she/he is independently from the intentions that could have brought her/him to act. The actor enters the public scene with speech and actions, but the reality of who this actor is becomes clear only to others, or, to put it another way, no matter who I think I am, my identity becomes clear only to my spectators. “This disclosure of ‘who’ in contradistinction to ‘what’ somebody is...is implicit in everything

somebody says and does. It can be hidden only in complete silence and perfect passivity, but its disclosure can almost never be achieved as a willful purpose, as though one possessed and could dispose of this 'who' in the same manner he has and can dispose of his qualities" (HC: 179).

Arendt also states that the inner intention, the springing to action and the connected urge to appear to others in the moment the agent actualizes her/his capacity for 'beginning,' becomes a reality independent from the agent. Words and deeds become part of the world; they acquire a reality, which cannot be mastered by us. We cannot master ourselves, or be totally in charge of ourselves in the public sphere, because our identity depends on the presence of others. "...the 'who,' which appears so clearly and unmistakably to others, remains hidden from the person himself, like the *daimon* in Greek religion which accompanies each man throughout his life, always looking over his shoulder from behind and thus visible only to those he encounters" (179–180).

There is, though, in this appearance, an immaterial, almost volatile aspect that it is difficult to grasp. This is clearly connected to the fact that each newcomer, each new beginning, can in practice say or do the most unimaginable things, since the "infinitely improbable," the "miracle" of birth becomes real in the public sphere of action and speech.

"The manifestation of who the speaker and doer unexchangeably is, though it is plainly visible, retains a curious intangibility that confounds all efforts toward unequivocal verbal expression. The moment we want to say *who* somebody is, our very vocabulary leads us astray into saying *what* he is; we get entangled in a description of qualities he necessarily shares with others like him; we begin to describe a type or a 'character'...with the result that his specific uniqueness escapes us" (181).

## ***1.4 The Relating Web***

Is the realm of human affairs thus a volatile and futile realm of which we can only say that nothing can be said about it? Certainly not. The Arendtian aim is to find a means of re-presenting actions and deeds as they take place in this realm that is not 'possessive,' manipulating and violent. Moreover, the Arendtian attempt is that of enhancing the importance of this realm and its meaningfulness.

The realm of human affairs, the space that men and women establish between themselves when appearing to each other, is an immaterial medium which Arendt refers to as the *in-between*, "...which consists of deeds and words and owes its origin exclusively to men's acting and speaking directly *to one another*" (HC: 183).

The constitutive plurality of this immaterial space is determined by the fact that deeds and words, when an agent performs them, always take place in an already existing environment. When the agent appears to others, giving birth to the unexpected and therefore actualizing her/his uniqueness, she/he is facing spectators that have been there before and are there to testify this new appearance. Without this pre-existing public dimension (which, in a larger sense, could be also called 'history') not only would deeds and words be lost but their very meaningfulness would be impossible to grasp.

The pre-existing community to which the agent refers is the pre-condition of meaningful and memorable actions. "Action alone is the exclusive prerogative of man; neither a beast nor a god is capable of it, and only action is entirely dependent upon the constant presence of others" (23).

Arendt calls this immaterial dimension the "in-between" of the "web of human relationships" and she says it "exists wherever men live together". "The disclosure of the 'who' through speech, and the setting of a new beginning through action, always fall into an already existing web where their immediate consequences can be felt" (183–184). I suggest that it is because of this web of human relationships that each human being feels the urge to disclose her/his own uniqueness. Plurality conditions our existence as much as natality does. Life without words and actions (which, of course are directed *to* – or against – somebody and are related to the world) would be "literally dead".

"No human life, not even the life of the hermit, in nature's wilderness, is possible without a world which directly or indirectly testifies to the presence of other human beings" (22).

If, then, this plural and public dimension is the most human of our 'conditions,' how do we preserve it, how do we grant meaningfulness to it?

"It is because of this already existing web of human relationships, with its innumerable, conflicting wills and intentions, that action almost never achieves its purpose; but it is also because of this medium, in which action alone is real, that it 'produces' stories with or without intention as naturally as fabrication produces tangible things"(184).

The result or 'product' of action and speech in the immaterial in-between where human beings encounter each other is the *story*. Each new beginner, each newcomer who acts and speaks in front of others gives birth to a story, which is the by-product of action. The story can be seen as the material, tangible link that gives solidity to the volatile and ever-changing realm of human affairs. Moreover it is through the story that the unique meaning of each newcomer is preserved. We shall see how and why in the following section.

## 1.5 Stories: *Something Rich and Strange*

Stories “tell us more about their ‘subjects’, the ‘hero’ in the center of each story, than any product of human hands ever tells us about the master who produced it”. The revelatory character of action is preserved in the narrative of the life-story. Only a story, with its unfolding and developing thread, can preserve all the different contingencies that build up each uniqueness.

Stories are the result of actions although, strictly speaking, they are not ‘products’. When a story is told, when it is transformed into a material object – be it a document, a monument, a painting – it can tell us a lot about its protagonist but nothing about its author: “...in any series of events that together form a story with a unique meaning we can best isolate the agent who set the whole process into motion: and although this agent frequently remains the subject, the ‘hero’ of the story, we never can point unequivocally to him as the author of its eventual outcome”.

In other words, the web of human relationships is so complex and intermingled that the “unique life-story of the newcomer” will affect “uniquely the life stories of all those with whom he comes into contact” (184). This is why nobody can be held responsible for the outcome of her/his actions. In other words, the actor presents her/himself to an ‘audience’ with her/his specific aims or intentions, but the revelatory character of action, its essentially public and plural nature, exceeds these personal motivations or aims.<sup>4</sup>

The ‘web’ in which our uniqueness appears is characterized by a plurality that can never be dismissed; stories, therefore, have agents and heroes but do not have *authors* in the etymological sense of someone that can be held responsible for the work he/she produces. To put it differently, each appearance in public gives birth to an unpredictability that is unknown even to the doer. The outcome of each life-story, the ending of each public performance, is, therefore, consigned to the plurality of listeners and spectators. Public stories do not have an author in the sense that nobody knows in advance, while acting, the sense, the direction of their own storyline. The difference between a fictional story and a real one is that the former does have an author while the latter does not, because the fictional story was ‘made up’ by somebody while the real one is simply the outcome of a real practice, namely that of acting. Nobody can be held responsible for the infinite consequences that her/his actions will have on the web in its entirety.

Therefore, we are actually unable to control or master our actions and ourselves as if we were the authors of our own storylines. This is only partly due to the fact that we are not in charge of ourselves, since the inability to control our actions is also due to the “already existing web”. Actions are determined by “innumerable, conflicting wills and intentions” (HC:184) and



this is why they rarely achieve their intended purpose. Action, as such, has endless consequences that fall beyond our control, for which we cannot be held responsible. It would be practically impossible to be aware – and to master – all the consequences of our words and deeds performed within a public space, within the already existing web of human relationships.

Unpredictability and irreversibility are thus two important features of action, determined by the fact that action is only and always public. Nevertheless, these two aspects of human action testify of the frailty of the public sphere – they in fact represent, according to Arendt, a “burden” for men and women acting. The model of an autonomous subject who is in control and in charge of her/his actions – the subject-model of Cartesian origins – does not fit within the image of a free and unpredictable – unpredictable even to the subject her/himself – agent disclosing her/his irreducible uniqueness. The impossibility of controlling both the motives and the consequences of action frustrates the agent on the one hand, but provides us with a specifically political notion of subjectivity on the other.

The political actor “never quite knows what he is doing” in the sense that his/her perception of action can never reach beyond the mere in-progress activity. As we know, the complete sense of an acting individual is provided by the historian or storyteller, who is external to the sphere of pure action. Therefore, Arendt writes that “all this is reason enough to hold in contempt the human capacity for freedom, which, by producing the web of human relationships, seems quite to entangle its producer to such an extent that he appears much more the victim and the sufferer than the author and doer of what he has done” (HC: 233–234).

The frustration of entanglement and lack of control has been emphasized by the so-called Western tradition of thought as a sufficient reason for abandoning the contingent realm of action as the realm in which spontaneous actions “fall into a predetermined net of relationships invariably dragging the agent with them, who seems to forfeit his freedom the very moment he makes use of it” (234). What is the use, the dignity, the importance of a realm in which all our actions, the spontaneous beginning of freedom, get caught in a net of existing relationships that seem to exhaustively determine the outcome of any effort to change?

Frustration for these main predicaments of action (irreversibility and unpredictability) tends to force philosophers to draw the conclusion that “the only salvation from this kind of freedom seems to lie in non-acting, in abstention from the whole realm of human affairs as the only means to safeguard one’s sovereignty and integrity as a person.”

The identity of the political actor depends upon the presence of others; its effectiveness may be regarded as powerless, ineffective and uncontrollable. The

philosophical tradition (including political philosophy) has always identified freedom with sovereignty, with the autonomy and separateness of individuals from one another. “If it were true that sovereignty and freedom are the same, then indeed no man could be free, because sovereignty, the ideal of uncompromising self-sufficiency and mastership, is contradictory to the very notion of plurality” (234). For Arendt, who seldom uses the term “identity” and prefers the philosophically unusual term “who”, political identity relies upon the presence of others in order to become real, and in this dependence renounces the distinctive features of the philosophical subject: self-sufficiency, mastership and sovereignty<sup>5</sup>.

As Bonnie Honig has pointed out, Arendt’s notion of action is essentially *sui generis*, not only contingent and unpredictable, but containing a specifically relational quality, which also testifies to the uniqueness of action. In the Arendtian frame of reference, what is at stake is not simply an analysis of the political as the realm of decision or the realm of change. What is at stake is a redefinition of subjectivity, according to which the very basis of our tradition is dismantled and refused (Honig 1988: 84)<sup>6</sup>.

This is why, according to Bonnie Honig, the Arendtian agent differs from that of other theories of action, insofar as she/he cannot be totally in charge of her/himself, nor can she/he be self-knowing and coherent. If, according to Arendt, the only criterion by which action can be judged<sup>7</sup> is greatness, then politics, as the realm of great words and great deeds, with its constitutive contingency and frailty, exceeds the rational and the reasonable. As Bonnie Honig illustrates: “Theories of action that postulate an agent in charge of itself, coherent because to some extent self-knowing, impose upon the self an unwarranted coherence. They thereby deny the self the opportunity to seek the coherence appropriate to it – an identity attainable through the performance of actions worthy of being turned into stories” (85).

## ***1.6 Contingent but Immortal Stories***

My doom has come upon me; let me not then die  
ingloriously and without struggle, but let me first do some  
great thing that shall be told among men hereafter.  
(Hom. *Il.* 22. 303–305)

Hannah Arendt (HC), in a paragraph entitled “The Greek Solution,” tells us the story of the political experience of ancient Greece, as to present an example of a political community exposed to – and terrified by – the futility of action. Arendt did not intend to present an historically faithful image of ancient Greece. Her use of the *polis* model serves primarily as a counter-factual model against

which she is able to confront the modern notion of 'the political'. By doing so, Arendt wants to emphasize those aspects she considers vital to a new notion of the political, while at the same time she is also able to show how and to what extent those aspects are essentially absent from the direction politics has taken in modernity.<sup>8</sup>

In addition to being a necessary frame in which men could appear to each other and distinguish themselves ("The *polis* was supposed to multiply the occasions to 'win' immortal fame...to multiply the chances for everybody to distinguish himself, to show in deed and word who he was in his unique distinctness", HC: 197), the Greek *polis* was a "remedy to the futility of action and speech." In other words, the political function of the *polis* could be compared to that of Homer: preserve human greatness, guarantee its remembrance. While Homer, the poet, would put into words and rhythm the deeds of the Trojan War, the *polis*, with its public and plural structure, would automatically guarantee that "those who acted will be able to establish together the everlasting remembrance of their good and bad deeds".<sup>9</sup> Again, "men's life together in the form of the *polis* seemed to assure that the most futile of human activities, action and speech, and the least tangible and most ephemeral of man-made 'products', the deeds and stories which are their outcome, would become imperishable" (197–198). The futility of the fleeting moment is therefore preciously preserved in the story, since the story alone can re-present the immaterial and intangible "who" that reveals itself through action and speech.

Thucydides provides us with several examples of this Greek attitude toward the preservation of a good memory of great deeds. His own historical account can be regarded as an attempt to simultaneously give voice to the actors themselves and celebrate those same discourses and enterprises by inserting them into his narrative. The best of these examples is *Pericles's funeral oration*, in which Pericles, with an emphasis dictated by the official celebration of war heroes, testifies to the strict relationship that existed between a public and political life and a memorable one (usually associated with a glorious death). "Even for those who were worse in other ways it is right that first place be given to valor against enemies on behalf of the country; by effacing evil with good, they became public benefactors rather than individual malefactors" (Thuc. II, 42).

Heroism is equated with a life spent serving the common good, not only with political hegemony upon other cities. To its citizens, Athens was an example of equality and justice. To die for it was not simply a courageous act, it also had a specific significance that went beyond the mere individual sacrifice: it meant the preservation of the existence of a city which, in turn, thanks to its good institutions and government, could guarantee the memory of great actions and discourses: "Through great proofs, and by exhibiting power in no way witnessed

we will be admired by this and future generations, thus requiring no Homer to sing our praises nor any other whose verses will charm for the moment and whose claims the factual truth will destroy, since we have compelled every sea and land to become open to our daring and populated every region with lasting monuments of our acts of harm and good” (Thuc. II, 41).

Another example provided by Arendt of the way in which the sphere of human relationships escapes its futility is epics. In the words of the epic poet, symbolized by Homer, the uniqueness of each hero becomes tangible once for all, immortalized by artistic hands. The poet transforms the living flux of action into memorable words.<sup>10</sup> Within the *polis*, the ‘work of art,’ which guarantees remembrance, is the *polis* itself. Nonetheless, in both cases the decisive aspect is that life produces stories, stories grow out of the intermingled living experiences of human beings. The ‘web’ of human relationships is as real as the soil under our feet. It is only by complying to this reality, by guaranteeing permanence and audibility to this web of infinite stories that life, in its most frail and human aspect, is preserved from futility. Again, Arendt returns to the Greek example: “The organization of the *polis*...is a kind of organized remembrance. It assures the mortal actor that this passing existence and fleeting greatness will never lack the *reality that comes from being seen, being heard, and, generally, appearing before an audience of fellow men*” (HC: 198, my emphasis).<sup>11</sup>

The poet, as well as the “organized remembrance” of the *polis*, testifies to human greatness by telling its stories. They both give voice to telling practices that do not ‘make up’ stories, they are not ‘authors’ in the above mentioned sense. Life stories do not need authors; their splendor simply emerges from the flux of action and speech that springs from birth.

The origin of all stories is the beginning out of which human beings enter the world. Quoting Augustine, Arendt writes: “*Initium ergo ut esset, creatus est homo, ante quem nullus fuit* (‘that there be a beginning, man was created before whom there was nobody’)”. The ‘principle’ of beginning is the precondition of all political activities, since human beginning “is not the same as the beginning of the world; it is not the beginning of something but of somebody, who is a beginner himself” (HC: 177). To begin is not simply to be born, but to actualize the gift of being a beginner by taking the risk of entering the public sphere. Politics is the sphere, the scene in which to enact, perform or disclose a potentiality provided by birth.<sup>12</sup>

Freedom, as it enters the world with the creation of man, is manifested through uniqueness, and uniqueness discloses itself through action and words. The story is the result of these appearances. Whenever freedom appears in the form of a new beginning there is a story to be told. Only through storytelling can the unpredictable freedom that each human being performs become a part

of the world and achieve solid reality. And only by telling these stories can we preserve the memory of these freedoms. No matter how incoherent and 'strange' a life-story can be, it is worth telling, because it expresses the unique path of a unique being.

## 1.7 *Telling the World*

"A story reveals the meaning without committing the error of defining it" Hannah Arendt, *Isak Dinesen (1885–1962)*

"Action reveals itself fully only to the storyteller, that is, to the backward glance of the historian, who indeed always knows better what it is all about than the participants" (HC: 192).

The storyteller can lead us along the path traced by actions and words performed in a lifetime; the memory of the deeds and contingencies that have traced it can be re-lived, can be a part of our experience and can be shared.

Stories establish themselves "as soon as the fleeting moment of the deed is past." The storyteller alone can see the unity of this path, can see its end. In establishing a unity out of the chaotic and incoherent directions of a life, the storyteller is able to find 'sense' in it. The unity of the story is the path, the line that can be traced among the innumerable contingencies. Each path is distinct, and the infinite life stories that constitute the world need a storyteller that captures into a narrative the sense, the path of each one of them.

The fleeting moment of action, the intangibility of the "who," becomes a solid identity only in the words of the storyteller. "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 the story that follows. Even though stories are the inevitable result of action, it is not the actor but the storyteller who perceives and 'makes' the story" (192).

Arendt, following the Greek tradition, says that this unity, this identity becomes visible only after the death of the actor. "The unchangeable identity of the person, though disclosing itself intangibly in act and speech, becomes tangible only in the story of the actor's and speaker's life; but as such it can be known, that is, grasped as a palpable entity only after it has come to its end" (193).

What is crucial to our investigation here, however, is not the glory of heroic performances. What is important is the narrative practice as a form of identity-giving relation.

By exposing her/himself to the glance of others, the actor assigns them the task of tracing her/his identity, that is, her/his meaningfulness. Each one of the

spectators could be a storyteller. The actor's identity, her/his story, is "community property" (Honig 1988: 88).

Spectators and storytellers grant reality and meaning to unique appearances; the actor's identity is in their hands. In this 'identity-giving' practice the philosophical distinction between subject and object is no longer valid. By appearing to others I insert myself into a public dimension in which I can reciprocally be a spectator, and I can therefore transform someone else's actions into a story<sup>13</sup>. Only inasmuch as persons abandon the private, inner-life dimension and enter a public sphere, are they exposed to the identity-giving practice that takes place wherever people act and speak "directly to one another." And only inasmuch as I expose myself, I 'risk' my own appearance, can I be real, can I be certain of my existence.

In *The Life of the Mind*, her final and incomplete work, Arendt traces with more philosophical intentions a map of the three major activities of the mind: Thinking, Willing and Judging. An important premise for Arendt in this work is sustaining a certain distance from various 'accepted' philosophical terms. Arendt does not abandon her political approach and tries to bring together in *The Life of the Mind* what she had separated in *The Human Condition*. To speak of the faculties of the mind does not mean to abandon the shared dimension of life, but to assume it as indispensable premise. To be in the presence of others, in a world always potentially 'on stage,' with an audience of spectators to grant reality to every performance, is not only a necessary premise for political action, but also for the proper functioning of the faculties of the mind:

"Without spectators the world would be imperfect; the participant [...] cannot see how all the particular things in the world and every particular deed in the realm of human affairs fit together and produce a harmony which itself is not given to sense perception and this invisible in the visible world would remain forever unknown if there were no spectator to look out for it, admire it, straighten out the stories, and put them into words" (LOM I, 132–133).

Therefore, the assumption of non-isolated, non-autonomous nor self-sufficient beings is important. Arendt, in my opinion, is aware of the fact that the traditional (philosophical) model of subjectivity is not useful either in thinking political action as such, or in the understanding of political misconduct. The model of a performative intersubjectivity, dependent on an audience of spectators who can suddenly and mutually convert into actors, serves, once again, her deconstructive and de-legitimizing intentions.

Bearing in mind the Homeric narrative of heroic lives and courageous deaths, Arendt finds in the Greek epic tradition the model of a narrative identity, whose greatness and remembrance is strictly linked to the context in which it occurs. Greek heroes always preferred "immortal fame to mortal things". Their 'glory'

could not be obtained without a courageous or premature death. The storyteller could then immortalize their actions in the epic verse. Not only does the poet serve as model of narrative meaningfulness, but in fact Arendt refers to yet another example from antiquity in order to legitimize her views on the relationship between uniqueness, action and storytelling.

## 2. History and Politics

### 2.1 *History in the Ancient World*

Storytelling and the storyteller are words that can confuse. As a matter of fact what we intend with these terms could be easily associated with the ancient notion of the historiographer – somebody who tells about things he has witnessed. The original meaning of the word *historein* contains the notion and the experience of public life as the theatre of great deeds.<sup>14</sup> History for the Greeks was the remembrance of single deeds and events.

Arendt's concept of history refers in fact to the ancients – primarily to Herodotus, the *pater historiae*. What was at stake in Herodotus' narrative of the Persian War was the memory of both Greeks and Barbarians, their heroic deeds required the words of the historian in order to be preserved in the memories of generations to come. The futility of each individual life, limited within the space between life and death, could be preserved from oblivion, could be reified as a 'monument' in the narrative of the historian. In the words of the historian: "I, Herodotus of Halicarnassus, am here setting forth my history, that time may not draw the color from what man has brought into being, nor those great and wonderful deeds, manifested by both Greeks and Barbarians, fail of their report, and, together with all this, the reason why they fought one another" (Herod. I, I).

Given this 'commemorative' aspect, history was then not conceived as a process or progress, but mainly as a togetherness of "single instances and single gestures," the meaning of which, according to Arendt, did not depend on a "developing and engulfing process to become significant" (BPF: 64). On the contrary, a distinctive feature of historical time was to distinguish itself from biological time, perceived as an ever-recurring and unchangeable process. History was a means of 'immortalizing' mortals, namely a remembrance practice that would raise the futility of biological life – *zoe* – to the dignity of historical life – *bios* – a specifically human, and therefore artificial, dimension in which men where

“at home in everlastingness”. In other words, if nature is immortal by essence, human beings – the only mortal beings within an immortal ‘world’ – need history in order to escape the ‘alienation’ or futility of mortality. Arendt underlines this difference and affirms: “What is difficult for us to realize is that the great deeds and works of which mortals are capable, and which become the topic of historical narrative, are not seen as parts of either an encompassing whole or a process; on the contrary, the stress is always on single instances and single gestures” (43). Beyond this notion there was the tacit assumption that a definite opposition existed between man-made things and things that come into being by themselves (the well-known Aristotelian distinction between *nomos* and *physis*).

If human beings are partly ‘biological,’ then their distinctive feature, their *bios*, as opposed to *zoe* – the mere circular movement of bodily functions – is that of being able to give birth to unique deeds and words. In other words, again, for the ancients, the strictly human dimension is that of speech and action. Those single instances, deeds or events that can happen within a human world, interrupt the circular movement of biological life. “The subject matter of history is these interruptions – the extraordinary, in other words” (43).

The importance of history then becomes clear: the task of the poet as well as that of the historiographer is, in Arendt’s words “making something lasting out of remembrance”(45). This is why no distinction is made either by Homer or Herodotus between Greeks and non-Greeks: all deserve to be remembered by the historian. This impartiality, which, according to Arendt, was already present in the epic poems of Homer, leaves behind the common interest in one’s own side and discards the alternative between victory and defeat. All human deeds, in their sudden and unpredictable appearance within the public realm of action – be it the *polis* or the Trojan War – deserve a narrative, deserve to become the common heritage of which history is built.<sup>15</sup>

The great paradox of the ancient world was that on the one hand they believed that human greatness was to be found mainly in the realm of *praxis*: human deeds and words were the distinctive feature of men. On the other hand, however, this feature was also the most futile, the most perishable. “On the one hand everything was measured against the background of things that are forever, while, on the other, true human greatness was understood, at least by pre-Platonic Greeks, to reside in deeds and words, and was rather represented by Achilles, ‘the doer of great deeds and the speaker of great words’”(46).

Here we can see the paradox of considering human greatness not according to ‘eternity’ or ‘permanence,’ as was the case for ‘greatness’ in general, namely that of the gods or of the skies, but according to the most futile and least enduring activities of men. For the ancients, the solution to this paradox was poetry and historiography.

The philosophical solution did not appear until later, first with Parmenides and then with Plato. Glory and greatness in action and speech are no longer



the distinctive features of men, as they have been replaced by contemplation in the realm of thought, where the futility of mortal life can be escaped thanks to the eternal dimension of thought.<sup>16</sup>

## 2.2 *Archimedes versus Thucydides*

Let us now return to the notion of historiography. What is at stake here is not only the fact that ancient historiography was a practice of remembrance, but also that the historical accounts, as we have seen, entailed an impartiality and a multiple perspective on things that is very different from our concept of 'objectivity'. For the ancients, 'objectivity' was not a universal standpoint outside the world, but the same common shared world seen from a different perspective. Being part of this world meant the ability to view things from somebody else's standpoint, to try to look at things from somebody else's point of view.

"Greeks learned to *understand* – not to understand one another as individual persons, but to look upon the same world from one another's standpoint, to see the same in very different and frequently opposing aspects" (BPF: 51).

As Lisa Disch (Disch 1994) has pointed out, the Arendtian notion of storytelling, in which Herodotus and Thucydides figure as models of situated impartiality, provides us with a political form of understanding that philosophy is unable to present. By symbolizing the two different perspectives through Thucydides and Archimedes, Disch refers to a lecture Arendt gave at the University of Michigan College of Engineers in 1968. The title of the lecture is, significantly enough, "The Archimedean Point". While the kind of knowledge provided by the detached and vertical Archimedean perspective is disinterested, impartial and apolitical, the narrative knowledge provided by the historical accounts of Thucydides is inherently political insofar as it is able to engage the readers and listeners in critical thinking (Disch 1994:128).

By presenting the audience with conflicting perspectives on a single fact, the Thucydidean narrative mediates among plurality and attempts to present as 'objective' an account as possible, although the position of the storyteller-spectator is not as external as the Archimedean. Only by being a detached participant in the scene of history can the historiographer-storyteller provide us with a fair account. From an Archimedean perspective, the minute and innumerable facts that occur on earth become insignificant. On the other hand, Thucydidean impartiality is much more limited, or characterized by a "much more limited withdrawal".<sup>17</sup>

The Peloponnesian War, as reported by Thucydides both through a direct observation of facts and knowledge of reported ones, is a recounting of events

and actions characterizing the war between the Athenians and Spartans. Thucydides had personally participated in that war as strategist, but the sudden defeat of his troops forced him into exile. As such, he observes the events and the discourses of his fellow citizens and enemies with a detached attitude. At the same time he is talking about contemporary events, in which he had recently been involved. The political situation of Thucydides cannot be completely transcended when discussing his report. Nevertheless, it is because of the force of this situation that we are able to enjoy an almost unique example of a political narrative. The limitation of his personal perspective (exile, harshness toward his personal enemy, Cleon, but also direct knowledge of the complex web of relationships characterizing the innumerable conflicts among city states) enables him to be as faithful as possible in reporting things as they were happening, in a sort of mimetic link to the fleeting moment of action. This limited withdrawal is therefore able to account for the complexity of the realm of human actions, not to subsume it or simplify it for the sake of Archimedean universality.

As Disch argues by quoting Peter Euben, the importance of a truly political understanding lies in the possibility of replicating the difficulties for the reader, as if she were the historian-spectator who had to mediate among different positions and perspectives. Thucydides is able to provide us with the possibility of experiencing the difficulties of re-presenting and therefore interpreting a complex historical perspective. “Arendt seems to have viewed Thucydides as she did herself, as a political theorist for whom the question of historical objectivity is an irrelevant methodological debate. The task of the political theorist is not to report objectively but to tell a story that engages the critical faculties of the audience” (Disch 1994:128 –129). It is important to note that it is not the renouncement of objectivity that characterizes Thucydides’ historiography, but the fact that the very notion of objectivity as detached and abstract cannot account for the complexity of an intricately political situation, as was the case in the Peloponnesian War. The account that the historian gives us of the conflicting views that characterized public debates prior to the actual outburst of the war can be seen as the maximum example of this situated impartiality.

It is not important to assess (quite an impossible task) whether the reported discourses and debates (as for example the famous discourse between Athenians and Melians) faithfully reproduce the actual proclamations. The historian reports contrasting discourses, endless debates and failed deliberations. The historical recount should be able to reproduce that atmosphere of irresolvable verbal conflicts, of different motives and aims in political action. The historian is interested in the deeds (*ta erga*) of actors, and as such his report aims at imitating those deeds. In this respect, there is a direct connection between the historian (even a rational and secularized historian such as Thucydides) and the poet

(Mazzarino 1983: 258–259). Insofar as he attempts to provide us with a faithful account of the deeds, he uses poetry to assess that faithfulness. An account is faithful insofar as it can reproduce – and therefore save from oblivion – the fleeting moment of action and word. This was the ancient, Homeric task of poetry<sup>18</sup>.

To imitate actions, not actors, was, according to Aristotle, the essence of tragedy: “[...] for tragedy is an imitation, not of men but of action and life, of happiness and misfortune. These are to be found in action, and the goal of life is a certain kind of activity, not a quality” (*Poet.* 1450 ab). Thucydides inherits the Greek legacy of poetry and tragedy; by reporting the contrasting discourses and viewpoints of Archidamus or Pericles, Alcibiades or Nicias, the historian aims at a sort of epic mimesis of their actions. It is as if he would grant those protagonists the possibility of re-enacting the public situation of their appearance, by re-enacting their different and opposing viewpoints.

Historiography, in Thucydides’ model, seems to offer a notion of impartiality that – far from giving us an acquiescent view of facts, as from a detached perspective to which the result of actions is indifferent – engages in critical thinking. A view that is simultaneously historical and political seems to be possible: “Political impartiality is not secured by means of detachment from politics but by fostering public deliberation, which depends on the ability ‘to look upon the same world from another’s standpoint’” (Disch 1994:130). And again, if there can exist a specifically political mode of understanding, it can be nurtured only by the stories of past deeds, as memory and experience for present and future generations.

The ‘monumental’ feature of ancient historiography, namely the idea of shaping a work of art by recounting deeds and therefore creating glory, is related to that of a critical understanding of political reality insofar as the memory of the storyteller preserves stories that can be retold and reenacted. In my opinion it is this very act of retelling and reenacting that involves the critical stance: it is because stories are consigned to time that they can exercise their influence as memory, and at the same time can re-actualize the complex situation in which that same memory was produced. When the reader, or the listener, witnesses that complexity, she re-actualizes the memory not by preserving a (supposed) original story, but by ‘visiting’ all the multiple perspectives that build up the story. She is a newcomer, a new spectator to that story. Therefore, the story enlarges both its memorable influence and its plurality. Even if we would like to presuppose an immutable story, an immutable spectacle, the very fact that generations change is enough to explain why at least one side of the ‘spectacle’ (the audience) changes. Once again, Arendt’s words in this respect are illuminating: “even if the spectacle were always the same and therefore tiresome, the audiences would change from generation to generation; nor would

a fresh audience be likely to arrive at the conclusions handed down by tradition as to what an unchanging play has to tell it” (LOM I, 96).<sup>19</sup>

Only insofar as stories – and not trends, or metahistorical forces – are the spectacle that is offered to the participating (political) spectator can political meaningfulness be achieved and eventually turned into art.

“Thucydides’ work fosters political impartiality by an artistic (though not fictional) creation of plurality by his presentation of speeches from the multiple, divergent perspectives that constitute the public realm.” As Peter Euben (Euben 1993) writes, Thucydides gives us “a form of political knowledge that respects, even recapitulates, the paradoxes and ‘perspectivism’ of political life”. In fact, continues Euben, Thucydides’ history is a form of political understanding that derives from a democratic political experience: it attempts to reproduce the horizontal democratic empowerment of democratic Athens. “Although Thucydides is sometimes distant from the self-understanding of his compatriots, he does not so much lead us on a Platonic path upward as invite us to burrow down into the depths of the particular, finding connections that permit us to see more clearly, recognize more fully, and describe more richly” (Euben 1993:191–192).

This feature of democratic historiography would not be conceivable without the public-political-ethical and religious experience of Greek tragedy. In accordance with Martha Nussbaum (Nussbaum 1986), Euben states that, like tragedy, Thucydides is able to present the duality of action, namely the external perspective of the spectator and the internal – limited and partial – perspective of the actor. This interesting blend of objectivity and involvement is what characterizes the historical recount of Thucydides. He was a spectator, but not so detached and uninvolved as to be unable to re-present the complexities and particularities of different and contrasting perspectives. As a matter of fact, Thucydides seems to incarnate the original meaning of the word *ístōr*, the witness who is able to tell because he has seen.

According to the important and acknowledged linguistic analyses of Émile Benveniste, the knowledge of the witness depends entirely on his being present for the spectacle (originally religious sacrifices), on his seeing (*ístōr* literally means “he who sees,” “le voyeur” according to Benveniste): “le témoin, à date très ancienne, est témoin en tant qu’il ‘sait’ , mais tout d’abord en tant qu’il a vu” (Benveniste 1969: II, 173).<sup>20</sup>

This aspect of ancient historiography seems to have disappeared from the modern concept of history, which, first of all, does not understand glory or greatness in remembrance as a higher value than life itself. According to Arendt, objectivity in the Thucydidean sense, lost its value in experience, it was “divorced from real life”, because the importance of self-interest and individual life became much stronger than the ancient love for greatness which of course entailed the

contempt for one's own life-interest. In other words, the public space of appearance is no longer the stage for 'immortality'.

To take our analysis a step further, it is not only the immortal aspect of ancient historiography that interests us. Thucydides represents, in our context, the possibility for a valid political understanding – the possibility for a *methodos* – literally a path – which remains bound to a horizontal dimension but is still able to fairly represent that intermingled situation of conflicts and deliberations, of actions and decisions, of accomplishments and failures. As Peter Euben states: “By combining this burrowing with an horizontal drawing of connections in ways that make every horizontal link contribute to the depth of our view of the particular, and every new depth create horizontal links, Thucydides establishes a web of meaning that resists both reduction and reification” (192).

The immortality of ancient historiography does not lie in the static image of a perfect and untouchable past, the origins of which we should attempt to recapture. The political impact of narrators such as Herodotus and Thucydides, in spite of the many differences that characterize them, rests upon the richness and complexity of their accounts. By immortalizing a set of specific stories, they have not handed down to us a text but a set of experiences that are complex and unfinished.

In dealing with the continuously debated question of whether Herodotus' Histories can be considered to be a complete, finished work, Santo Mazzarino, a famous Italian scholar, warns against the risk of reducing an ancient author to modern criteria. The question of a unity and completeness in Herodotus' work does not grasp the historical spirit of antiquity: “How could it be possible to assign the word ‘the end’ to a work that can be enriched to the infinite degree? [...] If Herodotus had concluded his work he would have done it by narrating the death of Ephialtes, the Thermopylae's traitor: he had expressed the will to do it. But this unfulfilled promise does not mean that the work lacks completeness. On the contrary it means that the work itself had, in the mind of Herodotus, always new possible developments” (Mazzarino 1983: 177–178, my trans.)

The loss of a public common space is, according to Arendt, also the loss of a human experience, namely that of being able to give birth to unique deeds and words. She also refers to it as the space of freedom, since the specifically human capacity for action coincides with freedom. In Arendt's writings, this perspective gives birth to a critique of modern notions of politics and freedom. The experience of freedom can never be a philosophical or speculative experience, but is always simply political and active. Here, we are interested in seeing how and to what extent this notion of politics as the capacity to act and to give birth to new deeds is connected to a correspondent notion of history.

I argue that according to Arendt, the only way by which the public realm, the realm of human life as lived not in solitude but among others, can be

'historicized', can become history, is not through a universal dimension of 'world history' or universal perspective, but, as in Herodotus, through its concentrating on single deeds and actions. "That every individual life between birth and death can eventually be told as a story with beginning and end is the prepolitical and prehistorical condition of history, the great story with no beginning and no end". We do not need a 'history' in the traditional modern sense of a science of history or as a process, but we need stories, single and unique. "...the reason why each human life tells its story and why 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" (HC 184).

Meaning, as such, cannot be found neither *im Grossen*, that is, in a universal perspective, nor in a process-like perspective, namely in a perspective that considers things as being temporally consequent. Chronology, as a supposedly neutral time characterization, is neither a criterion for truth nor for meaning. Moreover, the universal perspective does not tell us anything about the uniqueness and plurality of perspectives – it simply neutralizes the impact of reality in the sphere of human actions in order to achieve an abstract point of view from which a 'law' of occurrence can be inferred.

The fact that unique stories, which tell of unique deeds, simply offer a chaotic image of the realm of human affairs, or do not offer a rational image of truth, is the reason why Plato thought that human affairs, the result of human action, should not be considered with any degree of seriousness. From a philosophical perspective, in fact, history as a togetherness of stories does not satisfy the contemplative mind. For Plato, "the action of men appear like the gestures of puppets led by an invisible hand behind the scene, so that man seems to be a kind of plaything of a god" (HC 185). In other words, the status of history as a mere togetherness of single stories, the general meaning of which can never be found, has baffled the philosophical mind to such a great extent that it had to find an external principle, an actor behind the scene, who could be held responsible for those authorless stories. Again, within the Arendtian frame of reference, we understand how and to what extent the metaphysical point of view attempts to suppress the political, its reality and its experience. In order to attribute a general, higher meaning to that chaotic realm of actions, philosophers have created the fiction of a metahistorical principle, the cause and origin of all human happenings.

"The Platonic god is but a symbol for the fact that real stories, in distinction from those we invent, have no author; he is the true forerunner of Providence, the 'invisible hand', Nature, the 'world spirit,' class interest, and the like, with which Christian and modern philosophers of history tried to solve the perplexing problem that although history owes its existence to men it is still obviously not made by them" (HC 185).

Arendt's critique of the modern notion of history is a recurrent *topos* in her texts: from *The Human Condition* (1958) to *On Revolution* (1963) to her famous essay *The Concept of History* (in BPF), Arendt is very harsh toward a rather undistinguished modern notion of history. As a matter of fact, the tone and arguments of the essay *The Concept of History* (re-published in 1961 in the collection of essays *Between Past and Future*, the essay had appeared in 1958 in the *Review of Politics*, under the title *The Modern Concept of History*) are very similar to her critique of the notion of historical necessity carried out in *On Revolution* (1963). Yet Arendt contests the essentially exclusive attention that modernity pays to history as an "entity," and in order to do so she excessively simplifies the modern notion of history. The ancient perspective is opposed to the modern one in a way which does not take into account the complex changes that the concept of history underwent in the XVIII century, namely the fact that the essentially new concept of history which appeared for the first time around 1750 not only radically distinguished itself from the old one (which had been valid essentially from Thucydides until the XVII century), but prepared the terrain for a new experience of both politics and history.

As Reinhart Koselleck has pointed out (Koselleck 1979: 38–66), the creation of the "collective singular" *Geschichte* (formerly, in German *Geschichte* was connected to a plural verb) coincides with the emergence of the philosophy of history<sup>21</sup>. History as *Historie*, in the years 1760–1780, as a togetherness of exemplary and paradigmatic facts, was substituted by history as *Geschichte*, namely a more comprehensive perspective on the order of things – precisely the perspective that enables general considerations on the secret laws and connections that guide the apparently chaotic realm of human affairs. Koselleck quotes the famous essay published by Kant in 1784, *Idee zu einer allgemeinen Geschichte in weltbürgerlicher Absicht*, in order to explain how the formulation of the very idea of a "allgemeine Geschichte" would have been inconceivable just a few decades earlier: "Zu einer Zeit, da sich die Universalhistorie, die eine Summe von Singulargeschichten enthielt, in die 'Weltgeschichte' verwandelte, suchte Kant nach dem Leitfaden, der das planlose 'Aggregat' menschlicher Handlungen in ein vernünftiges 'System' überführen könnte. Es ist klar, daß erst der Kollektivsingular der Geschichte solche Gedanken aussagbar machte, unbeschadet, ob es sich um die Weltgeschichte oder um eine Geschichte im einzelnen handelte"(53).

The shift from *Historie* to *Geschichte*, or, from the plurality of single stories to the essential oneness of a detectable historical pattern, understood *im Grossen*, would have been impossible without the linguistic creation of the collective singular *Geschichte* (47–49). The political problem which arises in this respect is the fact that *Geschichte* becomes useful only insofar as it renounces to *Historie*, or, in other words, the new concept replaces the old one in such a way that it

would be almost impossible for us (so distant from a notion of history as a togetherness of single stories) to understand the old concept<sup>22</sup>. This is the point Koselleck makes, and it is useful to us insofar as it better situates Arendt's simplistic reduction of the modern notion of history as a mere opposition to the ancient one.

Arendt's notion of politics also presents similar problems insofar as her recurrence to the Greek example does involve both some interpretive incongruence and some simplifications.

Yet, I have concluded that what is important in the Arendtian perspective, with respect to politics and history, as well as their Greek paradigms, is the counter-factual model, as I have noted above. It might be impossible for us to experience history as a togetherness of single events or paradigmatic examples (Koselleck's *topos* of *historia magistra vitae*), but it can nonetheless serve as a contesting and provocative ideal-type in order to question the political validity of history as *Weltgeschichte*. In this respect, Koselleck's findings become precious insofar as they offer precise references, confirming Arendt's notion of modern history as *Geschichte*, and also because they specify, both historically and philologically, the motives and proceedings of conceptual change. In other words, in my opinion, the critique of the modern notion of history, conceived essentially as an entirety with detectable laws, as a word which has lost the memory of its previous meaning, becomes effective when confronted with a different model. The historical plausibility or facticity of this model (in this context, ancient historiography) does not necessarily frustrate the critical intentions – that is, the perspective of this critique does not aim at recovering a notion of history that would be historically provable. If comparison, confrontation and opposition are not possible – even when they might fall prey to non-transparent attributions – then how can our space of experience transcend the boundaries of historical determinism?



## 3. Re-presenting the Political

### 3.1 *Re-presenting the Origin?*

Si el pensamiento nació de la admiración solamente, según nos dicen textos venerables (1: Aristóteles: *Metafísica*. L.I.982b.) no se explica con facilidad que fuera tan prontamente a plasmarse en forma de filosofía sistemática; ni tampoco haya sido una de sus mejores virtudes la de la abstracción, esa idealidad conseguida en la mirada, sí, más un género de mirada que ha dejado de ver las cosas. María Zambrano, *Filosofía y Poesía*

What is decisive for our analysis is the fact that there is another way of attributing meaning to events, a way that must not necessarily rely upon a general, abstract meaning, but can attain meaningfulness in itself. The importance of a narrative account (recount) becomes visible when what is at stake is not only human immortality or glory but also a form of representation that renounces **theoretical abstraction**. What is here at stake is a way of understanding the realm of human affairs that refrains from abstracting particulars from the context in which actions, events take place.

The spectators, or witnesses of the appearance of the “who,” even if they take part in the ‘live-show’ of this disclosing and revealing activity, find it difficult to re-present it, to clearly and unmistakably say who they have seen. The problem lies not in the fact of understanding the ‘performance,’ but in the possibility of representing it faithfully, exactly as it has happened. The difficulty of representation depends on the plural and unpredictable features of an event as it happens among human beings. If each appearance is “infinitely improbable,” and if each newcomer has the capacity to give birth to something never seen before, then the “miracle” of each uniqueness finds it difficult to be represented.

According to philosophical discourse, the representation of an object, idea or fact means that one has a clear image in mind and is able to present this image (we could also call it a concept) to the ‘eyes of the mind’. In order to do this we must be able to abstract from the eyes of the body, as Arendt tells us.

As Jacques Derrida (Derrida 1967) has pointed out, the importance of representation in philosophy is accounted for by the possibility of re-presenting (that is, presenting over and over, infinitely) the same ideal, abstract features. Metaphysics, according to Derrida, is nothing more than the possibility of repeating and reiterating the origin, which is conceived of as pure presence. This same presence, therefore, it is not a pure object to be grasped through contemplation, but is the essentially repeatable game of the repetition of signs.

Philosophy is above all a text that is constituted by signs. If, within a deconstructive approach, we deny the correspondence between a sign and its meaning, then we can treat philosophical discourse as a collection of signs the legitimacy of which does not lie in its capability of grasping a truth, but simply in the possibility of their repetition.

The possibility of repetition lies in the fact that signs, as such, are 'unreal', or, to put it differently, that they do not have to do with a changing reality but are constructed within a structure – language – which founds its legitimacy upon the immutable identity with itself. “Mais cette idéalité, qui n'est que le nom de la permanence du même et la possibilité de sa répétition, *n'existe* pas dans le monde et elle ne vient pas d'un autre monde. Elle dépend tout entière de la possibilité des actes de répétition” (Derrida 1967: 58).

Ideality, therefore, is the possibility of infinitely repeating a set of signs without running the risk of clashing with reality. Philosophy builds its legitimacy not on the truth of a vision, but on the solidity and immutability of such an ideal feature of language. There is no pure 'origin' to be grasped at the top of the abstracting process. There is no pre-linguistic presence to be witnessed through the experience of contemplation. Moreover, there is no possibility of escaping the re-iterable and cogent nature of language as a set of ideal signs.

Linguistic structure has a set of rules that appear to govern all our representations. This structure, according to Derridean standards, is not able to account for the unexpected, for the new. As Derrida states: “En ayant proféré l'*epecheina tes ousias*, en ayant reconnu dès son deuxième mot (par exemple, dans *le Sophiste*) que l'altérité devait circuler à l'origine du sens, en accueillant l'altérité en général au cœur du logos, la pensée grecque de l'être s'est protégée à jamais contre toute convocation absolument *surprenante*” (Derrida: 1967A, 227). There is no room, in other words, for the unexpected, for the unpredictable, for telling a story which nobody has ever told before.

If this is, according to Derrida, the 'essence' of philosophy, inasmuch as it has always dealt with abstracts, with 'ideal' elements that constitute language as such, then it becomes clear that the representation of “who” somebody is cannot be carried out in terms of philosophical language.

Philosophical discourse, in force of its universal claim, deals with particulars only insofar as they can be abstracted; in order to reach knowledge philosophy conceives of particulars as that which universals must neutralize or suppress. Knowledge, according to the mainstream of philosophical thought, is 'speculative' in the sense that it must mirror the true representation of an object in the eyes of the mind. There must be a correspondence between subject and object, or, in other words, the subject reduces objects to representation, to a mind construction. In order to do so, the object (be it a table, a person or a fact) must be deprived of its unessential features, that is, of those elements that are not specific to its being universally and eternally precisely *that* object.

Theoretical knowledge is founded upon fixed terms that serve as guiding standards, as it is originally and most clearly visible in the work of Plato, who is concerned with definitions that can be applied generally to all contexts, and can be recognized as eternally valid, that is, as outside a temporal or situated dimension.<sup>23</sup> As Arendt says, Plato's philosophy, when it concerns politics, develops criteria that could "bestow upon the realm of human affairs the solidity inherent in work and fabrication" (HC: 225). We could also refer to this as *possessive knowledge*, as strictly linked to the philosophical shift from a simple contemplative attitude to a 'ruling' one, which makes its first appearance in Plato's *Republic*. The famous myth of the Cave, telling with non-philosophical words the essential experience of the philosopher, gives voice to the normative and manipulative attitude through which the inspired philosopher sees the world of appearances. Again, Arendt says: "It is only when he returns to the dark cave of human affairs to live with his fellow men that he [the philosopher] needs the ideas for guidance as standards and rules by which to measure and under which to subsume the varied multitude of human deeds and words with the same absolute, 'objective' certainty with which the craftsman can be guided in making and the layman in judging individual beds by using the unwavering ever-present model, the 'idea' of bed in general" (HC: 226).<sup>24</sup>

### 3.2 *Elusive Narratives and the Monologue of Reason*

I argue that since the birth of Greek philosophy the quest for objectivity and normative standards has taken the direction of abstraction and detachment. Denying the legitimacy, or better yet, the necessity and inevitability of such direction, I would like to investigate other possible directions of truth, meaning and understanding. By using Arendt's suggestions regarding reality, human actions and narrative understanding, I shall question the metaphor of verticality, of abstraction and detachment from the world of appearances. Furthermore I would like to investigate how and to what extent a narrative form of representation can offer a different and radically new mode of understanding.

If our secularized minds are denied immediate and truthful access to reality (is it nothing more than a text?) what can stories teach us? How can a narrative form of understanding pretend to grasp reality as it really is and has been? Our point of departure is that a narrative form of representation and understanding is inevitably linked to the linguistic structure and its rules. While partially accepting the deconstructionist approach to metaphysics, and therefore not hoping to reveal a *pure* narrative knowledge or a pure narrative of the "who" that is unmistakably able to apprehend its uniqueness, I would like to suggest that when dealing with stories, with narrative recounts of actions and lives,

what is at stake is not objectivity, or normativity, or pureness of origin. If philosophy, according to Derrida, is deeply embedded in the dilemma of an ungraspable origin, the truthfulness of which the philosopher strives to attain, storytelling has to do with the witnessing of human actions and words. As soon as they take place in an already existing web of human relationships, in an intermingled context of previous actions and events, actions do not allow for the possibility of an origin. Moreover, within the Arendtian perspective, actions take place in a public environment, for if they lack this publicity they are not actions at all.

Publicity therefore implies a multiplicity of glances, plural perspectives that can account for an action or a fact from their situated positioning. The historian himself, as Thucydides demonstrates, mediates among this multiplicity, when he has not personally witnessed the fact.<sup>25</sup> The representation that emerges, therefore, is constitutively plural because it is public and vice-versa. The narrative recount of actions and events presents us with a radically different kind of objectivity –one that is situated and plural.

At the same time, the pureness of the fact, the action as it took place, can never be handled conceptually, that is, as a fixed and regulative standard, nor can it be presupposed as exemplar, as guiding future occurrences. We could rather talk of a mobile perspective, which denies orthodoxy: no story is more true than any other, there are but simply many real ones.<sup>26</sup>

The perspective of the storyteller can give us an objective account insofar as she/he has either witnessed or heard the accounts of witnesses of deeds and events, but this objectivity can never be omniscient or panoptical. The realm of human affairs cannot be ‘handled,’ that is, possessed conceptually and therefore manipulated. Human plurality, that is, the reality of uniqueness, resists all conceptual representations, exceeds all definitions.

In the case of a human being it is clear that, according to a universal definition of it, the contingent elements that account for her/his uniqueness are unessential to the speculative labor of philosophy. A man can be a ‘mortal,’ a ‘political animal,’ a ‘rational animal’. Woman can be defined through many stereotypes as well, although none of them is as ‘universal’ as those applied to men.

As mentioned above, there is a manipulative and violent element in speculative knowledge that derives from philosophical abstraction. It is manipulative because it considers everything it encounters as an object to be ‘grasped,’ to be possessed, as a thing we can dispose of. It is violent because the ‘ethics’ of this possession always mean adequacy to certain supposedly universal principles, although they still belong to a precise biased tradition.

As Emmanuel Levinas says, the violence of this tradition depends on the univocal feature of truth, which does not allow contacts with exteriority, namely

with an outside which can or could endanger the compact nature of ontology. Levinas criticizes the speculative tradition of thought derived by Greek philosophy insofar as it is a “monologue”: “La raison parlant à la première personne ne s’adresse pas à l’Autre, tient un monologue” (Levinas 1971: 69); in its universalizing monologue each uniqueness must be overcome in thought. “Mais faire du penseur un moment de la pensée, c’est la fonction révélatrice du langage à sa cohérence traduisant la cohérence des concepts. Dans cette cohérence se volatilise le moi unique du penseur.”

It is in the name of coherence and universality that the monologue of reason legitimizes itself – only insofar as it is able to eliminate all traces of individuality, particularity, difference or strangeness. In favor of a silent and silencing coherence, alterity becomes a necessary part of sameness: “La fonction du langage reviendrait à supprimer ‘l’autre’ rompant cette cohérence et, par là même, essentiellement irrationnel. Curieux aboutissement: le langage consisterait à supprimer l’Autre, en le mettant d’accord avec le Même!” (70)

It is this “pensée du Même”, that has dominated our tradition from Plato to Hegel, to Heidegger. Levinas insists on this possessive aspect of our tradition in order to oppose a different relationship with otherness. Philosophy takes a totalizing attitude toward the world: before encountering the ‘outside’ it seeks to possess it conceptually, to subsume it, to entrap it into a concept.

Levinas tries to oppose a mode of ‘encounter’ in which knowledge is not the primary factor. Instead of a possessive knowledge by which we should be able to attain or discern the ‘form’ of something (thing or person), he advocates a “face to face” encounter, a concrete confrontation with others (“Autrui”). This encounter is guided by the simple clash with somebody else’s face, which, in all its alterity, I can only acknowledge as radically different from my own. The face to face relationship is a “dépendance [...] qui à la fois, maintient l’indépendance” (88).

There is a simultaneous strict link with others as well as the impossibility of possessing this otherness: “Autrui ne nous affecte pas comme celui qu’il faut surmonter, englober, dominer, – mais en tant qu’autre, indépendant de nous” (89). Ethics is therefore opposed to ontology; ethics comes before ontology.<sup>27</sup>

The encounter with others, with a who that is different from me, is, according to Levinas, always radically new and unique in its occurrence, and is often also a painful experience. What is at stake in this relationship with the outside is neither the understanding of the other nor its justification. Knowledge and the theoretical attitude toward the possession of the main features of alterity are out of the question here, or, in other words, are discarded in favor of the passive acceptance of alterity. What Levinas proposes is a new form of subjectivity: a passive and submissive subjectivity that is always prepared to accept, receive and host others, without expecting anything in return, but also

without claiming to know or understand the otherness it faces. It is “une expérience sans concept” (103).

This digression into Levinas’ thought can help us to focus on the question of knowledge, which, according to the French thinker, is almost always possessive and violent. There can be no knowledge of “Autrui,” insofar as I assume the viewpoint of ethics as opposed to that of ontology. To put it differently, this means that only if we assume the viewpoint of the radical alterity of others does knowledge/subsumption become an unfair and manipulative attitude. Outside the realm of concepts only real encounters can take place. Levinas proposes a shift from the detached, objective and nonetheless aggressive perspective of theory toward a passivity that as such is difficult to conceive within the horizon of our tradition. As such he often refers to the Jewish tradition as opposed to the Greek one, as the former should offer an example of the primacy of ethics over ontology, or, the primacy of responsibility over knowledge.<sup>28</sup>

A connection between this radical proposal of critically abandoning the tradition of speculative thought and Arendt’s positions can be tracked in the common recognition that theoretical knowledge fulfills its premises by suppressing contingency and alterity. It is according to a code of the repeated annihilation of differences that theory can produce its objects, its forms.

To put it simply, there is no room for uniqueness, for what Arendt calls “the paradoxical plurality of unique beings” (HC:176). By positing some general principles that must account for the ‘essence’ of human beings, philosophy has removed itself from the complexity of reality. In Levinasian terms, the monologue of reason does not include radical alterity, namely it does not comprise the *impossibility* of its own functioning. This is to say that within the frame of theoretical knowledge uniqueness, or radical alterity, are told only according to the laws of subsumption, and are therefore violated. This violation is at the core of our tradition.

Many other thinkers have witnessed the arbitrariness and exclusion upon which our commonly accepted notion of truth is founded, and some feminists have claimed that the main violation carried out by such a tradition is the exclusion and oppression of women. This is why, I dare say, the problem of criticizing and testing the boundaries of such a tradition is not only an intellectual dispute, but also a truly political issue.<sup>29</sup>

### 3.3 Disrupting Orthodoxy

If we return now to the Arendtian perspective and to the impossibility of representing the “who”, we can easily understand that what she is criticizing here is the violent and manipulative character of speculative thinking. She does not do it directly, but instead simply investigates the possibility of ‘saying’ the “who” in different terms. As we have seen, there cannot be a speculative science of uniqueness in the sense that if uniqueness must be ‘conceptualized’ or mastered conceptually, as if it were a thing, an object that we could control, then it would cease to be uniqueness, the “who” would be transformed into a “what”: “...the impossibility, as it were, to solidify in words the living essence of the person as it shows itself in the flux of action and speech, [...]excludes in principle our ever being able to handle these affairs as we handle things whose nature is at our disposal because we can name them” (HC: 181–182).

Since each human being discloses his/her uniqueness by appearing to others in a public context, and since uniqueness is strictly connected to this appearance, what is vital to Arendt is to find a way of telling this uniqueness as it appears.

“This disclosure of ‘who’ [...] can almost never be achieved as a willful purpose, as though one possessed and could dispose of this ‘who’ in the same manner he has and can dispose of his qualities” (HC: 179). The telling of stories in the context of a public realm testifies to the *impossibility* of manipulating that same realm.

As Adriana Cavarero has pointed out, a narrative practice is always present in a contingent realm, insofar as it is this very narrative practice and not a definitory knowledge that can better grasp the uniqueness of the “who” (Cavarero 2000). Cavarero utilizes the Arendtian notion of storytelling and develops it further: not only are we unique beings from birth, not only is our identity visible only to others (as in the Arendtian paradigm, where the complete sense of our actions become visible only after our death. Only when the path is completed can the storyteller give a complete account of our life), but as a consequence of our exposed frailty we need and *desire* somebody who tells our story. We perceive ourselves as *narratable*, as protagonists of a story that we want to hear from others. This desire for a story, for our own story to be told, becomes the guiding element in the new approach to identity that Cavarero offers. Our identity is not possessed in advance, as an innate quality or inner self that we are able to master and express. As Arendt says, the “who” is visible only to others, it stems out of what we do and say in front of others. Cavarero adds that we have a primary need to receive this “who” from others in the form of a narrative.

From this perspective we begin to understand how stories ‘work,’ namely, we begin to uncover (or re-invent) a different way of understanding. Stories

are not a newly posited realm of truth, a mythical dimension systematically opposed to a logical one. Can we simply admit that stories exist? Do people tell stories? Cavarero emphasizes this fact: one cannot deny that since the beginning of time immemorial people have told and continue to tell stories to each other. Can we emphasize the standpoint of a need for stories?

In other words, if we refrain from seeking definitions, if we are simultaneously aware of the contingent character of those definitory norms that proceed through exclusion – as Judith Butler, among others, has pointed out – then the incoherent path of a life-story might lead us into an altogether different sphere. Arendt's idea of storytelling can become useful not only for immortalizing heroic gestures or preserving the memory of past deeds, but also as a non-hegemonic means of understanding political reality. What is excluded from the truth-regime are stories, with their uncontrollable potential of unexpectedness and novelty. Stories can be activated in the disruption of a truth-regime that is based on normalizing and controlling concepts. Stories – that is, narrative forms of *understanding*, as opposed to conceptual, abstract ones – can better account for the complexity of political reality, can preserve the uniqueness of the acting individual, can tell the “who”.

As Paul Kottman, in his introduction to the English translation of Cavarero's book, *Relating Narratives* points out “‘Who’ someone is remains unexpressable in philosophical terms not because the term ‘who’ designates something which is absolutely unnamable or ‘outside’ language, but rather because each person reveals that he or she is absolutely unique and singular. It is this *uniqueness*, this one-ness, which philosophy fails to express. [...] ‘Who’ someone is, therefore, remains unexpressable within the language of philosophy; but ‘who’ someone is does not, as a result, remain utterly ineffable. Rather, ‘who’ someone is can be “known” (although this is not an epistemological knowledge) through the narration of the life-story of which that person is the protagonist” (Kottman 2000: vii).

For Arendt, “who” someone is is not at all ineffable, but is, rather, revealed and manifested through that person's actions and speech – words and deeds which, *ex post facto*, form the unique life-story of that person. Arendt writes: “*Who* somebody is or was we can know only by knowing the story of which he is himself the hero – his biography, in other words” (HC: 186).

Narrative understanding does not presuppose orthodoxy or correctness. As Karen Blixen – a genuine storyteller, according to Arendt – once said, the only ‘law’ that storytelling requires is that of a ‘loyalty to the story’. ‘Be loyal to the story, be eternally and unswervingly loyal to the story;’ one of the many Blixenian storytellers wisely says to a young girl.<sup>30</sup> A story only asks to be told with loyalty, that is, not to be manipulated or violated in order to make it comply with a ‘higher truth’. A story carries with it its own law. As in ancient



historiography, a limited, circumscribed event can yield a singular meaning. In other words, meaning must not necessarily be attained only in the realm of general trends and only inasmuch as it can be universalized.<sup>31</sup>

Arendt, when speaking of Karen Blixen, whom she describes not as an 'author' but as a storyteller<sup>32</sup>, says almost the same thing: "All she needed to begin with was life and the world, almost any kind of world or *milieu*; for the world is full of stories, of events and occurrences and strange happenings, which wait only to be told" (MDT: 97).

The storyteller is a spectator, but not in the sense of an overwhelming figure that decides the outcome of action, or as the 'actor behind the scene' that can dispose of each individuality and make it 'act' according to a universal principle or order. The storyteller, not the author, tells stories that spontaneously emerge from the richness of life, she is a voice that puts them into words. Reality and meaningfulness stem from the shared dimension in which spectators and actors interact through the identity-giving practice of storytelling.

This identity-giving practice implies the criticism of the superiority of the universal subject, abstract and identical in all empirical occurrences of the term 'Man'. It also involves a critique of the 'possessive' knowledge derived from the supposed superiority of the subject. The abstract subject of philosophy adequates the world to his representations, reduces multiplicity to a unity eliminating from it the inessential particulars, the 'accidents'. By doing so this subject can dispose of the world as if it were his own creation, a thing to manipulate, as the craftsman manipulates wood in order to obtain a table. This abstract unity of the concept is foreseen, is a model that the mind contemplates in order to obtain the table.

The storyteller provides the actor with a 'unity' that she/he had not seen and could not predict. Identity, therefore, as a unity in the narrative perspective, is not given but stems from acting and speaking in front of other people. The actor has "no identity until he has acted....He simply relies on his spectators to grant meaning and identity to his action and himself by bearing witness to his performance" (Honig 1988: 88).

As noted above, the perspective into which we would like to carry out our analysis is that of a narrative realm, namely, a realm into which we move as naturally as we walk. Some narrative practice is always at work in our lives, both as biographical and autobiographical practice. It is in this continuous narrative that we try to give sense to things and attribute value to experiences. Stories told from within a shared life-dimension – that is, in Arendtian terms, stories without an author – have to do with actions, with events. To distinguish between a biographical and an autobiographical account, though, is vital to our analysis, where what is at stake is not the inner life of the subject but the reality and representability of both political and historical actions.<sup>33</sup>

A story does not 'contemplate' a model beforehand. Stories simply emerge from the soil of life, storytelling follows their traces and the outcome is always marvelous, an unexpected miracle.<sup>34</sup>

The unity a story yields is always different from previous unities; the 'identity' emerging from it cannot be subsumed under a general principle, under a concept. If philosophy is the science of eternal truth, where no room is left for the unexpected, for the 'miracle' of uniqueness, storytelling is a strange kind of science, where the only eternal truth to which we must be committed is a similarly strange 'loyalty'. And Arendt, commenting on the Blixenian precept, says that this loyalty "means no less than, Be loyal to life, don't create fiction but accept what life is giving you, show yourself worthy of whatever may be by recollecting and pondering over it, thus repeating it in imagination; this is the way to remain alive"(MDT: 97).

It is in the form of a path that the story can be understood, a path that can be re-traced in its unexpected unfolding. "Who" somebody is can be told only by a story of her/his actions and words, by representation in the form of narrative, in the form of a detectable 'path,' the volatile and immaterial essence of the "who". Stories, therefore, are like paths, that once traced, once the uniqueness has been disclosed in action and speech, can be re-presented by being re-told, that is, the path can be re-traced.<sup>35</sup> The metaphor of the path provides us with a horizontal image of truth, where objectivity does not consist of an abstract point of view that is external and detached from the theatre of human happenings. Following the story as a path traced in the soil of life, within the intermingled web of human relationships, can perhaps allow us to re-enact actions and words without presupposing an original and unmodifiable truth, a measure valid *sub specie aeternitatis*.

This is the difference between a philosophical and a narrative representation. By following the 'path' of a life-story, storytelling does not violate it, it simply gives voice to a uniqueness the essence of which is the story that is audible from many different voices; an 'essence' the quality of which is from the very beginning, from its first appearance, linked to its multiplicity. Unlike a philosophical representation, which abstracts from the particular context in order to grasp the objective and universal truth of 'Man', a story multiplies particulars. The more detailed a story is, the closer it gets to the living reality of the "who". Philosophy – the abstract discourse of science – proceeds 'vertically'. A linear ascending path leads to truth – there is only one way to reach it – by proceeding with philosophical, logical-deductive reasoning. Reality, in its irreducible plurality, remains outside this order, the model of which has, since Plato, been the immobility of the skies and the perfection of the universe, as seen from the outside, from a distant Archimedean point.

To represent through stories, on the other hand, is a horizontal, earth-bound practice. Stories follow the complex web of human relationships 'fairly'. Only stories, since they are the result of action, can follow the crazy and incoherent path a life traces.

Each life produces a story and each story is a unity: the path might lead nowhere but it can be 'rich and strange'. As Karen Blixen says, it can be a beautiful and unseen drawing that cries out all the "tears and laughter, hopes and disappointments" that once had happened. The story can redeem all of them, can prevent them from disappearing into a void. The story is able to absorb them "into a unity. Soon we shall see them as integral parts of the full picture of the man or woman." This picture is always a "harmonious beauty," because "each one of us will feel in his heart the inherent richness and strangeness of this one thing: his life."

## NOTES

- 1 Dana Villa correctly distinguishes Arendt's action from the Aristotelian notion of *praxis* insofar as within the Aristotelian framework *praxis* is certainly subordinated to *poiesis*, and the teleological aspect is emphasized: "For Aristotle, then, action is ultimately a *means*: to the development of character, to the actualization of virtue, to the realization of justice, and to the procurement of happiness." (Villa 1995: 46–47). The teleological aspect is inherent to the Aristotelian framework in general, with the insistence on the superiority of the final cause. According to Villa, Arendt's theory of political action "*should be read as the sustained attempt to think of praxis outside the teleological framework*" (47, emphasis in the text). This is important since her 'recovery' of an unorthodox notion of action – and her equally unorthodox and philologically dubitable view of ancient Greece – goes in the direction of an essentially performative dimension, to which the dimension of self-disclosure is central, while the ends-means category is totally extraneous: "Arendt's appropriation of *praxis* proceeds, then, by detaching *energeia* from the metaphors of production or growth that had made it the teleological concept par excellence[...] So transformed, *energeia* spawns an aesthetic or theatrical metaphors, one in which the self-containedness of an activity no longer denotes 'perfection' but rather virtuosity. The virtuosity manifest in the performance of an action is action's true reason for being. Action embodies not 'the good for man' but freedom"(53).
- 2 Arendt worked on the *Liebesbegriff* in Augustine for her doctoral Thesis: the concept of birth as miracle, as unpredictable *initium* ("*Initium ergo ut esset, creatus est homo, ante quem nullus fuit*") has a strongly Christian connotation which Arendt does not problematize to any great extent in *The Human Condition*. In fact, she takes the metaphor of the beginning in order to stress the uniqueness of the "who" as a primarily political agent.
- 3 The long-debated question over Arendt's debt to Heidegger, the tormented relationship between them as a result of his behavior during the Nazi era – his political blindness – are issues that have been treated thoroughly and exhaustively (Dal Lago 1987; Esposito 1987; Schürmann 1987; Villa 1995; Taminioux 1997; and especially Forti 1994:43–87). It is precisely on the point of the existential project, that, in my opinion, Heidegger's and Arendt's views, take radically different routes. Insofar as the "ownmost" ("eigen") aspect of the Dasein is for Heidegger the care ("Sorge") of the self, and insofar as this care involves the self's mortality "as its ownmost can-be" it is clear that the perspective into which Heidegger moves (in *Sein und Zeit*) is that of a story that has already been told, to reiterate our favorite metaphor. In other words, the Dasein becomes – or is – authentic insofar as it becomes transparent to itself as regards "its ownmost possibility" (Taminioux 1997: 68), namely death,

the end of the story, the path-leading principle. Apart from the already known and investigated difference between the abstract, speculative and neutral notion of the Dasein and the Arendtian “individuation of the ‘who,’” its embodiment and concreteness, the distance between Arendt and Heidegger lies in the different ways in which they conceive of contingency, uniqueness and unpredictability. Where uniqueness is for Arendt a contingent feature of our being exposed to life and others, Heidegger conceives of it as ‘authenticity,’ namely as the ownmost possibility inherent in a life-project, its completion, death. As it is clearly visible, the life-story which could emerge from this perspective does not capture our attention, the ownmost possibility of its unfolding is already contained in the doomed beginning. Stories, in order to fascinate, must be unpredictable and adventurous.

- 4 This, of course, does not mean that each actor cannot be held responsible, for example, for criminal deeds or misbehavior. Arendt, in two early essays *Personal Responsibility under Dictatorship* and *Organized Guilt and Universal Responsibility* (see EIU), talks of the moral inescapability of personal responsibility in extreme situations, namely of a responsibility that cannot be dismissed even when juridical and political criteria collapse (as was the case during Totalitarianism). I would like to thank Tuija Parvikko for her valuable suggestions on this topic.

What Arendt outlines in *The Human Condition* is a sort of ideal-type model of action which distances itself from the traditional ‘fiction’ of an autonomous individual who is always rationally and willingly in-charge of her/his own pursuits. This ‘fiction’ of an isolated and sovereign individual belongs to the philosophical tradition, which Arendt constantly criticizes and which has obscured the dimension of the *vita activa*, a dimension in which we are all born, and obviously not simply as isolated and rational beings. In my opinion it is this relational quality of the *vita activa* that Arendt wants to emphasize in contrast to the philosophical model of order and autonomy.

- 5 Adriana Cavarero analyzes the political implications of the notion of sovereignty in Plato’s *Republic* and shows how the idea of a self-sufficient individual who is sovereign over his own bodily functions and passions is the precondition for his ability to be sovereign in the *politeia*. It is a specific model of order which the philosopher shapes in accordance to the rational model of sovereignty over the irrational, almost bestial part of our being: the body. The philosopher transforms this order into ‘the’ order to which he has a sort of unique access: “al filosofo, che sintomaticamente si identifica nell’elemento razionale, non solo spetta di governare l’ordine, ma anche spetta di governare questo preciso modello di ordine che egli stesso ha appunto disegnato” (Cavarero 1995: 69).
- 6 The most famous example of a ‘philosophical notion of subjectivity,’ considered as autonomous, in charge of her/himself, sovereign over the bodily passions, is Descartes’. The so-called postmodern critique of the traditional notion of subjectivity takes Descartes as its target, often overlooking the different notions

of subjectivity elaborated by other thinkers. Nevertheless, in spite of significant differences among different notions of subjectivity, we can admit that there is a certain homogeneity in the abstract features of the philosophical hero, from Plato onwards. The political importance of deconstructing moves such as Arendt's (and, for that matter, Derrida's, Foucault's, Lyotard's and others')—her oversimplifications and biased interpretations notwithstanding—which displays a radical challenge to the tradition, is great also in force of the intellectual audacity of her positions. In my view, Honig, in emphasizing Arendt's *singularity* inherits a certain degree of that audacity.

- 7 “Unlike human behavior – which the Greeks, like all civilized people, judged according to ‘moral standards’, taking into account motives and intentions on the one hand and aims and consequences on the other – action can be judged only by the criterion of greatness because it is in its nature to break through the commonly accepted and reach into the extraordinary where whatever is true in common and everyday life no longer applies because everything that exists is unique and *sui generis*” (HC: 205).
- 8 On this specific topic of Arendt's use of Greece see Benhabib 1990: 171.
- 9 HC: 197, Arendt is here quoting Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War* II, 41.
- 10 The importance of the memory of heroic deeds can be summarized by this sentence proclaimed by Hector in the Iliad before he faced Achilles in the battle that caused his death: “My doom has come upon me; let me not then die ingloriously and without a struggle, but let me first do some great thing that shall be told among men hereafter”(Hom. *Il.*22.303–305).
- 11 Here Arendt follows the aforementioned oration reported by Thucydides. The glorification of actions was guaranteed by the fame Athens had gained – obviously thanks to other great deeds of the ancestors . Pericles consoles his audience by stating that their fame will be preserved and handed down even without material objects (tomb, epigraph) to remind posterity: “the whole earth is the tomb of famous men, and not only inscriptions set up in their own country mark it but even in foreign lands and unwritten memorial, present not in monument but in mind, abides within each man” (Thuc. II, 43).
- 12 Birth, in my opinion, and apart from the metaphysical or essentialistic connotations it might have, serves in this context of counter-philosophical anthropology of life as lived *among* others, to oppose the figure of death with an efficacious image – a metaphor – that could immediately, precisely because of its figurative power, offer a specular path – that of birth. Seen from this perspective, birth is certainly an excellent choice and, interestingly enough, an unusual and provocative one.
- 13 Adriana Cavarero, to whom these reflections owe a lot, defines this identity-giving practice as a “scene of reciprocity”, in which the practice of storytelling becomes an “ethic of the gift” (Cavarero 2000: 3). In other words, telling someone her/his story is simply a gift, a precious gesture that cannot be accounted for in terms of utility or possession, but simply because the other person once told

my story to me. It may become clear that telling someone her story is quite different from assigning her either an abstract identity (“woman,” “mother,” “witch” or “mermaid”) or simply letting her tell her own story. In the first case it is clear that the abstract identity has more to do with the “what” than with the “who,” while the second case lacks the reality of being seen and heard, the reality of appearance.

- 14 There are several meanings of the Greek verb *historein*, which derives from the root *id-*, which indicates the act of seeing (from which also the Platonic word *Idea* – that which is seen – derives). Among contemporaries of Thucydides, *Historia*, then, refers to an inquiry, research conducted in order to assess events as they have taken place. Nevertheless, this specific form of inquiry is connected to the witnessing of those events. It is a form of *autopsia*, as Herodotus calls it, insofar as it relies on the presence of the historian as a witness of narrated facts. Note that also *autopsia* derives from the same root *id-* which also characterizes the verb *horan*, to see. *Autopsia* was originally a direct sensorial experience. (Mazzarino 1983:140).
- 15 Marcel Detienne (Detienne 1992) investigates the role of the poet in archaic Greek culture. As a sort of powerful living memory the poet was responsible for the praise (*Epainos*) or the blame (*Momos*) of the hero. There was a strict correspondence between the memory of the poet (directly inspired by the Muses) and the notion of truth (*aletheia*). The memorability of deeds and words depended on the favor of the poet, whose powers were not only commemorative but also “mantic,” divinatory. (Detienne 1992: 1–16). The almost coincident realms of memory and truth offer a notion of objectivity divorced from that of a position above the realms of truth and lie, of reality and appearance. The poet is the sole arbiter of good and bad, insofar as he is also the glorifying voice of the hero. Justice, therefore, qualifies as the task of attributing equal memorability to all great laudable deeds, even to those of the enemy. In the words of Pyndar: “Therefore, whether a man is friendly or hostile among the citizens, let him not obscure a thing that is done well for the common good and so dishonor the precept of the old man of the sea, who said to praise with all your spirit, and with justice, even an enemy when he accomplishes fine deeds” (Pyndar, *Pyth.*, IX, 95).
- 16 Havelock (Havelock 1963) ascribes the origin of the conceptual, abstract way of thinking to a linguistic transformation: the passage from orality to literacy was helped by the grammatical modification in the use of the verb “to be,” used by Plato only in the present form, as in mathematical statements. The role played by arithmetic in the Platonic theory of forms, and especially in his polemic against Homer, must not be underestimated, because, according to Havelock, it was the decisive change of technology that was responsible for the birth of an entire civilization: “The mind must be taught to enter a new syntactical condition, that of the mathematical equation, in preference to the syntax of the story” (230). Or, again: “The entire purpose is to accelerate the intellectual awakening

which ‘converts’ the *psyche* from the many to the one, and from ‘becomingness’ to ‘beingness’; this, [...] is equivalent to a conversion from the image world of the epic to the abstract world of scientific description, and from the vocabulary and syntax of narrativized events in time towards the equations, laws and formulas and topics which are outside time” (258–259).

- 17 Arendt, “The Archimedean Point” quoted by Disch (1994: 129).
- 18 In a recent book, Carlo Ginzburg (Ginzburg 2000, previously published in English, 1999) argues in favor of a ‘poetic’ contamination of historiography. While criticizing – through an overly philologically and biographically complicated analysis of the *Ur-text* of post-structuralism, Nietzsche’s essay on “Wahrheit und Lüge” – post-modern critics of historical ‘truthfulness,’ he affirms that historical knowledge is strictly intertwined with narrative and poetry and this does not invalidate the referential truthfulness of historical writing, but, on the contrary, it reinforces it. Historical knowledge, according to Ginzburg, relies on both proofs (documents, evidence of all kinds) and rhetoric (use of language): the two aspects go together and do not necessarily imply a reduction of all historical writing to ‘narrative’ –understood as rhetorical construction. The two aspects must go together and at the same time they can integrate one another: when one of the two is lacking the other can provide ‘amendments’ and vice versa. The fundamental aspect of all historical reconstructions is not that they are fictional – as, according to Ginzburg, skeptical post-modernists would have it – but that they rely upon power relationships that are always asymmetrical. The richness of historical discourse should be able to illustrate this asymmetry, to situate itself – as Thucydides did –in the position of being able to recount both perspectives, without concluding that history is only a matter of perspective.(Ginzburg 2000: 13–19 and 43–49)
- 19 Arendt’s position is very close to that which Deanna Shemek (Shemek 1998) ascribes to literary works by referring to Bakhtin’s idea of “unfinalizability”. In a work on women’s representation in art, popular culture and literature in early modern Italy, Shemek carries out an interpretive work on some literary classics (Ariosto’s *Orlando Furioso*) in order to illustrate how these texts offer complex and even contrasting views. The richness of literature, argues Shemek, depends on its capacity to signify in multiple directions, both spatial and temporal. I would here like to emphasize the interesting proximity of Bakhtin’s ideas to Arendt’s where openness of meaning is concerned. According to Bakhtin, in fact, literary works must neither be enclosed in their epochs, nor totally deprived of their historical belonging: the first approach impoverishes the reader’s potential, the second sacrifices that of the writer. It is rather a matter of considering “creating and expressive works as ‘noncoincident’ with themselves, as inherently capable of plural significations”. The Bakhtinian point is to insist on the “surplus of potential meaning that makes works, cultures, and even individuals ‘unfinalizable’ in the most positive sense and allows them to continue speaking” (Shemek 1998:7). See Bakhtin 1981, 1986.



- 20 See Emile Benveniste (Benveniste 1969): “Mais c’est précisément parce que *istôr* est le témoin oculaire, le seul qui tranche le débat, qu’on a pu attribuer à *istôr* le sens de ‘qui tranche par un jugement sans appel sur une question de bonne foi’” (II, 174).
- 21 “Im Deutschen Sprachgebiet also waren zunächst die Geschichte(n) – von den Singularformen ‘das Geschichte’ und ‘die Geschichte’ – beides Pluralbindungen, die auf eine entsprechende Menge einzelner Exempla verweisen mochten. Es ist spannend zu verfolgen, wie sie unmerklich und unbewußt, schließlich durch Nachhilfe zahlreicher theoretischer Reflexionen, die Pluralform von ‘die Geschichte’ zu einem Kollektivsingular verdichtet hat” (Koselleck 1979: 50–51).
- 22 “Die Geschichte belehrt also nur, indem man auf die Historie verzichtet” (Koselleck 1979: 49).
- 23 See Havelock’s masterpiece *Preface to Plato* (Havelock 1963). I shall discuss – even if marginally – his perspective in the following chapter.
- 24 As Simona Forti correctly points out, Arendt’s interpretation of Plato is often philologically dubious and schematic, but nevertheless it serves her scope, namely to formulate an interesting and original reading of the birth of philosophy in connection with its political implications (Forti 1994: 121). To de-realize the world, to condemn finitude, multiplicity and contingency, as Parmenides originally did, seems to suggest that metaphysics in its foundations wants to oppose to politics a different kind of immortality, no longer dependent upon the political and its unstable changes, but on the removal of time and death, in an obsessive desire for durability: “Hannah Arendt sembra dunque dirci che l’atto di nascita della filosofia è iscritto nell’impossibilità, per il pensiero, di sopportare la maledizione del finito, nella sua incapacità di accettare il mondo segnato dal lutto della contingenza. [...] I fondamenti della metafisica – introdotti da Parmenide e consegnati compiutamente alla tradizione da Platone – non sono altro che la manifestazione di un desiderio ossessivo di durare, che rimuove la morte e il tempo” (Forti 1994:125).
- 25 As the famous Greek historian says, the difficulty of his enterprise lies in the fact that he has to mediate between different elements: the facts which he personally witnessed, the facts for which he was absent and therefore relied on the account of others, the different accounts of the same fact given by different spectators or participants. Nevertheless, Thucydides is not at all frustrated by the polyvocality of his history, since it is a useful service he has done for posterity. “It is a possession for all time, not a competition piece to be heard for the moment, that has been composed.” (Thuc. I, 22)
- 26 One might wonder whether these ‘many stories’ are simply juxtaposed or, rather, contrast one another. Max Weber, in his famous essay on Objectivity (“Die ‘Objektivität’ sozialwissenschaftlicher und sozialpolitischer Erkenntnis” in Max Weber 1985) notes that the kind of objectivity available to the social sciences has nothing to do with the absolute and detached perspective of the natural

sciences. The multifaceted and polymorphous reality of human actions and institutions allows for an objective perspectivism – that is, a scientific approach that cannot be totally value-free, but, on the contrary, must take the differences in values and beliefs as its appropriately scientific starting point. This perspectivist position is by no means a celebration of relativism, but the radical acknowledgement that values are part of our worlds (and of our views of the world) and, as such, can only be assumed as starting points of any social analysis – although they can never become a matter of dispute for the social sciences. “Er wird gewonnen durch einseitige Steigerung eines oder einiger Gesichtspunkte und durch Zusammenschluß einer Fülle von diffus und diskret, hier mehr, dort weniger, stellenweise gar nicht, vorhandenen Einzelercheinungen, die sich jenen einseitig herausgehobenen Gesichtspunkten fügen, zu einem in sich einheitlichen Gedankenbilde” (191).

The result of this perspectivist yet ‘objective’ position is that the perspectives are essentially oppositional and contrasting, although this aspect must not frustrate the social scientist. Reality, the multifaceted and infinite world of human relations, institutions, actions and phenomena, does not allow itself to be approached systematically. Or, more clearly put, one can attempt a systematic approach, but the results will be far less objective than those of the partial perspective: “Es gibt keine schlechthin ‘objektive’ wissenschaftliche Analyse des Kulturlebens oder der ‘sozialen Erscheinungen’ unabhängig von speziellen und einseitigen Gesichtspunkten, nach denen sie als Forschungsobjekt ausgewählt, analysiert und darstellend gegliedert werden” (170).

Insofar as stories are partial and situated perspectives of the world and accounts of portions of it, they can also be read as “einseitige Steigerungen” (partial constructions), the main feature of which is to give way to contrasting debates that do not necessarily lead to agreement, but instead perform or enact political debates. As Lisa Disch has argued, to use storytelling as a form of critical understanding means “[...]telling the story of a situation in a way that makes explicit the disposition of the author and relates as many of its constituent perspectives as possible. Storytelling is ‘more truth than fact, because it communicates one’s own critical understanding in a way that invites discussion from rival perspectives” (Disch 1994: 140). The “constitutive perspectives” that become visible – yet contestable – in a story can perhaps be compared to Weber’s “einseitige Steigerungen” which constitute the starting point of every social analysis. I would like to thank Kari Palonen for his invaluable suggestions on this topic. See my *The Concept of Objectivity in Max Weber*, in Ahonen & Palonen (eds.)(1999), pp. 109–132.

- 27 Levinas’ target in his affirmation of the primacy of ethics over ontology is Heidegger, whereas the German thinker “subordonne à l’ontologie le rapport avec autrui” (Levinas 1971:89).
- 28 Levinas claims that this tradition of ethical responsibility is to be found – not exclusively, but somewhat more visibly – in the relationship between God and

the Jewish people. As regards this privileged perspective in Levinas writings see Levinas 1981.

- 29 The tradition is, of course, that of the Western male. Metaphysical thought has always presented its validity as universal and neutral, as some kind of cogent truth to which everybody should unconditionally comply. This is clear from Plato's Cave onwards. More or less recent deconstruction practices have shattered this supposed universality and plausibility, displacing the Western philosophical discourse and revealing its male legacy, otherwise known as phallogocentrism. See Irigaray 1974, Cavarero 1991, Braidotti 1991.
- 30 Arendt quotes Karen Blixen in an essays entirely dedicated to the Danish storyteller. See MDT: 97.
- 31 Martha Nussbaum, in her book *The Fragility of Goodness*, investigates the complexity of human reality as it is re-presented in Greek tragedy. She is concerned with the importance of luck (*tuche*) in Greek ethics. Her analysis shows how Greek tragedy represented a way of understanding complexity in contrast with the philosophical (Platonic) view on ethical matters. Important, for our context, is the emphasis Nussbaum puts on a different kind of understanding, that of tragedy, that is mainly concerned with "concrete words, images incidents." Sophocle's tragedy in particular offers us an insight into the complexities of reality that differs from the pureness of the Platonic vision. "We reflect on an incident not by subsuming it under a general rule, not by assimilating its features to the terms of an elegant scientific procedure, but by burrowing down into the depths of the particular". The understanding that tragedy engenders, then "stresses responsiveness and attention to complexity; it discourages the search for the simple and, above all, for the reductive. It suggests to us that the world of practical choice, like the text, is articulated but never exhausted by reading" (Nussbaum 1986: 69).
- 32 Karen Blixen used to say of herself: "*Moi je suis une conteuse, et rien qu'une conteuse. C'est l'histoire elle-même qui m'intéresse, et la façon de la raconter.*"
- 33 As Cavarero notes, by following Arendt's view, in the reciprocal scene of narration, where a story told by others who have witnessed testifies to my identity, my "who", the text as such is quite inessential. In other words, the attention is neither on the narratological question, nor on the style or semiotics of the text. "It concerns – rather – *exclusively* and in total indifference towards the text – the complex *relation* between every human being, their life-story and the narrator of this story". Moreover, in connection to this aspect, there is another, more crucial one. The life-story which should emerge from a political, public scene of action and discourse does not retain any of the modern features of the self: the interiority, the private, the in-dividual. "Arendt does the reverse", and by moving from the inside to the outside, she elaborates a notion of the self "that is expressive and relational, and whose reality is symptomatically external in so far as it is entrusted to the gaze, or the tale, of another. Even the utterly

modern role of personal memory – namely, the autobiography as an intimate construction of a self that narrates himself to himself – vanishes as a result” (Cavarero 2000: 41).

- 34 Arendt, in her essay on Karen Blixen, speaks of the ‘sin’ of “making a story come true, of interfering with life according to a preconceived pattern, instead of waiting patiently for the story to emerge” (MDT:106). Karen Blixen personally experienced the frustration of living one’s life as if it were a story already known, with a fixed and preconceived pattern, and she wrote “some tales about what must have been for her the obvious lesson of her youthful follies.” Arendt then concludes that while you can turn life into a story the reverse is dangerous : “you cannot make life poetic, live it as though it were a work of art (as Goethe had done) or use it for the realization of an ‘idea’” (109).
- 34 Interestingly enough, Nussbaum depicts the audience’s attitude at a tragic performance as “openness” and “willingness to be surprised and moved, in company with others” (Nussbaum 1986:72).
- 35 By following a tale by Karen Blixen, Cavarero (2000: 1 “A stork for an introduction”) metaphorizes the life-story that each human being leaves behind as a path traced in the sand by a man randomly walking on it at night. The path can turn out to be an understandable design afterwards, but while being produced it was a mixture of intention and accident. Only from a different standpoint than that of the person *tracing* that path can we perceive, witness and re-tell the story of that unique life.



# CHAPTER TWO

## 1. On the Verticality of Thinking

### *1.1 Unfolding Concepts*

“Wer von dieser Kühle angehaucht wird, wird es kaum glauben dass auch der Begriff, knöchern und Beckig wie ein Würfel und versetzbar wie jener, doch nur als das *Residuum einer Metapher* übrig bleibt, und dass die Illusion der künstlerischen Uebertragung eines Nervenreizes in Bilder, wenn nicht die Mutter so doch die Grossmutter eines jeden Begriffs ist.” F. Nietzsche, *Über Wahrheit und Lüge*

My aim here is certainly not to propose a new theorem, but simply to emphasize the difference between stories and concepts. One could argue that a story is not all that different from a concept, it is simply a different *kind* of abstraction. One could also argue that it is simply naïve to presume that stories are somehow ‘more real’ than concepts. Stories belong to the realm of language, they are products of a code, of a symbolic order that, as such, cannot be transcended. These are the main arguments against the notion of storytelling as a form of critical understanding.

I would like to point to a decisive difference between abstract thinking and a concrete way of ‘re-presenting’ reality. If we cannot speak of a ‘pure’ and normative opposition between stories and concepts, we can certainly call to mind what Arendt says in reference to the activity of thinking (LOM: I). Thinking deals with “invisibles,” while we are born into a “visible” world. Thinking is an “extraordinary” activity, in the sense that it abstracts from the world of appearances, the visible and tangible world in which we find ourselves. Put simply, Arendt analyzes the extent to which thinking is an extraordinary activity that nonetheless takes place in the world. Thinking as an activity that abstracts from everyday life needs to manifest for the mind what is absent from the senses.

Metaphors, Arendt stresses, are helpful in this ‘abstracting’ activity. “No language has a ready-made vocabulary for the needs of mental activity; they all borrow their vocabulary from words originally meant to correspond either to sense experiences or to other experiences of ordinary life” (LOM: I, 102). Thinking is metaphorical and analogical, it develops its language from an originally ‘concrete’ language in which terms like ‘soul’ and ‘idea’ were everyday words that referred to concrete situations. “All philosophical terms are metaphors, frozen analogies, as it were, whose true meaning discloses itself when we dissolve the term into the original context, which must have been vividly in the mind of the first philosopher to use it” (104).

In this section of *The Life of the Mind*, Arendt engages in a practical demonstration of the etymologies of some of the most famous philosophical terms. What is important here is to understand how a conceptual language has become the ‘code’ of our way of thinking. Is this another way of saying that concepts were built upon stories? Or, rather, that stories are ‘more original’ than concepts?<sup>1</sup>

Put simply, a concept is a synthesized story. A concept is a ‘frozen’ version of a situation that could otherwise be told as a story.<sup>2</sup> In the Platonic dialogues it was precisely the definition of a ‘frozen’ situation, the production of a concept independent of concrete occurrences, that was at stake. In the early Platonic dialogues, Arendt notes, there tends to be a general introduction that “runs as follows: to be sure there are happy people, just deeds, courageous men, beautiful things to see and admire, everybody knows about them; the trouble starts with our nouns, presumably derived from the adjectives we apply to particular cases as they *appear* to us. [...] In short, the trouble arrives with such words as *happiness, courage, justice* and so on, what we now call concepts – Solon’s ‘non-appearing measure’ (*aphanes metron*)” (LOM: I, 170).

The need for metaphors, due to the ineffability of the uppermost principle, testifies to the strong double-sidedness of metaphysics as a systematization of the “extraneousness of thought”. Thought is a suspension of common, daily experiences in order to grasp a different meaning than that of the immediacy provided by lived experience. But thought is preceded by experience, that is the world of appearances in which we are born and live; the precondition of thinking, as such, is living. Metaphors therefore, de-codify the strangeness of thought into the familiarity of life and the senses. Metaphysics requires metaphors but denies experience.<sup>3</sup> We shall see how the vertical metaphor has influenced some of the most famous philosophers of our tradition, and in doing so has enhanced the extra-terrestrial, unfamiliar and de-sensed experience of thinking in the direction of the metaphysical obsession with eternity and immutability. A simple and ordinary experience such as thinking has been transformed by metaphysics into “the dream of a timeless region, an eternal

presence in complete quiet, lying beyond human clocks and calendars altogether” (207).

The ambiguity of metaphysics denies cognitive power to the senses but then reverts back to them in order to explain the sense-less, invisible, unspeakable nature of its objects. This ambiguity, however, enables a deconstruction of the prerequisites upon which metaphysics has been constructed, but it also enables a deconstruction that, by denouncing the arbitrariness of such a system of thought, also detects the possible ways of saving a quest for meaning without denying the world and reality.

A concept proceeds vertically, by abstracting from the multiple aspects of a phenomenon or a thought. A story unfolds horizontally, its path simply follows complexities and accidents that build up reality.<sup>4</sup> Conversely, a concept, is conceived of in order to reduce the complexity of reality, to render it graspable through a word, some kind of “shorthand” (171). In the words of Solon, a concept is “most difficult for the mind to comprehend, but nevertheless holding the limits of all things”. This ability to abstract, to synthesize many occurrences in a word, involves the violent character of theoretical understanding.<sup>5</sup>

As Rosi Braidotti (Braidotti 1994) has phrased it, theory always proceeds through exclusion and hegemony, that is, by forming a hierarchy. The nature of these exclusions and hegemonies is not explicitly oppressive or unjust. Theory proceeds through exclusions as an apparently neutral method of differentiation, as Plato shows us in the *Sophist*. Theory, in order to ‘understand’ must exclude and abstract.

What is decisive in this respect is the fact that theory is not at all neutral. In the production of abstract names for different living beings, the uniqueness of each one of them is lost. Concepts equalize. Stories, on the other hand, differ exactly on this point: they do not abstract. All the multiple particulars that build up a specific story – inasmuch as it is different from another or any other story, at least in terms of *one* particular – are not present by accident. They belong, so to say, ‘naturally’ to the story. The ever-changing combination of accidents, particulars, and unexpected finales is what makes stories so precious for the understanding of human diversity and plurality. Moreover, stories give voice to all that is excluded from (or arbitrarily included in) theory.

## 1.2 Concepts, Stories, Metaphors

Many literary critics and philosophers would argue that the narrative mode of representation is, as every other mode of representation, ideological. There can be no purer intentions in a narrative than there are in theoretical discourse, insofar as a narrative has its own structure as does theory.<sup>6</sup> In other words, a



binary opposition between a totalizing theory and a liberating narrative does not solve the problem. As Derrida would say, to move within a binary system of oppositions, automatically implies the use of a metaphysical code, an unreflected use of the devices one pretends to criticize. As for the many positions surrounding a critique of narrativity, among which emerge structuralists and post-structuralists, a narrative is not only an instrument of ideology, but the very paradigm of ideological discourse in general. It is the very core of a narrative, the subject, that is illusory and constructed rather than found.

Derrida (1980), again, claims that there is no significant difference between stories and concepts, insofar as there is no 'pure' genre to which stories or theories alternatively belong exclusively. At the same time, however, for Derrida, a story always responds to a law, it must follow that law in order to exist. There is no *re-cit* outside the law, outside the code of discourse, which has its own laws.<sup>7</sup>

Hayden White best represents the critical attitude toward a pure notion of narrativity, one which has been freed from the impediments and 'sins' of theory. He argues that "narrativity presupposes the existence of a legal system against which or on behalf of which the typical agents of a narrative account militate," and, therefore, it implies an authority which guarantees its meaningfulness (White 1987: 13). There would, therefore, be an intrinsic desire to moralize reality in the use of narrative. This also means that within a narrative or narrativized context, what is at stake is the conflict between two different views, opposed and conflicting with each other (14).

Frederic Jameson, for example, deals with the narrative problem within the context of literary criticism. He claims that narrative is a form of ideology that aims at both underlying a view of the world and repressing other elements which might disturb that view. A narrative text always seeks to control or master something it contains. By virtue of his textual analysis Jameson wants to illustrate that each narrative hints, directly or indirectly at a "political unconscious". What is interesting is that, according to Jameson, the narrative seeks to repress (or highlight) this hidden element, and it can be detected only if we examine a narrative text from the point of view of its "logical closure". Every narrative text (every literary 'version' of a narrative) possesses an ideological content (or better yet, performs its own "strategy of containment") that we can access only by treating stories as closure-oriented (Jameson 1981: 49).

Narrativity is therefore connected to ideology insofar as it is understood as a development from a beginning to an end, a sequence that almost inevitably implies causality. More or less evidently, the majority of scholars in this field insist on the textual aspect of the narrative. The post-modern paradigm does not allow us to view stories as something objective, as something that actually occurs in life – they are merely a construction, an organization of those

happenings. The coherence, closure and completeness attributed by historiography to real events is “only an image of life that is and can only be imaginary.” (White 1987: 24). As they are closure oriented, ideologically conservative, or, better yet, imaginary and fictional yet dependent upon a conceptual structure from which they are unable to escape, stories seem to tackle an all-times favorite philosophical issue – the key question in philosophy, at least since Kant – is there a reality behind representation?

If we must, given the ‘sign of the times,’ move within this paradigm – namely, that of the narrative as a text – can we still contest some of these views, not by intruding the dangerous terrain of literary criticism, narratology or semiotics, but by shifting the focus? Given the textual nature of all representations, there are still some texts that are more eloquent than others, more interesting, more useful, more politically critical.

The point that I would like to sustain and make clear throughout this work is that a narrative, diachronic dimension, be it real or fictive, is extremely interesting politically. As Aristotle makes clear in his *Poetics*, poetic mimesis (in particular the tragic one) is the only way through which *praxis* can gain representability (*Poet.* 48a). We are dealing with the realm of *praxis*, in which *phronesis*, the practical reason, shapes and governs a realm of its own, a realm that is different (but subordinate, for that matter) to the noetic realm of philosophy. Narrative, as a form of poetic imitation, seems to be more closely linked to a temporal dimension, it does not elicit temporality from the realm of truth, as philosophy does. Rather, narrative opens up spaces of contention: I see narrative representations as horizontal paths of meaning and exposed unimaginable experiences.

I would like to insist on the exposed character of all narrative recounts (either literary or oral), on the fact that stories told imitate life by assuming temporality as their mode of expression. What comes after, what follows is both unknown and necessary to the status of a story as such, and the same can be said of life. It is the paradox of our human condition: unexpectedness is the only assurance, the only guarantee of a future. At the moment at which I am able to completely predict my own future (as, for example, in the assertion of mortality) I cease to be alive. Life is exposed to temporality, but not only as Heidegger’s *Sein zum Tode*. Life is exposed to the unexpectedness of a future and to the unpredictability of its possible ramifications. I can only imagine or predict such future: one is the task of literature, the other of theory. But what is at stake in the literary imagination of a possible future is that it imitates life by telling a story with a beginning, a middle, and an end (possibly, but not necessarily); it consigns its truthfulness to the imitation of a temporal development, a sort of temporal miniature of life.

Paul Ricoeur has engaged in the immense effort of retracing a correspondence between narrativity and the experience of time, or what he calls a “phenomenology of time experience” (Ricoeur1980:168). In fact, he affirms that temporality is “that structure of existence that reaches language in narrativity and narrativity [...] the language structure that has temporality as its ultimate referent.” Ricoeur criticizes those theories of history and literary criticism that dismiss narrative, therefore denying temporality, by insisting instead on a-chronological models “such as nomological laws in history or paradigmatic codes in literary criticism” (165). On the one hand we have a so-called textual approach – semiological, structuralist, nomological or a-chronological, in the words of Ricoeur – while on the other hand we would have a deep correspondence between storytelling and life, in which narrativity would be the mediating device between reality and its representation.

Ricoeur insists on the importance of the plot in “symbolizing events,” as not being a mere construction, a mere textual device devoid of legitimacy in the representation of life and reality, but a configuration able to symbolically represent what otherwise would remain unspeakable in language, namely the aporetic nature of the human experience of time: “...the speculation on time is an inconclusive rumination to which narrative activity can alone respond”(Ricoeur 1983, 1:6).

Ricoeur’s work deepens in the demonstration of this correspondence between temporality and narrativity, through the integration of the Heideggerian views on time and *within-time-ness* with his own theory of narrativity. I shall not venture into the debate between this notion of temporality as a deep structure of our being (as in Heidegger and Ricoeur) and the opposed views expressed by theorists who criticize the narrative representation of time. The core of the debate is somehow alien to this work, insofar as the aim of my research is much humbler. To narrate rather than to conceptualize, or, to develop diachronically rather than to grasp synchronically, is a mode of representation, of knowledge, that opens up spaces of signification and contestation, as opposed to reducing possibilities. A concept is a story with a predictable end. A story, in its unfolding in time (both the time of the thing that is represented and the time of representation itself, the time of the narration) can never authorize its own closure, can never be responsible, certain or in charge of either its unfolding in time or its ending.

Ricoeur criticizes anti-narrativists and structuralists for overlooking the importance of the plot in the meaningfulness of a narrative account. Plot is not merely a succession of events, not simply the linearly chronological dimension of the story that leads to its completion. For Ricoeur, plot is “the intelligible whole that governs a succession of events in any story” (Ricoeur1980: 167).

Moreover, Ricoeur insists, “the time of the simplest story also escapes the ordinary notion of time conceived of as a series of instants succeeding one another along an abstract line oriented in a single direction” (170). The mistake of anti-narrativists, in other words, is their consideration of temporality as a mere succession, linear and mono-directional, therefore reducing the temporal mimesis of narrative. Ricoeur attributes to the story not only a succession of events but a sort of intervention into the changes it narrates, namely that of resolving the predicaments engendered by those very changes. In other words, the plot of the story (the ‘whole’ which makes the series of events meaningful) is the way in which narrative ‘solves’ predicaments caused by things that have happened. “Let us say that a story describes a series of actions and experiences made by a number of characters, whether real or imaginary. These characters are represented either in situations that change or as they relate to changes to which they then react. These changes, in turn, reveal hidden aspects of the situation and of the characters and engender a new predicament that calls for thinking, action, or both.” Since narration deals with actions, changes and developments from a given situation, the task of narration is, according to Ricoeur, to solve the situation, to give significance to those changes by completing them: every story yearns for its conclusion, “the answer to this predicament advances the story to its conclusion.” The meaningfulness of the story told inevitably lies in its conclusive directedness: “the story’s conclusion is the pole of attraction of the entire development” (170).

Of course, we all know that traditionally each story leads to another story, or, there is no conceivable end in the realm of narrative, since each end can be transformed into the beginning of another story, as the well-known collection of the *Arabian Nights* has shown to generations of listeners and readers.<sup>8</sup>

As Adriana Cavarero has pointed out, every human being is unique and one, insofar as the story of her life can be narrated. The unity of this life-story, however, does not depend upon any specific or extraordinary qualities possessed by a subject, but simply on the fact that each “who” leaves behind acts and words that can be re-composed into a story, into a unity, by others. According to Cavarero, in force of the fragility and contingency that guide all of our actions, we need and desire to perceive ourselves as a unity, as a path in which we recognize ourselves. This path, though, can never come in the form of autobiography, in the narcissistic form of a self-reconstruction, but is fulfilled instead by the narration of my story by somebody else: it is in her/his words that I recognize my uniqueness and I perceive my unity as the protagonist of contingencies and incoherent facts that eventually can still be configured or emplotted as a story. This unity, therefore, is eventual, *a posteriori*, and at the same time is always modifiable, insofar as it relates (to) a story not yet concluded, a life-story that each of us desires, continuously, while living.

In this sense Cavarero differs from Arendt, insofar as the political value of storytelling for Arendt lies in the fact that a story can only be properly told after the agent, the protagonist, is dead. Nevertheless, this narrative unity to which we refer is, in Cavarero's case, a unity that is independent from the text as such. The narratable self is constitutively independent from the content of the narrative (Cavarero 2000: 32–45). The form, the unique and individual life-story that we want to hear is vital to our self-perception, to the revelation of our 'who,' while the content becomes secondary. The narrative, the 'text,' comes after the lived experience, it is neither a product of previous texts, nor a rhetorical construction. The self must not necessarily be 'narrated' but it is constitutively 'narratable': perceiving ourselves as narratable means perceiving the unity and uniqueness of our life-story. In order for this perception to become real and tangible, there must be somebody else who actualizes this potentiality and creates a story out of my life.

It is the inexhaustible realm of stories, of told, re-told and re-tellable experiences that qualify narrative in this context. Ricoeur's perspective, which recognizes its debt to Arendt, emphasizes the completion-closure-conclusion side of the art of storytelling, its relationship with contingency is characterized by a control over it, as the story's conclusion leads and shapes all other events within it: "Looking back from the conclusion to the episodes leading up to it, we have to be able to say that this ending required these sorts of events and this chain of actions" (Ricoeur 1980:170).

Instead of this aspect, however, what I would like to emphasize in the realm of stories and storytelling is the reversibility, the non-influential aspect of conclusion, the possibility inherent in every story to be appropriated and re-told without any 'pressure' from the side of dogmatism, authenticity and directness. In other words, we contest concepts and their mode of representing reality because they are cogent, they inevitably lead to a conclusion, they *are* already a silencing conclusion – it is as if only that nomological, conceptual, abstract way of naming and defining things were legitimate. If this is what we are contesting in the philosophical-abstract way of knowing, we cannot accept a similarly 'dogmatic' way of interpreting storytelling. Affirming, as Ricoeur does, that every story is primarily recognizable by the 'whole' represented by the plot, and secondly by the directness toward conclusion, means reducing stories and the art of storytelling to a sort of second class abstractions – not to the level of conceptual synthesis – but nonetheless as aspiring to a unity. Unity is not what interests us here, or if it does, it is insofar as a narrative unity is the outcome, not the a-priori of narrative.

Ricoeur insists on the difference between the *predictable* outcome of theory and the *acceptable* outcome of narrative, insofar as the narrative conclusion is something which can neither be deduced nor predicted. "Une histoire qui ne

comporterait ni surprises, ni coïncidences, ni rencontres, ni reconnaissances ne retiendrait pas notre attention,” as each story must above all else be binding and attention-grabbing. But to follow a story to its very end is different from following an argument to its constraining conclusion (Ricoeur 1983: 267–268). This is why Ricoeur insists on the difference between the cogent direction of an argument and the acceptable ending of a story. A story combines contingency and acceptability in a way that differs from that of a nomological procedure. Contingency becomes acceptable once told in the form of a *récit*, that is, once inserted into a configuration that gives meaning to events. This configuration is the plot, or the *intrigue*, according to Ricoeur; some sort of normative principle which gives philosophical dignity to his theory of the *récit*.

The importance of the plot, however, resides in the teleological nature of all historical and narrative forms of understanding: to render contingency acceptable means to emplot it according to a principle, a unity or a whole which guarantees its intelligibility. The *telos* of narrative comprehension lies in the conclusion of every story: “Portant notre regard en arrière, de la conclusion vers les épisodes intermédiaires, nous devons pouvoir dire que cette fin demandait ces événements et cette chaîne d’actions” (268). Is this another species of the genus “historical inevitability”?

As a matter of fact, it is precisely the acceptability of a story’s end that we would like to question here. In the following chapters I intend to illustrate how and to what extent stories in the realm of historiography should convey indignation and contestation rather than acceptance. In other words, what can be useful and politically interesting in the re-appropriation of the discursive realm of stories, is their ability to refute an acquiescent view of the past and the present.

Discontinuous rather than consequent, interrupted rather than complete, stories perform their efficacy only if the perspective within which we understand them remains bound to the Arendtian precept of “understanding without justifying”. History does not qualify itself as the realm of historicity, in which human temporality meets its adequate means of representation, narrativity, as Ricoeur would have it. History, in a more Foucauldian sense, is the realm of memory and conflict, in which no definite view of the past can be settled once for all, but, rather, its meaning and importance are constantly fought in the present: “there is no knowledge which does not rest upon injustice” to quote Foucault’s famous essay *Nietzsche, genealogy, history*. A fighting notion of history means, for Foucault, to disrupt, unpack, delegitimize accepted values and knowledges, to deny the very possibility of an homogeneous origin to which we all belong and to which we will teleologically return: “The purpose of history, guided by genealogy, is not to discover the roots of our identity but

to commit itself to its dissipation. It does not seek to define our unique threshold of emergence, the homeland to which metaphysicians promise a return; it seeks to make visible all of those discontinuities that cross us" (Foucault 1977:162).

### ***1.3 Metaphysical Metaphors***

Things have become increasingly complex, as nowadays one cannot simply dismiss the question of representation, understanding and politics by simply affirming that stories are superior to concepts. Metaphors, Arendt affirms, are the very structure of our philosophical reasoning. Yet their origins are concrete not speculative. I have gone even further and ventured to say that perhaps concepts can be seen as frozen stories, as if it were possible to recover a purer and truer dimension, the once hidden and forgotten 'origin' of our language and culture, that lies beneath the hard layers of metaphysical violations. Yet one cannot rid oneself of metaphors quite so easily. At the same time, one cannot simply dismiss metaphysics *tout court*. Perhaps it is possible to carry out an experiment by virtue of which the metaphor of verticality could simultaneously be considered a different means of reading abstract thinking and an instrument (metaphysical fallacy) that is indispensable to thought in order to think of itself as world-less. In other words I do not expect to find a more concrete reality beneath the metaphor(s), one that is more original and more authentic than the rhetorical figure.

By following the argument formulated by Derrida, in his famous essay, *La mythologie blanche* (Derrida 1972: 247–324), the experiment I want to carry out does not intend to recover the original and pure language that has yet to be worn out – according to Derrida's "concept d'usure" – by philosophical use (256). We can certainly agree on this: the metaphor is dependent upon a definition, the concept of metaphor, and, as such, the metaphor is intrinsically philosophical. By following Aristotle, Derrida shows that the metaphor is, by definition, philosophical and that philosophy is, by definition, intrinsically metaphorical: "D'une part, il est impossible de dominer la métaphorique philosophique, come telle, de l'extérieur, en se servant d'un concept de métaphore qui reste un produit philosophique" (272).

The following attempt to deconstruct the plausibility of the vertical metaphor through a few, representative samples of philosophical texts of the tradition is situated at a lower level than Derrida's – the metaphor of verticality seems to be indispensable in metaphysical thinking (some of the most common metaphors are: light, sun, sight). On the other hand, however, this very metaphor, a vertical

spatialization of truth, precisely because it is a metaphor, a rhetorical figure of speech, should not possess the preponderance and absoluteness which, instead, qualifies it within philosophy. This is what Arendt calls the metaphysical fallacy, or, the paradox which characterizes metaphysics. Philosophy denies value to the senses, to experience, while appropriating a spatial metaphor deprived of all connections to the senses. This very metaphor is then projected upwards. Thinking, as we have seen, cannot exist without metaphors, while metaphors are thinkable only within a metaphysical horizon. Not every metaphor, though, suits the aims of Western thought. This is why at the beginning of this work I opposed two different spatial metaphorizations: a vertical metaphorization (Plato) and a horizontal (Chatwin) one. There are many possible horizontal metaphors that have the potential to contest the uniqueness of the vertical dimension, of the eliotropic metaphor. This does not mean that we should recover a binary opposition between vertical and horizontal, stories and concepts. It must be possible, however, to contest the uniqueness and absoluteness (no longer legitimate) of the vertical metaphor. By opposing some horizontal stories to vertical concepts, or by conceiving of stories as horizontal and philosophical constructions as vertical, certain political implications emerge regarding apparently neutral philosophical texts. The very nature of this opposition is in itself metaphorical; I attribute to it the value of a rhetorical and deconstructive reading operation. It is nothing more than a further metaphorization of the well-known opposition and mutual implication of philosophy and politics. The attempt to carry the Arendtian task of separating politics from philosophy a step further takes the shape of this metaphorization, in the hope to uncover interesting and fruitful aspects in the confrontation of two metaphors – in other words, of two altogether different stories.

### ***1.4 Temporal Mimesis***

“For [the narrator] too something merely essential – a name or a concept – dissolves, but not into something equally only essential, rather into its own actuality, more precisely its own actualization. He will barely form is-sentences at all and [...] he will use was-sentences at most at the beginning. Substantives, thus substance-words, occur in his narrative, it is true, but the interest does not lie in them, but rather in the verb, the time-word.” Franz Rosenzweig, *The New Thinking*

To narrate, to proceed diachronically, to imitate (even metaphorically) life as a temporal development toward an unknown future can be seen as a mode of representation that remains bound to reality as a shared dimension. To



communicate through stories, through the recount of what came after what, be it the recount of a lived experience or the telling of a fairy tale, always leaves the possibility for a different ending, for a re-negotiable future (imagined, dreamt, invisible).<sup>9</sup> The possibility to perceive ourselves as always re-negotiable, to imagine a different course of development in our lives, is, I should say, not only the very fabric of our longing for the future, but also the basis for politics, of our being together and taking care of the future. In this respect, each story (whether it be real or fictive) is a metaphor of politics, insofar as it represents a temporal reality by imitating it and by doing so it materializes, makes visible, tangible or audible, the relational nature of our human condition. To be linked to temporality also means to be dependent upon and exposed to the presence of others, to rely entirely on belonging to a generation, on the primary relation to a mother, on the indispensable dependence upon others, without whom the unexpectedness of my own future would be inconceivable, as would the very meaning of life as such.<sup>10</sup>

Politics, as I have tried to explain in the previous chapter, is the relational dimension of our being, it is the strictly human mode of action and interaction. Arendt refers to the ancient meaning of the verb *archein*, which originally meant to start something new or to initiate, and later came to exclusively signify the principle (*arche*) of ruling (HC: 177). Arendt strenuously affirms the intrinsic value of a politics of relation, uniqueness and beginning, refusing all other specialized definitions regarding politics as both a science and a philosophy. Her notion of politics as space of appearance and new beginning comes close to what Kari Palonen refers to as ‘politicking,’ the “art of playing with contingency” (Palonen, 1993). ‘Politicking’ does not belong, according to Palonen, to the realm of policy and polity, where what is at stake is the normative and formal aspect of the political considered as a system. Both terms retain a “finalistic sense of being oriented towards something, and the normative sense of being at distance with the actual state of things” (9). Therefore Palonen distinguishes between policy and politics by applying Arendtian terminology; “politics refers to action, while policy refers to fabrication” (9). The importance of neologisms such as politicking and politicization lies in the fact that they testify to an autonomization of politics as a specific concept (one that is not dependent on polity and policy). According to Palonen, politicking also refers explicitly – also in terms of its verbal character – to politics as action or as a synonym for “acting politically” (10).<sup>11</sup>

We could therefore say that Arendt refuses an equivalence between politics and polity or policy. The latter terms refer to what Arendt calls the reduction of politics to *techne*, to a practice of rule and order. Arendt, we could say by applying Palonen’s terminology, transforms the polity in politicking, emphasizing the performative aspect of acting politically, disrupting the hegemony of politics

as system of order (polity) or a system of predictability (policy). In order to do so she also recognizes the political importance of stories as means of glorification and remembrance. I should like to take further these Arendtian notions and explore the political value of narrative not only as a marginal means of celebration, but also as a possible alternative to a politics of definitions and exclusions, of closure and predictability, of the denial of temporality<sup>12</sup>. As the matrix of our civilization, philosophy has played a significant role in shaping a culture of exclusion and predictability, simultaneously denying temporality.

In the following chapter, I would like to carry out a rhetorical/grammatical reading of three philosophical texts of the tradition (Plato, Descartes, Kant) in order to emphasize their denial of temporality and contingency, and underline what we might even call their syntactical refusal to refer to a diachronic dimension of time. Truth is the *matter* of which philosophy is made of, and as such, it has nothing to do with either the earthbound condition of human beings, or their temporal devices to defy mortality, namely political systems. In this respect, the critical reading of the verticality of thinking should convey the political impact of vertical spatialization as a refusal not only of a democratic order (as, for example, the verticality of hierarchical divisions) but also of a diachronic dimension, in which change and unpredictability are the major features of the dimension of the *vita activa*.

## 2. Reaching upwards: the Vertical Metaphor in Plato, Descartes and Kant

### 2.1 *Plato and the Extra-Terrestrial Nature of the Good*

In *Republic* VI Plato employs the sun metaphor in order to explain the true nature of the idea of the good. The extent to which this metaphor becomes a fruitful mechanism within the Platonic system by virtue of which the cosmos acquires order and meaning is generally acknowledged. Just as the sun enables our eyes to see objects, to distinguish them from one another, the idea of the good guarantees intelligibility to all other ideas. Not only is the sun the means by which we see, it is also the life-giving principle the force of which allows existence and growth.

In the same way, but on a higher level, the idea of the good is responsible for the existence of ideas. It is the *metron* by which we can compare and therefore measure all other ideas. The magnitude of this metaphor guarantees a great

margin of movement, that is, the possibility to attribute numerous characteristics to the principle of the good. At the same time, though, its magnitude can also be seen as synonymous to vagueness. As a matter of fact, the metaphor is suited to a principle – that of the good – which in its content is empty. The idea of the good is a standard by which we can measure all the other ideas, although in itself it does not possess any characteristics. As in mathematical reasoning, the system operates through relations and proportions. The good is a standard, the qualitative nature of which cannot be grasped.

Through Socrates' speech we acknowledge that there cannot be a direct discourse on the good, but only a description that begins from its 'offspring' or its 'fruits'. The good, as such, is 'too high' to be grasped immediately. The distance that separates our being human from the absolute purity of the principle makes it inaccessible, it requires several metaphors in order to de-codify such purity in terms of human sensorial perception. The sight metaphor hence displays such ability: this sensorial faculty is more reminiscent than the other senses of a divine nature, because it owes its efficacy to 'the divine element of the sun'. "It was the Sun, then, that I meant when I spoke of that offspring which the Good has created in the visible world, to stand there in the same relation to vision and visible things as that which the Good itself bears in the intelligible world to intelligence and to intelligible objects"(508c–d).

Both the sun and the good are defined according to the relation they establish with the objects they encounter. The luminescence of the sun and the correctness of ideas are calibrated on the objects they illuminate. The relationship, however, is not a simple one, and the adjustment of ideas to objects is problematic. The sunlight that illuminates the objects, a light which sight needs in order to see, is a divine light, since the sun is a divine element whose reflection reaches the earth. The idea of the good, its 'employment' as a criterion of the suitability and adequacy of objects to a model, to a superior copy, is also of divine origin.

The extra-terrestrial provenance of these elements accounts for the incommensurability they display when compared to the human dimensions of life and death. Therefore, Socrates is unable to attain the divine dimension of the good with his human speech. Only through a gradual path filled with sensorial images can the impenetrable land of speculation be courageously explored.

The idea of the good, the highest principle of the Platonic doctrine, is presented through images, the main characteristic of which is their upward projection. Like the sun, the good is "of all the divinities in the skies," a light that "is responsible for making our eyes see perfectly and making objects perfectly visible" (508a–b). In order to succeed in the argumentation of the perfection of the good, the discourse must recur to the 'progeny'; the sun is "...the offspring which the Good has created" (508c). The blindingly

unrepresentable nature of the uppermost idea of the good is made accessible to our senses through metaphors and analogies. But how? The ‘celestial’ image of the sun is ever present in the rhetorical pattern that Plato uses in order to legitimize the philosophical and political proposal of the *Republic*.

“You will agree, that the Sun not only makes the things we see visible, but also brings them into existence and gives them growth and nourishment; yet he is not the same thing as existence. And so with the objects of knowledge: these derive from the Good not only their power of being known, but their very being and reality; and Goodness is not the same thing as being, but even beyond being, surpassing it in dignity and power”(508b).

The sun and the good justify one another, in a parallel way, as one guarantees the intelligibility of the other. If the sun is the ruling principle of visibility in the realm of sensorial objects, the second principle is law and principle of the intelligibility of ideas. And as in the sensorial world we can have clear images of objects but also shades or reflections of objects, in the intellectual realm of ideas we can have copies and images of pure ideas ( for example, the triangle of geometry is an image of the idea of the triangle, or the triangle in itself), as well as pure ideas which do not need images in order to be comprehended. These ideas are pure principles that can be grasped only by intellection – they belong to the intact realm of the contemplation of things that always are, concerned only “with the unchanging and immortal, and with truth”.

The impervious path constellated by sensorial images, which are supposed to prepare to the ascent to contemplation, slowly loosens its ties to the earth, to the terrestrial. The land of contemplation is no longer conceivable through metaphors or analogies, it is simply intellectual. The means by which thinking frees itself from sensorial images and reaches the principles is dialectics. Plato describes dialectics as “a flight of steps up which it may mount all the way to something which is not hypothetical, the first principle of all”(511b–c).

The dialectical process, thanks to which the philosopher can attain the realm of principles, is characterized by a progressive de-sensorialized path, in which images progressively disappear and truth can be grasped with the sole faculty of the intellect. This process, however, is described as an incessant pattern of going upwards and returning downwards, drawing truth from the celestial source above and then returning to the material and terrestrial surface located below. The philosophical experience of contemplation is defined here as taking place within the vertical dimension, as projected toward an ‘outside,’ the main characteristic of which being that it is neither comparable nor mixable with sensorial images, which are copies of ideas, imperfect and not self-sufficient when compared to the aforementioned realm of thinking. “Then by the second section of the intelligible world you may understand me to mean all that unaided reasoning apprehends by the power of dialectic when it treats its assumptions, not as first principles, but as *hypotheses* in the literal sense” (511b–c).

There is a hierarchy among the different activities of the mind, which Plato expresses with another metaphor, this time taken from geometry. The metaphor is intended to supply a progressively less sensorial means of representing the true nature of dialectics. The separation between the intelligible and sensorial realms is constructed as the image of a line, or a segment that is divided into two parts. Each of the two parts is respectively divided into two other parts. The first larger half of the segment represents the sensorial world, its further half is the division within the sensorial world between shadows or images that are merely reflections of real objects and objects as such. Similarly, the second larger half of the segment is divided into the two further halves, which represent the difference between opinion and knowledge within the intelligible world. There is a proportional relationship between the two parts of the segment: "...the proportion in which the visible world has been divided as corresponding to degrees of reality and truth, so that the likeness shall stand to the original in the same ratio as the sphere of appearances and belief to the sphere of knowledge"(510a–b). In order to arrive at the realm of the intelligible, the soul must linger upon hypotheses, for examples those used in geometry. Hypotheses are still images through which the soul is guided upwards until it reaches the realm of intellection, where no images are available to aid in its comprehension.

The process of ascension toward the purely intellectual dimension is dramatized through sensorial images and metaphors right up to its threshold. These images and metaphors are necessary in order to 'substantiate' the imperceptible and obscure nature of the intelligible world. This is characterized as ineffable, as "even beyond being, surpassing it in dignity and power"(508b). It is something that transcends, that goes beyond existence and essence *per definitionem*, and *qua* transcends it is place-less, extension-less. It lies beyond our sensorial and imaginative faculties, and therefore it might as well not be. But in Plato's metaphors, images and analogies are taken as the necessary steps through which we can achieve the image-less nature of the good. Images are the ascending steps, the launching platform toward the *epecheina tes ousias*, that which lies outside and beyond the earth. If it is ineffable (that which cannot be put into words), the realm of principles is also, and above all, invisible.

Four cognitive processes take place in the soul, the primary being intellection, the second dianoetic thinking, the third opinion and the lowest imagination. Following the narrative, which also elsewhere than in the *Republic* warns us of the unreachable and extra-sensorial nature of truth and beauty, we become more and more acquainted with the ejection of the contemplative dimension, the dimension of truth and beauty, from the world. What is interesting is that such ejection is represented by images that inevitably remind us of a vertical dimension, totally upwardly oriented. It is a purifying process, which in order to become truly pure must transcend, ascend and escape from the terrestrial

world. This escape has been the primary feature of the philosophical project, and Plato represents the inaugurating example of the entire tradition. Nonetheless, it is only by virtue of such a vertical escape, by calling itself out of the world of human affairs and its instability, that philosophy has been able to 'rise' as the first science.

The Platonic project, as it is expressed in the *Republic*, aspires to a severe definition of the vertical path that should allow the philosopher to reach the good and truth. It is the definition of how the philosopher should abandon her terrestrial roots in order to reach what lies above. It is above all an ethical project, which is nonetheless not devoid of serious cognitive and epistemological implications. As Martha Nussbaum puts it (Nussbaum 1986), Plato's proposal involves a radical transformation of the common way of perceiving things, that is, a radical proposal for the transformation of our lives.

Through the idea of the good Plato aims at expressing a standard against which other values can be measured, a standard that would guarantee a fixed measurement by which all other values can be compared. And by doing so, it would be possible to establish a means of defining human conduct in abstract, that is, without referring to experience or to acquired values transmitted by tradition. But, according to Nussbaum, the commensurability of values, the radical proposal is not intuitive in its acceptability: "From our ordinary viewpoint things do look plural and incommensurable. But this viewpoint is sick. We want, and know we need, the viewpoint of science," which obviously is a 'radical proposal' if compared to our ordinary, commonsensical viewpoint. "The science that eliminated the possibility of contingent conflict and removed *akrasia* did so by eliminating or denying just that special separateness and qualitative uniqueness that is also a major source of each single's attachment's exposure to fortune" (Nussbaum 1986: 117).

Contingent conflict and plurality are the main features of both our being human and our being inserted in a human world of actions and contingencies, the world of *akrasia*. Nussbaum insists on the ethical aspect of Platonic philosophy, stating that "the *Republic* is [...] a book about education, about the strategies for 'turning the soul around' from its natural human way of seeing to the correct way" (157). It is a very powerful strategy that enables whoever practices it to control his/her passions and appetites, abstracting from the individual and unique person she is in order to achieve a purified soul, a soul which contemplates ideas and aspires to an eternal duration. It is clear that the aspiring immortality of the philosopher, as it is expressed in Plato, is quite different from that of the Greek hero. For the Greeks, as we have seen, immortality had to do with one's ability to leave some trace behind his individual life, some imperishable trace that would be remembered. Great actions, such as those of the fighting heroes of Homer's poems, as well as great deeds and

great words, well carried out or pronounced, deserved immortality, that is, immortal fame after death. These great actions, deeds and words were intended to remain among men after the death of the individual.

According to Hannah Arendt, immortality – as opposed to eternity – relies on the ability of mortals<sup>13</sup> “to produce things – works and deeds and words – which would deserve to be and, at least to a degree, are at home in everlastingness, so that through them mortals could find their place in a cosmos where everything is immortal except themselves” (HC: 19). It is this concern with leaving some trace after death that occupied the Greek mentality of ‘fame’ – *Kleos* – to leave a solid and memorable sign of an otherwise perishable identity. The fact that immortality is dependent upon mortality, the distinctive characteristic of humans, becomes decisive in the distinction between philosophy and politics. Immortality, since it is concerned with the defeat of the fragility linked to existence, which is temporally limited and subdued to change and transformation, has to do with the *vita activa*, namely life which takes place within the realm of human affairs. For Arendt the *vita activa* is the realm of practical activities – work, labor and action – as opposed to that of philosophy, the *vita contemplativa*. If we attempt to define the *vita activa* in relation to the *vita contemplativa* in terms of the opposition between immortality and eternity, we see that while the *vita activa* is concerned with leaving some trace behind the individual life, with producing something that can escape time, that can survive after generations, the *vita contemplativa* aspires to eternity, that is, something that, in Arendt’s words “can occur only outside the realm of human affairs and outside the plurality of men, as we know from the Cave parable in Plato’s *Republic*” (20).

While immortality is bound to the fact of mortality, a constantly occurring event, eternity has to do with the elimination of such mortality, as if it wouldn’t affect the contemplative dimension, which is solely concerned with the extra-terrestrial dimension of abstract truth. “The philosopher’s experience of the eternal, which to Plato was *arrethon* (unspeakable), and to Aristotle *aneu logou* (without word), and which later was conceptualized in the paradoxical *nunc stans* (the standing now) [...] has no correspondence with and cannot be transformed into any activity whatsoever, since even the activity of thought, which goes on in one’s self by means of words is not only inadequate to render it [the eternal] but would interrupt and ruin the experience itself” (20).

The unspeakable nature of contemplation, its ineffability as an “experience of the eternal,” releases itself from the bonds that could remind the contemplating mind that it belongs to a human being and is therefore bound to mortality. Contemplation ejects the mind toward the above, giving the illusion of the attainment of eternity and pure truth.

Eternity, as opposed to immortality, tells us a lot about the vertical nature of philosophical metaphors. Not only do we regard metaphors as a rhetorical device by which thinking finds a possible way of producing meaning, but metaphors are the only way through which thinking can convey a meaning, in the sense that the ineffable nature of contemplation, its being without words, requires images that somehow substitute words. What is important to note here as regards the opposition between immortality and eternity is that the former is concerned with a shared dimension within the world of human affairs, since it is concerned with transforming the world for the sake of leaving a trace by which to be remembered, while the latter is primarily concerned with the denial of such a world. Eternity projects itself outside the world, a world way too chaotic and plural to satisfy the philosopher's quest for order and linearity. The *escamotage* by which philosophy calls itself out of the realm of human affairs while it evokes the superior aspiration to eternal truth, shrewdly eliminates all possible and different truths which occur within the world of human affairs by *inventing* the one that is as ineffable and invisible as Plato's good. Its 'superior value' is not necessarily a qualitative characteristic but simply a spatial dimension that cannot easily be reached, and, as such, in terms of its normative value, it also cannot be easily contested. The verticality of contemplation, the eternity of metaphysical experience, defines itself as normative and superior, as the supreme truth and godlike good, the arbitrariness of which we aim to contest in this work.

The traditional feature of metaphysics as an escape from the world of appearances that enables the comprehension of a true and perfect world, can be read as a vertical spatial metaphor, which, by virtue of its verticality is above, way up, difficult to reach and therefore unspeakable in its distance, remote. This spatial metaphor allows metaphysics to constitute itself along this vertical axis, which configures itself as the one and only path through which truth can be achieved. Philosophy, therefore, is the endless attempt to delineate the vertical path, and since Plato this attempt has gone hand in hand with the ethical ideal of *askesis*, of liberating the mind from the heaviness and materiality of the body.

The philosopher, as the definition is shaped in the figure of Socrates, is a self-sufficient individual who never gives in to appetites and passions. Socrates is the beautiful soul who anxiously awaits his death with the knowledge that he will finally be able to abandon the body and all its impure needs.<sup>14</sup> As the philosopher frees himself from contingent needs and passions he is able to shape for himself a character that will always act and judge according to his ascetic conduct, that avoids taking into account human passions and feelings: "...the philosopher's ability to judge correctly seems to have less to do with mere quantity of experience than with the fact that experience has taken him



to a certain place: a place where reason, free of pain and limitation, can stand alone, above the restrictions imposed upon thought by merely human life” (Nussbaum 1986: 147). The place where the philosopher’s experience has taken him is that of the “nowhere of thought”, the land of contemplation which cannot be expressed in human words. “[T]rue insight [...] is attained by making the intellect purely active, impervious to influence from outside; forms of passivity or receptivity, like the feelings of pleasure and pain” (205).

The eternal can be achieved only through the long-term practice of self-sufficiency and autonomy, independence from outer influences. The dream of philosophy is above all that of purity, of not compromising with the outside world, of denying experience. The metaphysical pattern since Plato has always been that of denying experience and projecting a vertical dimension that would easily be sufficient to itself without reverting back to the terrestrial. Such a pattern, inevitably deals with the extra-terrestrial, but in such a way that experience and change are determined in advance, a priori, by the mere exploration of the mind. To determine experience by denying its cognitive value, its practical form of understanding – which springs only from experience as unprecedented – by establishing cognitive values independently from experience, is the metaphysical game that is played and re-played endlessly.

The common feature of all metaphysical attempts since Plato has been that of denying the world, and in doing so projecting it outside and above. I argue that verticality of thought is not only arbitrary in that it ejects the plural nature of truth and experience to the above, transforming it in one absolute and unspeakable truth, but that by virtue of such verticality the horizontal dimension of human affairs, of different and possible paths, has been eliminated from philosophical discourse. The only possible path is the one that leads above, and it is difficult yet cogent in the sense that its vertical-linear direction leads only to the ‘nowhere’ of contemplation, unnamable and invisible but nevertheless preferable as true freedom. In the epistemological-ethical project of the Western philosophical tradition true freedom equates with the avoidance of chance and contingency – in other words, avoidance of the world.

## ***2.2 The Nowhere of Thought***

According to Hannah Arendt, thinking is an activity that is strictly linked to our human condition, to the vitality of our being human. This activity is nevertheless simultaneously characterized by a withdrawal from the shared world of human affairs and the constitutive extraneousness of such activity to the world. The activity of thinking easily suspends attention toward the material world in order to ‘make space’ for the immaterial flux of thoughts that unfolds

in the extraneous dimension to which the daily life of appearances remains irrelevant. This ability to suspend is powerful in its *de-sensing* character: “Every mental act rests on the mind’s faculty of having present to itself what is absent from the senses” (LOM: I, 76–77).

It is the capability of denying the immediacy of the senses that characterizes thinking and mainly it is the capability of denying our ‘sense of reality’ that is peculiar to thinking. The “life of the mind” is characterized by the withdrawal from the shared, common sense reality, by a ‘spectator’s attitude’ from which we can observe things and judge them or reflect on them. Such withdrawal provides not only a suspension of the activity of the senses, but also a suspension of the temporal flux: thinking not only denies the perception of a material environment, but it also alters the normal perception of temporal sequences.

Thinking is nowhere, both in the temporal and the spatial sense. This is, according to Arendt, the unavoidable characteristic of thinking inasmuch as it is a human activity that is strictly connected to our need for reflection, our quest for meaning.

The extraneousness of thinking to the world of appearances takes place within the world in which we live, and thinking is strictly interwoven into the lives and experiences of all of us. The problematic aspect of thinking is not its natural tendency toward ‘suspension’ or ‘de-realization,’ but the fact that philosophy has accentuated such aspects without recognizing their extraordinariness in relation to the daily human experience. Philosophy, in other words, has transformed the natural attitude toward withdrawal into a normative, prescriptive aspect of philosophy. Arendt affirms that even if mental activities tend to carry us outside, in the nowhere of thought, “we are of the world and not merely in it...and while we come from a nowhere, we arrive well equipped to deal with whatever appears to us and to take part to the play of the world. These properties do not vanish when we happen to be engaged in mental activities and close the eyes of our body, to use the Platonic metaphor, in order to be able to open the eyes of the mind” (I, 22).

Arendt poses the problematic relationship between the world and mental activities as if it should be read from a different perspective than that of philosophy. She aims at investigating the extent to which philosophy as metaphysics has departed from the natural experience of thinking, as well as the extent to which metaphysics must be criticized for having denied spontaneity, uniqueness and contingency.

In other words, her last work on the topic of mental activities connects to the former works on the *vita activa* and the concept of politics inasmuch as it tries to investigate the public/political nature of thought, its concreteness, its belonging to a world of appearances, its withdrawal notwithstanding. Through an analysis of the so-called “metaphysical fallacies” of the history of philosophy,

Arendt aims at investigating the reality of thought as a human experience. By following Arendt's critical reading of the philosophical tradition – I individuate some interesting 'fallacies' in the vertical yet arbitrary ( or un-problematized) spatial dimensions of truth.

### ***2.3 Descartes and the Immaterial Reality of Doubt***

Descartes bases his process of de-realization, which was inaugurated by Plato, on doubt. It is acknowledged the extent to which Cartesian doubt paradoxically feeds an entire system of thought based exclusively on the certainty and evidence of reasoning. The paradox of this system is that this thought process cannot be certain of anything but the process itself (the *cogito*). All physical perceptions and the knowledge derived from the senses are banished, physical and material impressions are suspicious because they do not bear the intellectual evidence of thinking. All real objects, that is, objects the existence of which does not depend on the intellectual activity of the mind (the only one I am sure of beyond doubt), must – in order to prove their 'existence' as truly objective – undergo the sharp action of doubt. Nothing of what I see, hear, smell or touch, nothing of what I physically perceive, can be said to enjoy the immediate right to existence, because the perception my senses give me can always be fallacious. My senses can deceive me, as in dreams. My own body, as such, is something to be doubted, since I can perceive myself as awake, my body moving, while I am only dreaming of it.

Nothing is exempted from the decisive activity of doubt, nothing except doubting as such. The fact that I doubt even my own existence proves that at least the activity of doubting is real, otherwise I would not doubt. Thinking – as a pure activity of the mind and a reflective process that leads to doubt – is the only activity the existence of which is certain, and indeed thought guarantees existence as such. Having eliminated all possible sensorial argumentations, Descartes' philosophy lays the foundation of reality upon the activity of thinking. I cannot be a body, because body, as such, is deceitful and its guarantees of reality are weak. I can conceive of myself only as a thinking process, as a mind in activity, a *res cogitans*, an immaterial existence whose only guarantee of reality is the thinking process, incessantly moving back and forth from doubt to evidence .

As such, the *res cogitans* 'is alive' only in the vertical and unknown dimension of thought, because it is only in the ceaseless activity of doubting, which ascends and abstracts from the *res extensa* (the material, bodily object), that it acquires plausibility. Introspection and inner processes of consciousness become certain because they are controlled by the thinking subject. Descartes' doubt restrains only when faced with the thinking subject, which produces its own reality by

thinking; reality *is* insofar as it is thought. This subject can only be sure of the train of thought, simply because it belongs to that interior process of which he is always conscious. The process of consciousness is always present to itself and to the thinking subject. Reality can be grasped only insofar as it is produced by the subject.

We should ask ourselves here what this thinking process actually consists of, since its only reality is a ceaseless movement along the directions of consciousness, hoping to find a satisfying stop that will provide some kind of truth.

Descartes, in his *Discours de la Méthode*, enumerates the four fundamental rules that should occur within the cognitive process in its abstraction from the concreteness of the senses to the clear and distinct intuition of the mind.

The first rule relates to the legitimacy of thinking objects: only those objects the certainty of which is definite deserve to enter the thought process. The certainty of a thought object means that it must be impermeable to doubt. Each object gains its legitimacy as an object – and not as a shadowy illusion of it – only if it overcomes the proof of doubt, that is, only if its certainty is measured against cognitive – and not experiential – correctness.

Since the only feature thought displays is that of being ‘stronger than doubt,’ more doubtful than doubt, reality qualifies as that which escapes doubt by doubting. Reality is only that of the inner process of thought. Cartesian reality is a thought reality, an activity that protects itself from the *dieu trompeur* by producing its own reality. Only by doing so can the modern Cartesian subject be convinced that reality is not a dream. The presence of consciousness to itself becomes the only founding principle of reality, since consciousness produces its objects only within its thought processes, never outside them. Reality does not have a spatial dimension, it is a thinking immaterial process which constantly doubts of itself and by doing so legitimizes itself as ‘clear and distinct’.

The second rule relates to the analytical procedure to be followed in the solution of a problem. Any issue that needs to be solved through the incontrovertible rules of evidence must be split up into smaller parts so that the solution of the cognitive problem will be more precise. The allusion to the mathematical model of thought is very clear: the thought process only trusts the procedure that provides access to truth. What is most striking is that truth is believed to reside only in the adequate procedure, which, according to Descartes, must be ‘discovered’ within our minds and is valid for all rational beings in the same way.

Access to reality is gained only through the vertical course traced by the rules of thought. Such a vertical path constitutes itself – in Descartes – as the radical questioning of reality as merely given. Not only is the immediate reality

of the senses doubtful, but also reality as it is reflected upon by ‘common sense’. Reality as the given and accepted everyday perspective on objects and activities is now discarded as deceitful, and the only representation of reality that is accepted is that of the net of mathematical relations produced by the mind.

The third rule is related to the modality through which though processes must be carried out. This is the most important rule connected to what we have referred to as the cogent verticality of metaphysical contemplation. Moreover, since Cartesian thought is primarily a process, the direction of the process is of fundamental importance. The direction is vertical, it develops on the vertical axis that from the concrete space on the earth aims at the unknown dimension of the sky.

“La troisième, de conduire par ordre mes penseés, en commençant par les objets les plus simples et les plus aisés à connaître, pour monter peu à peu comme par degrés jusques à la connaissance des plus composés: et supposant même de l’ordre entre ceux qui ne se précèdent point naturellement les uns les autres” (Descartes 1995: 33).

There is something quite interesting in the apparently innocuous description of the method followed by Descartes in his directions regarding the thought process. He says that the obvious way of proceeding is from the simplest objects to the most complicated, and the direction in which these are positioned is vertical. Simple objects are below the more complex objects, and one gradually reaches the upper dimension. Descartes uses the word ‘monter,’ to mount, as in the idea of climbing or ascending. What strikes the reader in this metaphor of verticality is the fact that to go from a simple element to a complex one, to go from below to above, from the earth to the sky, seems to be the most natural of processes. As a matter of fact, what we are attempting to do here is to demonstrate the arbitrariness of this dimension and deconstruct its ‘naturalness’.

Descartes, however, subsequently states that this process of ascension is not only found naturally in the ‘order of things,’ but it must also be presupposed in those cases in which simple objects do not necessarily precede the more complex ones. Verticality is therefore imposed upon thinking. In other words, the metaphor of verticality, of constant ascending and descending, is here interiorized as the true path that thinking must follow. Not only is thinking the only criterion by which we can judge truth and conceive of reality, but thinking must follow the vertical rules of inductive reasoning, it must proceed according to the true path, the one that ascends – no matter where it leads it undoubtedly detaches itself from earth.

Descartes considers his method the solution of many of the philosophical problems of his time; it is therefore interesting to note that his introduction to the *Discours* aims at explaining the existence of differences in opinions. They

do not originate from differences in ‘intelligence’ or rationality, but simply from differences in paths: “ et ainsi que la diversité de nos opinions ne vient pas de ce que les uns sont plus raisonnable que les autres, mais seulement de ce que nous conduisons nos pensées par diverses voies, et ne considérons pas les memes choses”(15). Paths which take their bearings from the senses, or from common opinions and shared values, are to be considered false, since their provenance is not to be found in the process of correct reasoning, which of course derives its authority from the inner process of thinking, the legitimacy of which lies in the fact that the *cogito* is free of doubt.

Many things have been said about and much criticism has been directed at Descartes and his foundation of modern thought. The valuable philosophical response to the development of science in the modern age has been that of delegitimization of all traditional authorities by founding truth on the procedure of logical thought. Thinking, as such, has gained the precious position of the only authority; the supremacy of logical thought and the laws of logical reasoning expand to such an extent that – as Grotius expressed it – “even God cannot cause two times two not to make four” (LOM: I, 15). The importance of such a revolution within the philosophical tradition lies in the fact that modernity as it has been inaugurated by Descartes, in spite of its refusal of authority and its apparent connection to productivity, carelessly repeats the vertical abstraction of the Greek tradition. This verticality reveals the cogent aspect of truth as it is conceived of by modernity. Truth lies in the ‘correct path’ to follow, the “*même voie*” and the “*même choses*” of which Descartes speaks. And according to him the only thing that men have in common is their minds, and the attainment of a homogeneity of opinions is a matter of directing these same minds toward the same path and objects of thought.

Interestingly enough the only burden that seems to disturb philosophers is that of the difference in opinions, the multiplicity of thoughts. Both Plato and Descartes are constantly concerned about the multiple and imprecise opinions that poetry (Homer’s poetry, in Plato’s case) causes amongst people. The real philosopher must free himself from this multiplicity and achieve the true dimension of thought, in which there is only one possible choice, that of contemplating the truth as such. This multiplicity can also be defined as the dimension of plurality. The common target of philosophy has always been that of eliminating plurality. Truth cannot have multiple versions, its path must be the one and only, leading inevitably to the outside, to the upper dimension which can be reached only through following the vertical path. We can summarize our analysis so far in the following points:

1. Truth, according to philosophy, always lies somewhere else, it does not belong to the earthly dimension, it is metaphysical, beyond the earth. The importance of this metaphysical dimension lies in the fact that it has very often

been metaphorized as vertical, as starting from the earth but aiming at the unknown dimension of the sky, the above.

2. Truth is one, and the path which leads to it is one as well. Philosophical reasoning and contemplation lead to it. Philosophy is the *askesis* by which one can achieve the upper dimension of truth. The vertical metaphor thoroughly fulfils the philosophical desire for homogeneity.

3. The vertical dimension finds itself as detached from earth, as completely alienated from it. Earth as a synonym of multiplicity, of chaos and plurality, cannot be accounted for within the realm of philosophy.

4. Following from the above is the characterizing aspect of philosophy as being totalizing (and totalitarian?) both in its procedure and content. This is so primarily because it conceives of truth as one, secondly, because it posits it outside the world, thirdly, because there is only one possible way of achieving it, that is, the way of abstraction. Its totalizing aspect lies also in the very pervasiveness of the notion of truth, insofar as its cogent character qualifies it as an omnipotent yet unreachable entity. Immense, ever-present yet unspeakable, surrounding us and determining our actions, the truth of philosophers resembles a disquieting eye of God, or worse, a panoptical device. The *possible* equation (considered in a problematic sense) between totalizing and totalitarian features will become clearer in the following chapters when we turn our attention to the specific notion of history as the realm in which this equation becomes more palpable.<sup>15</sup>

Verticality can be defined as the figure that can represent with efficacy the one-dimensional and coercive intention of philosophy. Verticality engenders, quite appropriately, the aspect of 'worldlessness,' which qualifies metaphysics, a characteristic which is the accentuation of the quality of thinking as being 'out of the world'.

It is not because I expect to counter this definition of truth that I am analyzing the vertical metaphors of the tradition, nor do I aim at exposing a better and less controversial notion of truth. The aim of this research is to point out the arbitrary character of the vertical notion, also attempting to detect the extent to which the presupposed purity of such a notion of truth contains a violent element, which is to be found in the abstracting character of philosophical thinking. Such violence is primarily to be found in the coercive nature of truth as one and absolute, meaning that the aim of philosophy is to detach itself completely from the worldly dimension from which it truly stems.

The term 'absolute' derives from the expression *ab legibus solutus*, free from all laws, arbitrary, such as the power of the king in the *ancien régime*. 'Abstract' derives from the Latin *abstrahere* and it means 'pulled up,' 'wrenched,' somehow violently drawn off, removed from a pre-existing context. Therefore the abstract and absolute connotations of philosophy derive from a violent gesture the

arbitrariness of which can be detected and as such de-legitimized. One might claim that arbitrariness would be easy to de-legitimize. The problem with the arbitrariness of the thought products, however, of their construction, cannot be put aside with an equally violent, equally abstract or equally absolute move. The problem is to locate alternative paths of thinking with the potential to, while delegitimizing abstract thinking as such, explore new possible modes of understanding and accounting for the world in a way which would respect plurality and multiplicity.

The problem of the representation of reality is what directs this research – not simply a cognitive problem of representation, or a linguistic problem of the legitimacy of different languages. Above all, it is a political problem concerning the representation of plurality as such, as the ‘law of the earth’ but also as the irreducible factor which characterizes our ‘being in the world’.

## ***2.4 Kant and the Verticality of Concepts***

Hannah Arendt, in her account of thinking as a human faculty, uses the Kantian distinction between reason and intellect – *Vernunft* and *Verstand* – as the guiding opposition that engenders the difference between thinking and knowing – that is to say the difference between meaning and truth. Philosophy as a specialized discipline has always treated the natural human faculty of thinking as a matter of knowledge, and as such it consequently considered the quest for meaning as a problem of truth. The point Arendt makes is that thinking as an innate quality of our being human is connected to the attribution of meaning to what happens to us and around us, while knowing and knowledge – the matters regarding the Kantian *Verstand* – have much more to do with a professional activity which only involves an intellectual elite and has established its laws and its conditions of possibility, defining itself as metaphysics.

The Kantian insight, as it is expressed in the *Kritik der Reinen Vernunft*, deals with the limits and possibilities of knowledge as such by investigating the modes by which the intellect – *Verstand* – proceeds. His critique is intended to provide the elements of a pure knowledge, which should also allow the provision of concepts that are able to ‘judge’ objects of experience. Kant is primarily interested in developing a science that would act as a guide in the definition of what mathematics and physics can achieve, what it is possible to know as a priori – that is, without the empirical verification of it – according to the possibilities and limits of the intellect. The detailed analysis of how the intellect proceeds in the composition of concepts and how it operates through them in judgments, starting from the intuitive and a priori representations of space and time, provides a full genealogical account of the human mind.



What distinguishes intellect from reason is the need of the latter to go beyond its possibilities, to have no 'sense of measure,' to ask itself questions it cannot answer according to its cognitive means. "Kant drew this distinction [...] after he had discovered the 'scandal of reason', that is, the fact that our mind is not capable of certain and verifiable knowledge regarding matters and questions that it nevertheless cannot help thinking about, and for him such matters, that is, those with which mere thought is concerned, were restricted to what we now often call the 'ultimate questions' of God, freedom and immortality"(LOM: I, 14).

Following Arendt in her interesting introduction to *The Life of the Mind*, we acknowledge that the problem of professional philosophers – *Denker von Gewerbe* – as she calls them paraphrasing Kant, has always been their lack of attention to thinking as an activity of every human being, or less as a human faculty striving for meaning, and more as "demanding the kind of results and applying the kind of criteria for certainty that are the results and the criteria of cognition"(LOM: I, 14). Kant's account of the limits of cognition seems to be harmless to the extent of its supposed target, that is, the question of how metaphysics is possible as a rigorous science, or, better said, as Kant puts it: "[Eine Kritik] die des Vernunftsvermögens überhaupt, in Ansehung aller Erkenntnisse, zu denen sie, *unabhängig von aller Erfahrung*, streben mag, mithin die Entscheidung der Möglichkeit oder Unmöglichkeit einer Metaphysik überhaupt und die Bestimmung so wohl der Quellen, als des Umfanges und der Grenzen derselben, alles aber aus Prinzipien" (Kant 1956: A XI, XII).

The *Kritik der Reinen Vernunft* aims at the definition of the pure science of principles, the science of thoughts. It goes without saying that the rigorous system constructed by Kant is the greatest systematization of 'vertical' thinking in existence. His deep conviction that the possibilities of the intellect are one and the same in all human beings leads him to posit the intellect as the supreme instrument through which truth can be achieved. Kantian gnoseology is the ultimate recognition of the power of abstract thinking, the instruments of which are concepts.

Concepts are defined as the unity under which different representations can be contained, and knowledge develops, or unfolds, only by following the process of such a unification – that is, of different representations, different images that the pure forms of space and time present to the intellect. Concepts are also defined as a "höhere Einheit", a unity higher than simple representations, that is, a more comprehensive instrument of knowledge, which is, according to Kant, already contained in the intellect. "Denken ist das Erkenntnis durch Begriffe" (B 94/A69), to think means to know through concepts and the modality of such a knowledge is defined only – this is the purpose of Kant's first critique – in terms of the rigorous and subsuming procedure by which concepts represent experience a priori.

Abstract and pure science can be achieved only through the illuminating power of the intellect, which acquires the knowledge of its objects through the knowledge of its possibilities. Philosophy, or the science of pure principles, is, therefore, the means by which the intellect knows itself through the way it proceeds in the production of its objects. None of its elements are to be deduced from experience. Its knowledge is transcendental, it derives from the inner consciousness the possibility of every reality. The analysis of the intellect is transcendental in the sense that it is a reflection of the intellect onto itself, an exploration of its possibilities, that is, the possibilities of a knowledge the source of which lies in its structure.

The important Kantian distinction between **phenomenon** and **noumenon** reveals how much of the “certainty of cognition” of which Arendt speaks is contained in Kant’s intentions. The fact that “das Ding an sich” remains unknown, a dimension which we can never achieve in the sense that it is out of our reach, reveals the revolutionary intention of his Critique. It is a Copernican revolution, as Kant defines it, mainly because the issue of knowledge is moved from an objective, cosmological perspective to a transcendental perspective. In its objectivity, the object as such can only be transcendental, the product of the unifying processes of our intellect. The object is exclusively a product of the mind’s faculties and modes of cognition.

The object is the *Gegenstand*, namely ‘what stands against’, what we encounter or face. The object, therefore, is defined only in relation to our mode of apprehending it, that is, our intellect. But since pure science does not deal with empirical objects, but with concepts, which are objects of our minds, the process of knowledge is totally interiorized and transformed into a gnoseological analysis of the procedure of the mind. The problem with Kantian gnoseology is not that of the limiting and defining action of the *Kritik*, but the schematizing action that becomes permanently imposed on the realm of thinking, which, on the contrary, following Arendt’s definition, has more to do with meaning than with truth. The detection of an objective path of thought, which according to Kant is defined through transcendental schematism, places the act of thinking in the realm of cognition; it displaces, so to say, the original quest for meaning that qualifies thinking as a living activity and substitutes it with the criteria of certainty, adequacy and validity that are typical of scientific cognitive standards.

The development of modern philosophy, which follows the path of science and mainly the Newtonian model, radicalizes the vertical direction of philosophy, and by vertical I am referring to the cognitive path that Arendt defines the major “metaphysical fallacy”<sup>16</sup>. Verticality in Kant is represented by the numerous metaphors which define concepts as “höhere Einheit” (higher unity) or simple representations that are subsumed under more general representations.

The first *Kritik* is amazingly full of such images, the adequacy of which, in relation to thinking, seems to be perfect. Who would deny that concepts are above, that the unity of our apperception, the unity of consciousness which is the possibility of all experiences – the transcendental –, inhabits a higher position than that of simple sensations ?

Verticality as a metaphor serves in this context to question the abstracting procedure, the unification of a multiplicity in a synthesis. The entire Kantian gnoseological effort is intended to provide a valid demonstration of the possibility of an a priori synthesis, that is, the possibility to make a priori synthetic judgments. In other words, Kant explores the possibilities of a science of pure intellectual objects, the legitimacy of which must initially be found, interestingly enough, in the senses. Reality presents itself to us primarily in the sensorial form: the senses provide us with a first access to the world. Yet, reality is not to be found in the senses but in the unity under which the sensorial realm is apperceived, in the moment we represent it to ourselves. A priori science means that I can infer knowledge from the intellect as a pure and non-empirical entity. Synthetic means that such knowledge it is not contained *per definitionem* in the intellect, that is, I cannot infer from it analytically, but it must be connected to experience.

The apparent paradoxical nature of Kantian metaphysics can be better understood when compared to what has been defined by Kant himself as the arbitrariness of metaphysics. As Ernst Cassirer puts it, the Newtonian perspective played an important role in delegitimizing the rationalistic mode of thinking by presenting evidence of experiences that put into question the deductive model of rationalism. In the logical model of rationalism, what Cassirer refers to as the “conceptual realism” of Descartes played a major role in determining the character of truth. The logical mode of thinking, with its principle of non-contradiction, was often believed to be found also in nature, and, as such, “a purely logical opposition becomes almost imperceptibly a real one: the antithesis of concepts is immediately posited as action of forces taking place in objects” (Cassirer 1971: II, 17, my trans.).

As opposed to 17th century rationalists, Kant looks for a definition of the way in which the intellect proceeds in order to be able to discard all other definitions and practices of thinking that do not follow the supposed path. In other words, the Kantian critique aims at delegitimizing the naïveté of previous metaphysics, which, as opposed to the new science, was becoming “arbitrary”. Thought itself, states Kant, has no boundaries and is fascinated by its own possibilities to such an extent that reality is believed – as we have seen in Descartes – to correspond precisely to its logical-deductive representation. “If I think of the *mundus sensibilis* according to the concepts of the *mundus intelligibilis*, then it is a *mundus mysticus*.”<sup>17</sup>

Reality – here Kant is referring to the empirical reality that science observes – has its own mathematical laws, the legitimacy of which can no longer be thought to be found in the logical consistency of our mind. The problem lies in the task of conciliating the way our mind proceeds with the mathematical principles inherent to nature. From this derives the apparently paradoxical nature of an a priori synthetic science. What is not paradoxical is the fact that mathematics exists as an incontrovertible truth and it regulates the laws of physics. Kant infers that there must be a means of conciliating the way mathematics (a priori) ‘affects’ physics (synthetic) with the project of a pure metaphysics. A rigorous metaphysics must proceed from the intellect toward experience keeping an eye on both. In other words, we can infer knowledge from the pure intellect because it is ‘suited’ to the understanding of experience. By investigating the unifying modes of the *Verstand* we can somehow infer experience. Experience can be acknowledged a priori, because, as a mathematical law, it always proceeds in the same way. The fact that a science of experience, a science of the laws of experience, does not need to refer to experience remains utterly paradoxical.

We must keep in mind, however, the fact that Kantian knowledge is always transcendental: its ‘objectivity’ refers solely to the acknowledgement of the noumenon, that is, our own unified and re-presented reality. Phenomenon, the ‘Ding an sich’ remains out of the reach of metaphysics.

The Kantian redefinition of metaphysics makes room for a renewed and fortified science of ‘ideality,’ that is, a science which cannot and does not want to take reality into account, and which asserts the whole realm of experience as an intellectual issue. The project of such a science, the power of which can nevertheless be detected in the future development of Hegelian metaphysics, which asserts that reality – or the unknown Kantian ‘phenomenon’ – corresponds exactly to the structure of reason, *also* remains paradoxical. In Hegel’s work, gnoseology, described as the science of the limitations of reason in Kantian terms, becomes the objective reality of the human world, and encounters its matching reality in history.

If the problem of the former metaphysics was arbitrariness, as Kant himself said, an overdeveloped ‘logical imagination’ that expected reality to correspond to its thinking processes, Kant’s project aims at eliminating such arbitrariness by invoking scientific rigor. If, on the one hand, this project wishes to purify metaphysics, on the other hand it postulates its transcendental schematism as universal, opening up a much wider space for the influence of metaphysical, ideal thinking on Western culture. By stating that knowledge of pure principles can and must be possible a priori, Kant definitely localizes metaphysics into a pure ideal realm, the overwhelming force of which becomes effective in the later development of German idealism. What Kant called the arbitrariness of

metaphysics is the ease by which thinking finds possible ways of expressing its essence by metaphorizing common ways of perceiving the world into concepts.

What Cassirer refers to as “conceptual realism” can be read in Descartes as an ultimate attempt by thinking not to succumb under the cogent prescriptions of science. Still, arbitrariness, in this case, could have been interpreted as the freedom of thinking, which, in its detachment from the world is somehow linked to images and metaphors that the world as observed with ‘logical’ – as opposed to scientific – eyes, suggests to the philosophical mind. As a matter of fact, images and analogies taken from some kind of commonsensical way of seeing the world are still present in Descartes’ philosophical argumentation. His new way of approaching the search for truth has inaugurated the modern age by basing the path of a such search on the process of consciousness itself. Still, this newly born modern thinking plainly reveals in Descartes its figural debt to metaphors, (which, of course, is always an important symptom of how thinking can never be as abstract as it wishes to be) especially in his treatise on the passions of the soul ( *Les passions de l’âme*).

If modern thought – inaugurated by Descartes – remains somehow linked to reality as is the case in its analogies with the senses, even in its attempt to deny that knowledge is derived from them, Kant suspiciously rejects such ‘imagination’ in favor of a much more abstract version, that of transcendental schematism. The rigor of which Kant speaks frees thinking from imaginative metaphors, openly distinguishes truth from its ‘analogies,’ and while attempting to recover a true dimension of reality, it detaches thinking from its terrestrial roots by attaining to the Newtonian definition of space and time as homogeneous and empty entities, and by defining experience as a scheme of the intellect. The universality of such a revolution obviously implies that the clearest and most distinct way of acquiring truth is through concepts, the formation of which is determined abstractly by transcendental schematism. Experience only falls under one of the different modalities expressed in the transcendental categories through which the intellect operates. Truth is a matter of cognition, but, moreover, its vertical path is now defined as undeniable since it is modulated on the objectivity of science – not that science should have more authority than other ways of thinking. The problem here lies in the fact that now reality is totally imprisoned within the schemes of experimental science. Its undeniableness depends on its capacity to subsume, through hypothesis that are verified by experiments, every single aspect of reality.

The enigma of nature – not only terrestrial but also universal – had already been solved by Galileo, who positively proved that Nature is a book written by God in mathematical characters. The Newtonian law of gravity added to this certainty the fact that it has been *observed* how God operates on the earth and in the sky: the laws are the same. Experience, factuality and concrete reality are

no longer excluded from the realm of pure principles, they are now the determining aspect of the new era, insofar as they confirm the principles. The ability and success of such a revolution depends strictly on the fact that it imprisons the world of appearances in the net of eternal laws, not as a mere accident but as the confirming aspect of their validity. The scientific swerve succeeds in presenting abstract explanations of the concrete, and by doing so definitely assigns reality and the miracle of its unpredictability to the predictable and verifiable laws of the universe.

The criteria of certainty, objectivity and measurability become the guiding standards of the activity of thinking, reduced to a mere cognitive process. The implications of this Copernican Revolution reveal their efficacy when introduced into the realm of history and human affairs.<sup>18</sup>

The totalizing ambitions of the thinking activity – which certainly gains a renewed self-confidence thanks to the Kantian enterprise – become professionally employed in the Idealistic project, and Hegel is able to turn the world upside down, displace the traditional verticality of truth and affirm that reason is the basis, the foundation upon which mankind projects its future. Interestingly enough, as I shall discuss in greater detail in the next chapter, the metaphor of verticality does not work for Hegel as it did for Plato, Descartes and Kant. Instead, the Hegelian enterprise is characterized by a circular spatialization. Only by analyzing his thought does this de-constructing process become worth following; the denial of temporality and the suppression of history as togetherness of human deeds and human stories finally becomes visible in Hegel's thought, not as a mere accidental aspect of his system, but as the definitive de-realization process that began with Plato. The decisive obsession becomes the taming of contingency and unpredictability, to get rid of the frustration deriving from the chaotic and aleatory dimension of our human condition. Philosophy as a system must expel the contingent, it must transform reality into rationality, history into inevitability, freedom into necessity.

The experiment of the displacement of the vertical metaphor has brought us to this point – now let us see where we can go from here. In order to re-think politics and history, to recover a means for their representation and understanding, it is necessary to displace the traditional allocation of truth, its philosophical iron-cage. It becomes clear with Hegel, though, that the *locus veritatis* is not as easily detectable as simply referring to it as the upper dimension, the vertical and linear path. As a totalizing project, Hegelian philosophy disrupts the traditional lines of thought and truth, displacing them as a circular net which encompasses reality in its totality. Do metaphors coincide?

My intention in this chapter has simply been to expose the arbitrariness of the vertical metaphor in various philosophical texts. This gesture of displacement does not presuppose the disclosure of a higher (or deeper) truth. I simply

found it interesting and curious that in almost any text of the tradition one can find a pattern of verticality and a correspondingly cogent notion of truth. The exploration of different, and less cogent, approaches to truth is what interests me in the following chapters.

## NOTES

- 1 One of the most interesting analyses of the original narrative matrix of Greek culture has been carried out by E. A. Havelock (Havelock 1963). Havelock attributes to Platonic philosophy a truly radical shift from oral to written culture, which also signified a shift from concrete to abstract knowledge. "In pre-Platonic usage [...] the words had never been used as subjects of the timeless is. They had symbolised the flight of an arrow or the corpse of a particular man as they had fitfully presented themselves in the narrative series, and now [with Plato] they are going to mean just 'any and every motion' and 'any and every corpse in the cosmos' without qualification" (260–261). As opposed to the narrativized experiences described in Homeric epic poems, nouns like for example 'justice,' 'good' and 'status' provide the "norms which persist through the situation and are obeyed in the course of the actions and events which constitute it" (265–266).
- 2 This is the aim of Nietzsche's wonderful essay "Über Wahrheit und Lüge im aussermoralischen Sinne", in which the displacement of a 'conceptual' origin of our civilization is told by using the classical tale *incipit* "Once upon a time". His irony seems to tell us that in order to convince ourselves that conceptual thinking has a contingent origin, we must put it in the form of a tale, since it can be so difficult to accept that we need an unusual means to 'unfreeze' *that* history (Nietzsche 1973: 369–370).
- 3 This is what Taminioux (Taminioux 1997) defines as the paradoxical situation of "a living being that, though itself part of the world of appearances, is in possession of a faculty, the ability to think, that permits the mind to withdraw from the world without ever being able to leave it or transcend it." The "paradox of belonging and withdrawal," which lies in the fact that the philosopher seeks the true world of thought in the world of appearances, or that the true world manifests itself in the form of appearance (127), is the constitutive situation of each human being: there can be no "withdrawal without belonging" (128–129). See also Arendt LOM, I: 48–49.
- 4 The oral poet's function, notes Havelock, "does not carry him vertically upward above the spirits of men but extends him horizontally outward to the confines of the society for which he sings" (Havelock 1963: 89).
- 5 Nietzsche, in the aforementioned essay, denounces the supposed 'rationality' of abstract thinking as opposed to an intuitive kind of 'understanding'. As a matter of fact, he says, this is what distinguishes man from animal, the ability to transform intuitive metaphors into schemes, to translate an image into a concept. What is at stake in this transformation, he writes, is the possibility of constructing a hierarchy, of creating a new world of laws, privileges, subdivisions, limitations, which can oppose the primordial or intuitive world insofar as the former presents itself as more solid, more general, more intelligible and therefore more



imperative: “Alles, was den Menschen gegen das Thier abhebt, hängt von dieser Fähigkeit ab, die anschaulichen Metaphern zu einem Schema zu verflüchtigen, also ein Bild in einen Begriff aufzulösen; im Bereich jener Schemata nämlich ist etwas möglich, was niemals unter den anschaulichen ersten Eindrücken gelingen möchte: ein pyramidale Ordnung nach Kasten und Graden aufzubauen, eine neue Welt von Gesetzen, Privilegien, Unterordnungen, Gränzbestimmungen zu schaffen, die nun der anderen anschaulichen Welt der ersten Eindrücke gegenübertritt, als das Festere, Allgemeinere, Bekanntere, Menschlichere und daher als das Regulierende und Imperativische”(Nietzsche 1983: 375–376).

- 6 See W.J.T. Mitchell (ed.) 1980.
- 7 Note that in this essay (“The Law of Genre”) Derrida plays with the French word for story or recount/account: *récit*. A story is a *récit* insofar as it is a recitation, namely a repetition, and therefore bound to remain within the regime of repetition, which is the ‘law’ of which he speaks, a law that guarantees the very possibility of the *récit* as such. (Derrida 1980: 54).
- 8 For a fascinating analysis of the female figure of Scheherazade in relation to a relational ethics of storytelling see Cavarero 2000: 119–127.
- 9 The recent tendency to re-write fairy tales or traditional stories in different ways (as, for example, the feminist re-writings of tales by Angela Carter) takes its bearing from a very common attitude among children, at least in my experience, of wanting to change the ending of tales one has memorized. Children generally want to hear the same story over and over, despite the fact that they already know how they will end, as if hoping that perhaps this time the ending will be different.
- 10 Belonging to a mother, to an original duality, is, according to Cavarero the primal feature of every new born. The mother is “the *ex-* of existent,” that is, the origin from which the child detaches her/himself while remaining, as existent, connected for life to that bodily origin (Cavarero 2000: 19). A politics of relation (“politica della relazione”) should take this inevitable aspect of being from birth in interdependence with others, instead of positing autonomous individuals. My analysis of storytelling as a temporal mimesis of life as unfolding and developing in time not as a self-sufficient recount but as a story told by someone else, is related to this perspective: the first spectator of each new-born is of course the mother.
- 11 Interestingly enough, Kari Palonen (Palonen 1993) develops a conceptual language for politics that privileges movement and openness (by following Koselleck’s idea of *Bewegungsbegriff*) and advocates for what he calls a “deparadigmatizing” and “demapping” reading of the political (14–15). Only insofar as the political is seen as the scene of politicking and politicization (namely of performative political action and interpretive political action) can we attempt new readings of “unconventional forms of the political,” that is, can we politicize that which traditional forms of politics (understood as polity and/or policy) have excluded or attempted to tame: “Polity and policy should not

be interpreted as paradigmatic forms of politics but as limit situations. Regimentation and regulation of contingency are surely legitimate responses to it, but if they are made paradigms, they tend to exclude even attempts to provide other kinds of responses, which politicization and politicking as horizons of action render possible” (14).

- 12 This specific aspect of politics is, according to Palonen, the ‘polity’ and ‘policy’ dimensions of the “art of dealing with contingency,” namely the “attempts to regimentate (polity) or to regulate (policy) the contingency characteristic of politics as action” (Palonen 1993: 13).
- 13 “This is mortality: to move along a rectilinear line in a universe where everything, if it moves at all, moves in a cyclical order” (HC: 19).
- 14 I would like to stress that Socrates, in the *Republic*, is a character having little to do with a possible historical and real Socrates. Plato’s *Republic* is a later dialogue which testifies to an autonomy of thought on Plato’s side: it is Plato ‘disguised’ as Socrates who is speaking. Arendt writes: “Plato used Socrates as the philosopher, not only in the early and clearly ‘Socratic’ dialogues but also later, when he often made him the spokesman for theories and doctrines that were entirely un-Socratic” (LOM: I, 168 ff.). Interestingly enough, Arendt, in LOM, uses the figure of Socrates as a philosophical counter-model to Plato, since *her* Socrates was not a “Denker von Gewerbe” but a man among men, a public figure who never left the *agora*. My intention in this chapter is not to provide an account of Arendt’s Socrates, but to displace some of the principal metaphors of our tradition from an Arendtian perspective.
- 15 I must admit that Arendt never fully accepted this equation, as, in fact, she does not blame philosophy directly for the advent of Totalitarian regimes (See AJ: 166, *Supra*, Chapter One). The possible involvement of philosophy – not as a specific philosophy, but in the Foucauldian sense of a global theory – in legitimizing a totalitarian attitude toward reality has in my opinion nevertheless been hinted at by Arendt’s entire work. This is not to say that she would have accepted as easy an equation as philosophy = totalitarianism – which, by the way, would have perfectly fitted a neutralizing and instrumental explanation of it, which Arendt always strenuously contested. I think, rather, that her critical attitude toward the philosophical tradition somehow aims at a radical questioning of its very basis not to simply contest the logically or epistemologically fallacious nature of that mode of thinking. The fallacies of which Arendt speaks are, in my opinion, political fallacies: what is at stake for her is the political disaster which took place. Philosophy is not immune. To recast the question of philosophical thinking means, for Arendt, to understand the political significance of that ‘partial involvement’.
- 16 I should like to emphasize that the vertical/horizontal spatializations I deploy throughout this work, and especially in this chapter, do not belong at all either to the Arendtian vocabulary or to her vast collection of metaphors. If the

argument is sometimes carried out without distinguishing clearly between my specific positions and what Arendt actually said, I apologize. Yet, I could defend my style by simply saying that a contamination between thoughts and styles, when explicitly acknowledged, and honestly used, is a precious source of intellectual production as well as a critical practice of dis-authorization.

- 17 Immanuel Kant, *Reflexiones*, n. 1152, quoted by Cassirer (Cassirer 1971:II,43).
- 18 If the Kantian “revolution” had remained a gnoseological matter, a question surrounding the foundations of both physics and mathematics, the problems of the denial of experience and conceptual mastership of the world of appearances would have arisen differently. Kant’s *Kritik der Urteilskraft* has been used by Arendt in order to formulate a different approach to thinking and to the issue of the abstract subject. In order to achieve this, she uses Kant’s aesthetic notions (his concept of ‘taste’) to develop a possible ‘political reason,’ namely a mode of reading, understanding and judging the political realm that refrains from producing general abstract rules and norms. The Kantian concept of *Einbildungskraft* (imagination) is used by Arendt in a political context as a means of ‘enlarging’ one’s own position in the world, and also as a means for “visiting” other – often rival – positions. Unfortunately this remained an unfinished project. See Arendt LOK and also Disch 1994: 141–171.

# CHAPTER THREE

## 1. The Politics of Historical Time

### *1.1 To Make a Long Story Short: Hegel and the Sacrifices of History*

There is another important metaphor, which, according to Derrida, is fundamental in the philosophical arsenal of the West, namely the circular metaphor. The most influential circular metaphor of our tradition is undoubtedly Hegel's. His entire system is based upon the circular movement of the Spirit, which progressively reaches a higher self-consciousness by subsuming and interiorizing contradictions, by returning to the point of departure with a richer and more aware knowledge. In this respect, what is interesting for our analysis are the historical implications of the philosophical metaphor of circular movement forged by Hegel. What is vital for Arendt in her Hegel critique – as partial and biased as it may be – is the historical turn which Hegel accomplishes in his mature systematization of Western philosophy.

Arendt perceives a truly revolutionary change in Hegel's theory, which conflates history and philosophy, time-bound happenings and time-less speculative activity, to a higher degree. Let us now follow Arendt in her interpretation of Hegel, not to repeat her words, but to prepare the terrain for our further insight into (his)story-telling and politics.<sup>1</sup>

Arendt refers to Hegel as one of the most ingenious system builders, and she carries out her critique by insisting on the systematic aspect of his thought, concentrating therefore on Hegel's last works. What is interesting for Arendt is the fact that Hegel recognizes the activity of thinking as such, namely the fact that it is primarily a human need that is linked to the vitality of life. "He knew that the intensity of the thinking ego's experience is due to their being sheer activity: the mind's 'very essence...is *action*. It makes itself what it essentially is; it is its own product, its own work.' [...] He even admitted the mind's tendency to destroy its results."

Hegel's novelty as a philosopher lies in the transformation of this vital activity into the normative and dogmatic aspect of his system: "But these insights of speculative reason into what it is actually doing when to all appearances it is doing nothing he transformed into pieces of dogmatic knowledge, treating them as results of cognition, so as to be able to fit them into an all comprehensive system where they would then have the same reality as the results of other sciences, results which, on the other hand, he denounced as essentially meaningless products of common sense reasoning, or as 'defective knowledge'" (LOM: I, 90).

The system, as Hegel develops it, has much to do with the process-like nature of thought. In other words, the terms according to which reality can be understood are those which correspond to the rules of logic. The developing, self-grounding nature of the modern individual and his world are legitimated and granted intelligibility only inasmuch as they can be traced back in the past as an evolution, as a process. According to Hegel, philosophy must become a science, a science of the self.

As Terry Pinkard (Pinkard 1996) points out, this philosophical science is not an objective knowledge of the self, but a self-reflection that conceives of agents as independent and rationally based. Most of all, however, it has to do with the process through which they have become aware of this independence and this rationality. The essence of the truth contained in such rationality is that it is the result of a historical dialectic of consciousness.

Modern rationality is real inasmuch as it can account for its process of development. The standards of reasons, set by man for himself, are able to account for the social, political and historical structure of the West. This is the peculiar *Grundlosigkeit* of modernity. The groundless nature of modernity acquires 'reality' inasmuch as it corresponds to the reflective process of thought on itself: the human subject is conceived as embodying a rational principle, as rationality individualized. This self-grounding subject is both a thinking and acting agent. The laws according to which he acts are internally grounded, according to rational, self-evident principles (Pinkard 1996: 90–92).

## ***1.2 Immaterial Reality***

What Arendt criticizes is the fact that the activity of the mind has been transformed into a device which is able to comprehend the totality of reality simply by transforming it into a thought process. Reality is understandable only inasmuch as it is rational, namely inasmuch as it can be interiorized by the mind and represented according to the logical criteria of the mind. If this self-reflection, which is also a self-grounding, provides acting individuals with

the rational necessary accounts of who “they had come to be” (Pinkard 1996: 193), it is clear that action is subordinated to thought. Action becomes rational only inasmuch as it can account for itself in terms of self-evident principles.

The nature of these principles is, of course, universal, but most of all it is “speculative”: action must reconcile itself with thought, it must ‘mirror’ it in its own concrete and historically realized nature. In Hegel, the old metaphysical dream of shaping reality according to the rules of thought takes on the sinister aspect of an intellectual *escamotage* which retrospectively dissolves reality, all that has happened, into a thinking process, the force of which is independent of single individualities and the development of which is guided by an irresistible force: the mysterious historical necessity.

The most dangerous aspect of Hegel’s thought, then, according to Arendt, is the fact that not only qualifies the activity of thinking as superior to all other activities, but that this thinking activity becomes the producer of reality.

Hegel, then, represents an absolute novelty within the landscape of the Western tradition of thought, a tradition that always denied value and dignity to the sphere of human affairs. Hegel, according to Arendt, is the first thinker to seriously consider the realm of human affairs: “Hegel’s truly revolutionary idea was that the old absolute of the philosophers revealed itself in the realm of human affairs, that is, in precisely the domain of human experiences which the philosophers unanimously had ruled out as the source or birthplace of absolute standards” (OR: 51–52).

The concrete realm of human happenings is now the fabric upon which rationality weaves its story. In fact, this realm of human affairs, in order to become reconciled with a higher and stronger reality, that of thought, must first of all be reduced to a harmless field. Arendt understands this as the most revolutionary aspect in Hegel’s thought: “No one has fought with more determination against the particular, the eternal stumbling block of thinking, the indisputable thereness of objects that no thought can reach or explain” (LOM: I, 91).

Hegel’s titanic enterprise is characterized by his philosophical attempt to include human affairs, the chaotic realm of *praxis*, into the realm of rationality. Philosophy is able to account for the contingent inasmuch as this realm also can become an object of science. “To think is to act”. With this statement Hegel performs a radical shift, inasmuch as he seeks to transform reality into a product of consciousness. In order for the de-sensing *escamotage* to be successful, that is, to win the battle against common sense, there must be some credibility to the idea that the world is a product of thought.

According to Arendt, Hegel carries out his battle against common sense by building a system. Philosophy deals with the particulars as parts of the whole, and the whole is the system, a product of speculative thought. The materiality

of objects, their cosality together with the contingency of human actions and historical events, acquire, within the system and its totalizing intent, the impalpable yet necessary nature of thought products. Thanks to the totality of the system the activity of thinking acquires a more solid reality.

The system, the dogmatic transformation of the mere, common-to-all activity of thinking into a structure, has the advantage of granting solidity to the frailty of an invisible process. Arendt ascribes to this transformation the status of a hypothesis: “This whole, scientifically speaking, can never be more than a plausible hypothesis, which by integrating every particular into an all-comprehensive thought transforms them all into thought things and thus eliminates their most scandalous property, their realness, together with their contingency” (LOM: I, 91).

How is a mobile and processual system to be conceived? If the realm of human affairs must gain philosophical dignity, then its transformation into a system must become universal. That is, it must involve the realm of human affairs universally, in one word, through history.<sup>2</sup> The system that Hegel invents in order to reconcile thought and reality is a combination of ideality and contingency, the modern invention of the philosophy of history.

Arendt, as should by this point be clear, opposes the transformation of the political into the historical (the historically inevitable). It is the typically modern notion of historical necessity or historical inevitability which she finds destructive to politics:

“Before the backward-directed glance of thought, everything that had been political – acts, and words, and events – became historical, with the result that the new world which was ushered by the eighteenth century revolutions did not receive, as Tocqueville still claimed, a ‘new science of politics,’ but a philosophy of history” (OR: 52).<sup>3</sup>

### ***1.3 Paradoxical Reason***

The metaphysical fallacy inherent in this view is typically modern and takes its bearings from the French Revolution, an event that to its contemporaries appeared as a necessary stream of happenings that could not be controlled by the individual actors participating in it. The vision of an awful force that unfolded itself in history became even more plausible to the observers of this spectacle. It was as if history revealed its own autonomous power, a force that “compelled men at will, and from which there was no release, neither rebellion nor escape” (OR: 51).

Hegel’s philosophy of history is, according to Arendt, “theoretically, the most far reaching consequence of the French Revolution,” not only because it locates

the 'absolute' of philosophers in the realm of human affairs, but also because it formulates "a philosophy which would correspond to and comprehend conceptually the newest and most real experiences of the time" (52).

The *theoretical* nature of this kind of comprehension, the fact that it consists of the contemplation of political events from a viewpoint external to them, and that it produces a corresponding theoretical comprehension of human deeds, is the reason why acting politically acquires the peculiar meaning of following historical *destiny*.

The lesson German idealism taught to the revolutionaries who followed in the footsteps of the French Revolution was that they had to see themselves "as agents of history and historical necessity, with the obvious and yet paradoxical result that instead of freedom necessity became the chief category of political and revolutionary thought" (53).

The paradoxical nature of modern thought was not new to Hegel, who was well aware of the Kantian 'scandal of reason'. In fact, Hegel's philosophy represents the attempt to overcome the famous antinomies of reason – the fact that reason cannot solve the problems that it itself has posed. What is even more scandalous for Arendt in Hegelian thought, is the violent rationalizing intention, namely that of reducing freedom to necessity. According to Arendt nothing can be more absurd, although, at the same time, nothing can be more dangerous.

Abstracting, subsuming the particular under the general, means depriving the contingent realm of human affairs of its richness, its plurality. If philosophy has always attempted to deny dignity to this realm by diminishing it to a lower level of reality, Arendt affirms that the dimension of appearances is more real than 'truth'.

We live in a dimension of appearances, where reality is the result of a multitude of appearances: "The world of appearances is *prior* to whatever region the philosopher may *choose* as his 'true' home but into which he was not born" (LOM: I, 23).

The traditional dichotomy between a true Being and a mere Appearance runs through the history of metaphysics, and Hegel, his 'novelty' notwithstanding, is no exception. In fact, even if the traditional absolute is, according to Hegel, to be found in the midst of human affairs, the dichotomy, although inverted, continues to perform its efficacy. The standards by which history is to be judged are to be found not in the realm of *praxis* as such, but in a theory that posits this realm as that of truth.

"Truth, even though it was conceived 'historically', that is, understood to unfold in time and therefore did not necessarily need to be valid for all times, still had to be valid for all men, regardless of where they happened to dwell and of which country they happened to be citizens" (OR: 53).



Since history is now the realm in which truth unfolds, the realm of human affairs, the realm of actions and events is transformed into a realm that constitutively responds to the standards of a rational argument. In order for this realm to be binding and necessary it must comply to the universalizing rules of philosophy: “Truth had to relate to man *qua* man, who as a worldly, tangible reality, of course, existed nowhere. History, therefore, had to be world history, and the truth which revealed itself had to be a ‘world spirit’”. In other words, “the notion of history could attain philosophic dignity only under the assumption that it covered the whole world and the destinies of all men” (53).

It now becomes clear how the Hegelian *escamotage* of transforming philosophy into a science simultaneously involves the trick of transforming reality into thought, namely of transforming thought into an activity. This is of course possible not by changing reality as such, but, as we have seen, by primarily denying its cosality, its contingency and thereness, and secondly by assuming a strictly contemplative perspective on matters of action.<sup>4</sup> “For the first time man dared to turn himself upside down” and, in the words of Hegel as quoted by Arendt, “to stand on his head and on thought, and to build reality according to it” (LOM: I, 45)

### ***1.4 Philosophical Unwillingness***

The fact that contingency is transformed into historical necessity relies upon the contemplative view, insofar as the historical movement is understood as a dialectical movement. The fact that the movement of history is dialectical and driven by necessity, is, for Arendt, “perhaps the most terrible and, humanly speaking, least bearable paradox in the whole body of modern thought” (LOM: I, 54). The conceptualization of contingency through its absorption into the speculative system works in Hegel as a theoretical neutralization of politics.<sup>5</sup> As we have seen, the Hegelian solution of a philosophy of history is concerned with the transformation of politics into history as a dialectical/necessary project.

We have dealt so far with the experience of thinking, transformed by Hegel into the normative and dogmatic foundation of his system. Now we shall investigate how Hegelian philosophy is, according to Arendt, the further misunderstanding of another faculty of the mind, the faculty of willing.

According to Arendt, the first difficulty in facing such a topic is the fact that “every philosophy of the Will is the product of the thinking rather than the willing ego.” The problem has primarily to do with the fact that both willing and thinking are activities of the mind, although their mode of proceeding differs. Willing, in spite of an entire tradition of thought that has attempted to negate its importance, is the faculty of the future, and the touchstone of a free

act. In other words, the capacity to act is connected with the Will, with the fact that “we know that we could also have left undone what we actually did.” The Will is the faculty of contingency, inasmuch as it “is characterized by an infinitely greater freedom than thinking” (LOM: II, 25–26).

As Arendt attempts to trace the ‘hidden history’ of the faculty of the Will, by illustrating how and to what extent philosophers have always denied its importance, her main target is Hegel. The theme of an ‘ingenious theory’ is recurrent and refers to the Hegelian *Geist*, seen as the force that directs men’s wills and their contingency toward an unknown, yet consequential, ultimate goal.

“Once this story is complete – and Hegel seems to have believed that the beginning of the end of the story was the French Revolution – the backward directed glance of the philosopher, through the sheer effort of the thinking ego, can internalize and recollect (*er-innern*) the meaningfulness and necessity of the unfolding movement, so that again he can dwell with what is and cannot not-be. Finally, in other words, the process of thinking coincides once more with authentic Being: thought has purified reality of the merely accidental” (II, 28).

The Will, as Arendt understands it, is strictly connected with her political views on action as a new beginning, as unpredictable and inexhaustible. The Will is connected to the capacity to act, to the ability to spontaneously begin a new series in time, interrupting the temporal *continuum*. The Will, in other words, can be understood as the faculty of the new, of the unexpected future, of freedom.

Philosophers have always neutralized the Will by reducing its power either to the neutral laws of causality or to the moral category of *liberum arbitrium*, which differs from the Will insofar as *liberum arbitrium* merely decides between different given potentialities.

At first glance Hegel seems to be one of the few philosophers who recognizes the importance of the temporal dimension of the future. We shall see below how Arendt deconstructs the Hegelian notion of temporality. By closely following an interpretation of Hegel put forth by Alexandre Koyré,<sup>6</sup> Arendt wants to uncover in Hegel’s work the metaphysical fallacy of the reduction of the temporal dimension of the future to the Platonic “image of eternity”.

Hegel conceives of man as a temporal being, “man is not just temporal; he is Time” (LOM: II, 42). How is this ‘time being’ to be understood? The self-constitution of the rational agent in Hegelian philosophy is simply carried out by enhancing the subject’s reflection on himself. In other words, the primacy of time is only apparently the primacy of the dimension of the future, the dimension of the Will. What in Hegel seems to be a description of the temporal dimension of the future, of the willing ego, is actually the description of the mental time of the Now.

If, on the one hand, the future is the time of anticipation, which “negates the mind’s ‘enduring presence’” by transforming it into an anticipated “no more,” on the other hand the accomplishment of Being, which, according to Hegel, should take place in the future, “belongs as such to the past.”

The future is seen simply as a dimension of “negation” of the present, as a “no more” rather than a “not yet”. The time of action and decision is transformed into a merely intellectual dimension and as such becomes neutralized.<sup>7</sup>

Clearly, the most radical view of a future seen as a “no more” is death, and the possibility of its anticipation is, according to Hegel, the very essence of man. Hegel reduces the Will itself in the last resort to the anticipation of death. The mind’s anticipation of the future is therefore also its source of the past, “insofar as that is mentally engendered by the mind’s anticipation of a second future, when the immediate I-shall-be will have become an I-shall-have-been.”

By transforming the will and the future into an interiorized time dimension with no other goal than the anticipation of death, Hegel falls prey to the old philosophical predicament of the denial of time. “In the anticipation of death, the will’s projects take on the appearance of an anticipated past and as such can become the object of reflection.” Arendt quotes Koyré:

“At the moment in which the mind confronts its own end ‘the incessant motion of the temporal dialectics is arrested and time has fulfilled itself; this fulfilled time falls naturally and in its entirety into the past,’ which means that ‘the future has lost its power over it.’”

In other words, the future is transformed into the dimension of the past, that is “suitable for the thinking ego.” The temporal dimension of the future is then reduced to an eternal present, the reality of which lies completely in the contemplative dimension: the Will’s projects are transformed “into objects of thought” (LOM: II, 42–44).

In this view, the future, the temporal dimension of novelty and unexpectedness, becomes the equivalent of the knowledge of death; the dimension of action and decision is reduced to a cognitive experience. The faculty of willing is reduced to that of thinking, and the old philosophical primacy of death is reaffirmed.

The transformation of history into a speculative realm, in which rationality comes to terms only with itself, annihilates newness in favor of conciliation, the famous Hegelian *Versöhnung* between thought and reality.

Arendt, contrarily, develops a notion of history and historiography which retains very little of the modern conceptualization of temporality: “Newness is the realm of the historian, who – unlike the natural scientist, who is concerned with ever-recurring happenings – deals with events which always occur only once” (EIU: 319). The Hegelian notion of history, on the contrary, “with its unparalleled emphasis on history as a process, has many origins and among them especially the earlier modern concept of nature as a process” (OR: 55).

The notion of historical necessity, which is considered to be of the same nature as that of astronomical processes, is implicit in this view. Even if the astronomical meaning of the word 'Revolution' very quickly lost its cyclical connotation, the necessity-driven nature of its motion survived also within a rectilinear time notion.

### *1.5 Necessary Stories*

According to Arendt, however, the real experience of such 'necessity' did not have anything to do with the Hegelian conceptualization of it. For Arendt, it is crucial to the understanding of revolutions that "the idea of freedom and the experience of a new beginning should coincide" (OR: 29). The unheard of experience of a new beginning, as the actors perceived it, cannot be understood in terms of either an empty rationality or a *post-facto* attributed 'sense' or 'aim.' The men of the Revolution "discovered their capacity and desire for the "charms of freedom"[...] only in the very act of liberation" (33). They realized how precious the treasure of freedom was only in fighting for it.

The 'necessity' of the Revolution, then, is not, according to Arendt, an aspect of its own understanding, of its own backward internalization from the rational spectator's side, but it is connected with the unknown yet actual experience of freedom, which was originated from the spontaneous need for change and a new body politic.

The *fact* of necessity is therefore primarily connected with the revolutionary experience, "it owes its existence not to theoretical speculation but to political experience and the course of real events" (55).

The backward glance of the philosopher who comprehends historical events by attributing to them a sense, a direction toward greater rationality, is not able to account for the newness of political experiences. The contemplative view cannot understand the uniqueness of each acting protagonist of history since their irresistible novelty must fit into the system, and, as such, it must lose what is contingent in it. The richness of a new political event, on the other hand, lies precisely in the contingency of each unique experience.

History as a developing, truth-revealing process finds its fulfillment only in the enlarged view of a totality in which uniqueness, novelty and contingency cannot find their place. The greatest mistake of our tradition, says Arendt, is that of expecting the world of ideas to have an equivalent in the world of facts and things. All philosophers have carried out the *adaequatio res et intellectus* insistently, with the arrogance and violence of a logical inference, with which one must necessarily agree.

History, conceived by Hegel as the realm in which such *adaequatio* performs its greatest efficacy, is, on the contrary, described by Arendt as the realm of contingent happenings upon which we cannot impose a self-conscious rationality, or a logical causality.

Arendt, as stated above (see *Supra*, Chapter One), recalls the Greek notion of history and opposes it to the Hegelian one. Herodotus, the first historian, understood history as being concerned with men and their mortality. History was supposed to celebrate single instances and single gestures performed by heroes in order for their actions not to be forgotten; immortality was the aim of historical narration. The task of the historian was “to save human deeds from the futility that comes from oblivion” (BPF: 41).

The technique of the historian did not rely upon a ‘whole’ grasped through contemplation, but simply on the ability to fabricate a memory. Each deed or event was able to provide a meaning for itself. Meaning, in other words, was attainable also within the confines of the individual shape of an event.

Arendt criticizes the modern incapability of considering single entities and individual occurrences as meaningful. In other words, she attempts to recover a different notion of historical understanding by emphasizing the importance of stories. She boldly affirms that history is nothing but a “story which has many beginnings but no end” (EIU: 320).

History is the realm of novelty and unexpectedness: in order to fairly assess the contingent aspect of history, we must abandon the metaphysical dream of a system of rationality; history is a togetherness of stories. History is the realm of contingency, only stories are meaningful.

History gains a new aspect within the Arendtian analysis: it is re-shaped and re-dramatized as a web of stories, the complexity of which cannot be described by the contemplating philosopher but by the storyteller or the poet.

## 2. Crystals of History: Totalitarianism between Abyss and Redemption

### 2.1 *On Dark Times*

Hannah Arendt often said that in order to understand political experiences in their radical uniqueness one should turn to poets and storytellers, who are able to illuminate with their art the incomprehensibility of dark times. “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” (MDT: ix).

When all the categories of comprehension are unable to account for reality, or, when reality and theory distance themselves to such an extent that they become impermeable to one another, then literature and poetry become precious sources of meaning, or, at least, are able to illuminate the discrepancies that hinder or frustrate any kind of shared meaning. The use of literature, that is, fictionalized stories, in order to understand history, testifies to the impossibility of providing a transparent account of facts and reality, and at the same time amplifies the possibilities of understanding that are not constrained within the limits of a causal dimension of facts, or ‘evidence’.

As Virginia Woolf once said, stories are able to give “more truth than fact”<sup>8</sup> insofar as they are able to address important and often controversial questions in a manner that does not necessarily yield a solution, a one-way conclusion: “One can only show how one came to hold whatever opinion one does hold. One can only give one’s audience the chance of draw their own conclusions as they observe the limitations, the prejudices, the idiosyncrasies of the speaker” (Woolf 1995: 4). As they expose a developing – i.e. narrativized – movement of happenings (be it concrete, real or figured, fictive) stories lay down a contestable path, insofar as it is exposed, visible, audible. Stories expose their partiality and incompleteness totally, so to say. They offer themselves and their lies to the audience, paradoxically hoping to convey truth: “I need not say that what I am about to describe has no existence,” says Woolf to her ‘real’ audience. “Lies will flow from my lips, but there may perhaps be some truth mixed up with them; it is for you to seek out this truth and to decide whether any part of it is worth keeping. If not, you will of course throw the whole of it into the waste – paper basket and forget all about it” (6).

Not only is the telling of a life story, the narrative representation of a political uniqueness important for Arendt. When confronted with a radically new experience, Arendt seems to suggest that literature is more precious than traditional historical understanding. Or, in other words, she contests the historical mode of understanding because of its inability to account for, or even hint at, newness. This is not to say, however, that literature should substitute for historiography. What is at stake in this respect is the fact that consequential history is unable to account for newness, and, at the same time, what is needed in times of *destructive newness* is a means of critical understanding, which, Arendt feels, traditional historiography is unable to give. In other words, to be faced with the situation of politically unprecedented facts – as all historical facts should be – and at the same time to perceive those very facts as historically (that is, through traditional historiographical means) undecipherable, constitutes an evident paradox.

In her reconstruction of the ‘elements’ that led to the outburst of the totalitarian phenomenon, Arendt carries out a critique of historiography insofar as it seems unable to grasp and account for the novelty of several political phenomena, the first of which is, according to her, Imperialism: “That a movement of expansion for expansion’s sake grew up in nation-states which more than any other political bodies were defined by boundaries and the limitations of possible conquest, is one example of the seemingly absurd disparities between cause and effect which have become the hallmark of modern history. By comparisons with ancient Empires, by mistaking expansion for conquest, by neglecting the difference between Commonwealth and Empire [...] historians tried to dismiss the disturbing fact that so many of the important events in modern history look as though molehills had labored and brought forth mountains” (OT: 131–132).

The contestation of the analogical way of proceeding in traditional history, or, better said, the modern notion of history, implies, according to Arendt, not only the contestation of the causal mode of understanding, but also the total failure to register new elements in the political landscape of the time – the failure to recognize the evident differences between Commonwealth and Empire, Colonialism and Imperialism, Tyranny and Totalitarianism. By refusing to recognize a specificity of the expanding movement of Imperialism, historians neglect the radical specificity of the Totalitarian movement.

This unsettling methodological problem surfaces in Arendt’s account of the origins of Totalitarianism not as a marginal question, but as the central issue of her critique of history and her different approach to a narrative-historical account of Totalitarianism.

The risk is that of reducing historical comprehension to clichés. History is always easy prey for conformism, it can immolate itself on the altar of easy

generalizations, of dangerous analogies. This is why, when writing about Totalitarianism, Arendt decides to multiply the stories, using many different characters, which might have seemed out of place in a book on politics and history, indulging in particulars, preventing herself from tracing any general tendency of world history.

“This book has been written against a background of both reckless optimism and reckless despair. It holds that Progress and Doom are two sides of the same medal; that both are articles of superstition not of faith” (OT: vii).

This is why the book is an attempt at illustrating how history is neither guided by a supernatural force nor by an actor behind the scenes. There is nothing necessary or inevitable in the course of human deeds, but it is an “amalgam” of elements, which for some contingent reasons combine together, giving birth to new historical constellations. Against the nihilistic view of a doomed modernity, which from Hobbes would have inevitably led to Auschwitz, Arendt gives voice to the different elements of the amalgam, showing how history is the realm of the unexpected: “Each event in human history reveals an unexpected landscape of human deeds, sufferings, and new possibilities which together transcend the sum total of all willed intentions and the significance of all origins”(EIU: 320).

The book, according to Arendt, does not deal with origins in the evolutionary sense, it is not the ‘genesis,’ but rather is an attempt to account for how different elements became *crystallized* into Totalitarianism. Her reconstruction of how the different “elements of shame”<sup>9</sup> become combined in the totalitarian event *respects* the contingent aspect of history, which is nothing more than a togetherness of stories. History is populated by characters who all have their life-stories, and there is no qualitative distinction between great history and biographical stories – their are interrelated and told together.

Arendt narrates, among others, the story of Benjamin Disraeli (OT: 68–79). This is a clear example – yet unique because of the contingent encounter he made with 19<sup>th</sup> century events – of how great history can be told as a biography, not in order to demonstrate that history is made by great men, but to explain that in order to understand the complexity of reality, its particular and accidental aspects become vital. Life stories intermingle with history, they populate the anonymous context of facts and figures, they complicate the apparently causal context of official events, they illuminate the course of those dark times. Stories help us to understand the phenomenon “as occurring not on the moon, but in the midst of human society”(79).



## 2.2 *An Illuminating Life-Story*

Interestingly enough, the paragraph “The Potent Wizard,” which is dedicated to the fascinating story and personality of Benjamin Disraeli, begins like a real tale: “Benjamin Disraeli, whose chief interest in life was the career of Lord Beaconsfield, was distinguished by two things: first, the gift of the gods which the moderns banally call luck, and which other periods revered as a goddess named Fortune, and second, more intimately and more wondrously connected with Fortune than one may be able to explain, the great carefree innocence of mind and imagination which makes it impossible to classify the man as a careerist, though he never thought seriously of anything except his career”.

A gift from the gods and his carefree innocence were the main qualities of this character, whose ambiguity becomes clear in the recount Arendt provides us with. The contingent, fragile aspect of a singular life-story becomes the thread by which she attempts an explication of Jewish history. Disraeli realized, by virtue of his innocence, that it would be foolish to “feel *déclassé* and how much more exciting it would be for himself and for others, how much more useful for his career, to accentuate the fact that he was a Jew”(OT: 68). In fact, Disraeli was a so-called assimilated Jew, his family had few connections with Jewish society and knew nothing of Jewish religion and customs. He decided to promote himself as an extraordinary person by virtue of his Jewishness, namely the mere fact of being born a Jew. He transformed Judaism, a historical, religious and political fact, into a racial issue. “All this demonstrates a unique understanding of society and its rules. Significantly, it was Disraeli who said, ‘What is a crime among the multitude is only a vice among the few’” (69).

Arendt guides the reader through the paradoxes and ambiguities of history through the dim thread of a memorable life-story. There is a sort of ironic aspect in these recurrent paradoxes: the life and works of Disraeli, the most proud of the many exceptional Jews who populate history, illuminate the beginning of the decline of the Jewish people better than any other objectively historical account.

The exceptionality of his race, in which Disraeli so ardently believed— a sort of aristocracy of the blood – was incredibly close to antisemitic theories: “he almost automatically produced the entire set of theories about the Jewish influence and organization that we usually find in the more vicious forms of antisemitism” (71). The story of his successes, his fame and his social position, and last, but not least, the friendship of a Queen, testifies to the complex and situated condition in which European Jews found themselves between the 19<sup>th</sup> and the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. It serves to proceed through the difficult and ambiguous terrain of historical transformations by taking into account not only mere facts, but also those ‘magical’ aspects – such as Disraeli’s Fortune and gifts from the

gods – which, nevertheless, can suddenly change direction and reverse their meaning.

Disraeli, says Arendt, “was the only one who produced a full-blown race doctrine out of this empty concept of historic mission”, since he actually deprived Judaism of its divine elements and affirmed that it was only a race, and that “‘all is race’, which is ‘the key to history’ regardless of ‘language and religion,’ for ‘there is only one thing which makes a race and that is blood’” (73).

Arendt seems to gather all these curious, almost comic aspects of his personality and beliefs – not to make fun of them, or to show us the inherent irony of history, but to expose all these apparently disentangled elements, their contingency and triviality, even their scientific inconsistency, in the form of a narrative that would preserve them as elements of an unbelievable story that in the end will show its meaning. “All those curious contradictions which indicate so clearly that the potent wizard never took himself quite seriously and always played a role to win society and to find popularity, add up to a unique charm, they introduce into all his utterances an element of charlatan enthusiasm and day-dreaming which makes him utterly different from his imperialist followers” (75).

In another respect, the story of this unique personality serves the purpose of not confusing him with the “imperialist followers” and here another important aspect of narrative emerges: the preservation of the uniqueness of each life story not only means to grant memory to heroic characters, but also prevents history from becoming the realm of generalizations, of easy simplifications and clichés.

Disraeli’s story is just one of a number of stories told by Arendt in order to trace different paths, laying them down, so to say, in front of the reader as a complex web, that would enable her to create the most complicated, particularized yet significant togetherness of stories. None of them, however, is able to satisfy the mind’s need for exhaustion. Rather, it keeps provoking in the reader’s mind the puzzling and never satisfied will to possess the web totally. The paragraph on Disraeli, therefore, concludes with one of the many brilliant yet frustrating sentences that Arendt often employs in the *Origins*: “In the end, it was not his fault that the same trend that accounted for his singular great good fortune finally led to the great catastrophe of his people” (79).

## 2.3 *Superficial Connections*

In the introduction to the book, Arendt explicitly states "...it must be possible to face and understand the outrageous fact that so small (and in world politics, so unimportant) a phenomenon as the Jewish question and antisemitism could become the catalytic agent for, first, the Nazi movement, then a world war, and finally the establishment of death factories" (OT: viii). Since there cannot be a necessary relation between anti-Semitism and Totalitarianism, the relations existing between phenomena, the apparently casual relations, are presented as smoothed over by interweaving strategies that multiply causes and offer numerous explanations for a single phenomenon. Moreover, each single explanation – as political, economic or social as it may be – is constructed through ‘superficial connections,’ namely connections that are detectable as parts of the complex and plural texture of reality. They are explanations that connect different, and apparently incongruent elements in non-essential cause-effect relations. They do not aim at explaining the very nature of phenomena but simply tell the story of their entanglement. Telling the story of different and apparently incongruent elements, the origin of which can never be ascribed to just one cause, but to the intermingling of many causes, offers the reader a rich source of material. As such, the reader can practice her/his capacity to judge, to discern in a critical way, since storytelling offers a vast choice of paths, does not constrain to one single option, as the logical abstract argumentation does.<sup>10</sup>

The complexity of reality, the improbable relation that links many phenomena to the monstrous outcome of annihilation, must be expressed in a way that does not necessarily attribute one or more causes to the effect. The cause-effect relation must be subverted and deconstructed in order to refrain from justifying what has happened. Storytelling has a displacing function, since it does not abstract from the complex context of the multiple reality, but sticks to the fabric of interwoven elements and tells each single story as a necessary yet insufficient element of the fabric. By multiplying stories and displacing essential causes that should have led to the advent of Totalitarianism, Arendt's account of the origins of Totalitarianism presents a ‘report’ on the nature of evil that is neither vindicatory nor vindictive.

The problem is not how and why theories such as racism or anti-Semitism developed, but, rather, the main question lies in the fact that between these theories and the reality of bestiality lies an abyss “that no explanation is able to bridge”.

It is as if Arendt were attempting to explore a *different* mode of understanding and accounting for the unbearable novelty of our time. Totalitarianism needs stories, that seek to understand what has happened, that try to fill the gap

between theories and facts without justifying either of them. If the historian has to do with the new, then is the main task of the storyteller to prevent that this novelty becomes a cliché, a stereotype. This puzzling question remains vividly unsolved, both in Arendt's attempt to convey a different kind of understanding and in our own attempt to theoretically discern the impact of a radically new political phenomenon. In other words, the dilemma of any historical mode of comprehension remains the following: how do we relate, recount and represent past events, how do we remember or witness past experience (ours or others') without *canonizing* them? How is it possible to both remember the past, allow visibility and audibility to those who have been silenced and oppressed, and at the same time prevent this from becoming the canon, the *true* story?<sup>11</sup>

And in what sense is the book on Totalitarianism a book of stories? Firstly, in its aim, which is neither comprehensive nor exhaustive. Secondly, in its method, which provides us with an enormous amount of information that, instead of being collected scientifically or orderly, is distributed conspicuously among different contexts, that is, personified or exemplified as the fabric which constitutes social, economical and biographical topics. Thirdly in its result: as a story usually has an unexpected finale, so are the conclusions Arendt draws from her analyses – always totally unexpected, yet congruent.

In other words, by trying to understand differently, by distancing herself from the mainstream of historiographic theses, Arendt demonstrates that beyond the apparently quiet surface of statistics and trends lies a precious source of knowledge that must be recovered. Only by assessing this precious knowledge in the form of a narrative recount are we perhaps able to acknowledge the *impossibility* of possessing it, of canonizing it. Understanding becomes an endless process although not an unnecessary one. It is in the mode of its unfolding, like in the narrative unfolding of a story, that the ethical core of the enterprise lies.

Storytelling is even more necessary because the quest for meaning and the impossibility of understanding require a means that is able to 'accept the unimaginable,' a means that can account for the monstrous new that has taken place.<sup>12</sup>

The acceptance of the unimaginable in a way that would not allow conciliation, justification or historical neutral consequentiality is the seemingly impossible task that I assign to storytelling and literature. My impression, further developed in the next chapter, is that the kind of understanding storytelling provides cannot be compared to traditional explicatory modes of both historiography and science. Storytelling does not aim at a complete, exhaustive understanding. The perspective is not general, the horizon is not totally mastered (as from an Archimedean point).

By following the terminology of Jean-Luc Nancy, I propose to look at the understanding provided by a narrative account as an ‘inoperative’ result. This oxymoron should testify to the epistemological impossibility of substituting historiography with storytelling which, by the way, Arendt did not have in mind. Storytelling simply illuminates the darkest parts of reality, to which traditional explicatory modes do not have access. Historiography has the potential to become ‘contaminated’ by a certain degree of fiction, which causes its narrative mode to become less finalistic. Certainly storytelling and literature are not effective alternatives of either history or the social sciences. They can perhaps displace their legitimacy, expose their supposed neutrality and inevitability, allow a vision of the past that is removed from its time-linear destiny.

We shall now focus our investigation on the implications of a refusal of traditional historiography, the paradoxes and predicaments connected to the understanding of dark times.

## ***2.4 Understanding and Resisting***

“One reason why Fascism has a chance is that in the name of progress its opponents treat it as a historical norm”  
W. Benjamin, *Theses on the Philosophy of History*

The central aspect of Arendt’s reconstruction of the origins of Totalitarianism is the comprehensibility (understanding) of the historical event. Certainly it is not a neutral problem, and even less so merely an epistemological question. The novelty of Arendt’s account lies in the fact that the epistemological question immediately acquires a political connotation. The need for understanding, when referring to Totalitarianism, immediately becomes a political problem.

Traditional political categories and historiographic methods of analysis are no longer useful in the comprehension of the “unprecedented”. This uselessness of the tradition, that is, of the philosophical, political and juridical categories of the past, becomes evident by virtue of the fact that Totalitarianism as an historical fact must not be investigated “sine ira et studio”. Conversely, “comprehension [...] means the unpremeditated, attentive facing up to, and resisting of, reality – whatever it may be.”

The unbearable inheritance of that “historical event” becomes, within the book on Totalitarianism, a haunting presence, some kind of dark and irreducible heaviness that we can never completely grasp. The abstract mode of theory cannot grasp such irreducibility, nor can the consequential and causal mode of historiography.

Arendt’s attempt to understand Totalitarianism is both characterized by the assumption of the “gap between past and future,” that is, the acknowledgement

of the need for a new epistemology, and the strong ethical commitment to understand it anyway. From this perspective we can consider Arendt's attempt as the quest for "responsible" epistemology, that is, the attempt to conjugate the method of the analysis with the ethical issue of understanding without justifying. In other words, I argue that Arendt's historical reconstruction does not aim at a scientific and detached analysis of the historical phenomenon. Arendt, however, is not interested in engaging in a polemical quarrel with history as such, the result of which could be the condemnation of some and the apology of others. Her critical inquiry is primarily concerned with an account that should present facts that enable us to gain a vantage perspective on them, namely that of "understanding differently".

## 2.5 *The Paradox of Reality*

"The many parallels which are used to explain away everything that may be new under the sun – the best as well as the worst – all these very well-known features of current historiography tend to produce easy and readable books, which leave the reader's peace of mind quite undisturbed." H. Arendt, *The Nation*

Reality for Arendt is a complex web of relations, the substance of which is only to be found in the "world of appearance". The human world, as opposed to the realm of nature, is characterized by "publicity". Reality stems from the public and shared dimension of the *vita activa*, that is, the world of human relations, which is characterized by the fact that individuals appear to each other. Our "feeling for reality" depends utterly upon appearance, and appearance is possible – since it requires as a precondition the presence of others – only in a public realm.

"For us, appearance – something that is being seen and heard by others as well as by ourselves – constitutes reality. Compared with the reality which comes from being seen and heard, even the greatest forces of intimate life – the passions of the heart, the thoughts of the mind, the delights of the senses – lead an uncertain, shadowy kind of existence unless and until they are transformed and de-individualized, as it were, into a shape to fit them for public appearance" (HC: 50).

An interwoven fabric of appearances, by which human relations are established, constitutes reality. Reality is not definable in terms of abstract criteria nor is it reducible to a common denominator, since its complexity resists all definitions and conceptualizations. Reality is not representable.

Similarly, we cannot reduce the real phenomenon of annihilation to a single cause or a single set of evident causes. Totalitarianism and its products cannot be synthesized into one origin that would enable a historical exhaustion of what has happened. "...it must be possible to face and understand the outrageous fact that so small (and in world politics, so unimportant) a phenomenon as the Jewish question and anti-Semitism could become the catalytic agent for, first, the Nazi movement, then a world war, and finally the establishment of death factories" (OT: viii).

If unpredictability characterizes reality – since it is the unpredictable actions and speeches of human beings who come into the world and fill the material frame of the earth space that is the status of reality – and if reality as such is unrepresentable, how do we face the absurdity of totalitarian reality? In other words, the problem Arendt has to face when dealing with Totalitarianism is not that of a comprehension of reality *tout court*, of reality in its appearing, in its phenomenal quality of "enacted singularity". The problem here is that of the comprehension of an unheard of reality, the absurdity of which undermines all previous criteria of understanding.

If reality, again, is infinitely improbable, then totalitarian reality respects the Arendtian precept beyond any imaginable extent. Of course, the paradox is evident. Reality as a contingent crystallization of facts, as an unpredictable interweaving of life stories, is the political reality that Arendt considers to be the worldly and human dimension. Moreover, this dimension becomes the counter model, urging and possible, and the modality of a deconstructive reading, of a tradition notoriously contemplative and "celestial". Totalitarian reality, then, is not only a complex and multiple interweaving of facts, plural and contingent as they may be, but is primarily a new and not yet experienced reality which carries within itself the unprecedented message of destruction. Therefore, understanding such reality becomes, for Arendt, not only a heavy task the difficulty of which lies primarily in the lack of intellectual tools, but also an ethical responsibility. The ethical issue involved requires that the paradox remain intact.

The aim of this move is to give up all possible justifications of the happened. "Comprehension does not mean denying the outrageous, deducing the unprecedented from precedents, or explaining phenomena by such analogies and generalities that the impact of reality and the shock of experience are no longer felt. It means, rather, examining and bearing consciously the burden that our century has placed on us – neither denying its existence nor submitting meekly to its weight. Comprehension in short, means the unpremeditated, attentive facing up to, and resisting of, reality – whatever it may be" (viii).

It is, according to my interpretation, this sort of a challenge that Arendt engages with history that prevents her from separating the epistemological

question from the ethical one. Her positioning with regard to this history is, therefore, simultaneously both responsible and challenging.

If reality, as we have already stated, is primarily public and a political dimension, its comprehension cannot exclude the plurality of its constitution. In other words, in order to provide a fair account of reality as plural and multiple, we must aspire to an ethical responsibility that remains faithful to the structure of reality as such. This responsibility engenders an understanding of Totalitarianism that does not justify its premises, both historical and epistemological. This responsibility becomes visible and effective in Arendt's reading of such reality from a political perspective. Arendt's political eye is very well aware of the plural and contingent dimension of politics, and this awareness is best clarified in the assumption that historical events are primarily real and concrete facts, the necessity of which within the time flow is merely a metaphysical prejudice. At the same time, though, Arendt neither idealizes nor exalts such contingency as "beyond good and evil," but primarily assumes it to be a strong ethical perspective.

It is not right, states Arendt, to trace the necessary causes that would have accounted for Totalitarianism, as if justifying its evil and absurdity by assimilating them to the inevitably continuous historical process were even possible. Totalitarianism has shown that the Hegelian *Geist* is not always forward bound, nor does it progressively become more self-conscious by actualizing itself in History. There are moments, even entire periods, in which the high conquests of the Western "Spirit" seem to be vanishing, its self-consciousness lazily asleep. To understand the events of absurdity means to face them with new eyes, with a new attitude.

If Arendt's will is puzzled by the responsible assumption of what we have called the 'paradox of totalitarian reality,' the effectiveness of such a paradox becomes operative in the comprehension of the incomprehensible. The operative modality of such effectiveness is strictly political. It is political in the sense that it is open to reality, it offers a modality of comprehension that does not subsume reality under one representation of it. Moreover such a modality of understanding through paradoxes is, I think, not merely polemical. In other words Arendt's aim is not to renounce any kind of understanding, nor does it have the nihilistic attitude of giving up the hope for a recovery of meaning. By deconstructing the tradition, by uncovering the unheard of reality of Totalitarianism from the heavy layers of conventional and traditional modes of understanding, the paradox gains an interesting and new validity within her political framework.

Politics is a complex means of accounting for a complex matter, such as reality. Politics is also a means of preventing reality from disappearing, that is, politics is a means of seeking immortality, a way to escape the futility of life.<sup>13</sup> This means that in Arendt's perspective, the need for understanding is political



also in the sense that understanding should allow facts and events to retain their significance, even in their unheard of absurdity. In other words, the ethical issue with which she is most concerned is that of remembering, of providing an account that would somehow seek immortality, as in Herodotus' historiography. The fact that immortality in this case has nothing to do with the great deeds of Greek heroes, but with brutality and absurdity, strengthens the need for remembrance. Remembrance might be painful and controversial, but, nevertheless, our task is to preserve it.

## 2.6 *The Politics of Fiction*

In my attempt to recollect all the different threads of the Arendtian discourse, and at the same time my returning to what I have called the central untied knot of Totalitarianism as a new phenomenon, I have realized that reality plays a very ambiguous role.

Totalitarian reality, according to Arendt, is both a complex pattern of facts and an undecipherable amalgam of elements.<sup>14</sup> In its novelty and unpredictability it is also faithful to the Arendtian *petitio principii*: reality is not representable. The problem is, then, how should we behave with regard to reality, when it confronts us with the question of evil? Reality is, as we have seen, fragile and of such an immaterial quality that it can vanish as easily as it appears. Totalitarian reality is twofold: on the one hand it is based on very contingent balances – this corresponds to the assumption that reality is contingent since it is produced and lived only in the public space of appearance, and, to this extent, it can also *not* happen. On the other hand, the disruptive and lacerating effects of such a reality are a heavy burden.

The first dimension is related to the historical analysis of the so-called “causes”. Anti-Semitism, Imperialism and Totalitarianism are phenomena the historical contingency of which is smoothed out by Arendt in her analysis in order to deny them the objective – Hegelian – character of necessity.<sup>15</sup> A strange consistence characterizes the second dimension, the “precipitate” of such amalgam, namely that of being a reality, a human dimension, the main feature of which is inhumanity. Arendt denies that history is an inevitable and necessary movement, but, at the same time, the irreversible aspect of historical facts – its effects – becomes a point of no return.

The totalitarian “precipitate” is, first and foremost, a reality, a fact. The quality of such a reality, though, is that of being “fabricated” according to strong ideological premises that grow very easily on other contingent historical phenomena. Totalitarian reality presents itself as a new kind of reality, the

premises of which are to be found in the denial of shared, public and plural reality. In other words, if Totalitarianism is a reality, its main quality is that of being unreal. Totalitarianism builds its strength on the confusion between reality and fiction. Reality can be easily manipulated, especially where individuals do not have a shared space in which reality as such can be experienced and judged. Arendt is clear on this. She investigates the disruptive effects of ideology on the political consistence of reality.

Ideological thought “destroys all ties with reality”. Reality as she intends it, as the shared reality of the five senses, loses its objectivity and its certainty in a world dominated by ideology.

“Before they seize power and establish a world according to their doctrines, totalitarian movements conjure up a lying world of consistency which is more adequate to the needs of the human mind than reality itself; in which, through sheer imagination, uprooted masses can feel at home and are spared the never ending shocks which real life and real experiences deal to human beings and their expectations” (OT: 353).

The remarkable role played by ideology in the fabrication of a new reality becomes effective at every level, and for the first time in history. The totalitarian capacity to build, although inflexibly, a new reality, and to make it work in a very plausible way, through paranoiac logic, simply withers away the hope for understanding, the very concept of objectivity loses its meaning. “ [Modern masses] do not believe in anything visible, in the reality of their own experience; they do not trust their eyes and ears but only their imaginations, which may be caught by anything that is at once universal and consistent in itself” (351).

The successfulness of modern ideologies combines with the exponential increase of atomized individuals in mass society. The main feature of the atomized individual is isolation and almost a total lack of human and social relations. The fabrication of a coherent reality based on ideological premises is possible, according to Arendt, simply because reality as intersubjectivity, as “perceptive faith” guaranteed by the presence of others, is lost since the public space through which human beings establish relations is lost. “What the masses refuse to recognize is the fortuitousness that pervades reality. They are predisposed to all ideologies because they explain facts as mere examples of laws and eliminate coincidence by inventing an all embracing omnipotence which is supposed to be at the root of every accident” (352–353).

Ideology is a *poietic* force, in the sense that it is productive; its devastating effect has been that of satisfying what Arendt calls the need for coherence, for a simplified, black and white reality, which the masses expressed. Reality then becomes manipulable, in the sense that it is reduced to simple logical coherence. The casual traits that constitute reality as such are eliminated, since plurality as the first constituent of reality is eliminated. “Total domination, which strives to

organize the infinite plurality and differentiation of human beings as if all of humanity were just one individual, is possible only if each and every person can be reduced to a never-changing identity of reactions, so that each of these bundles of reactions can be exchanged at random for any other. The problem is to fabricate something that does not exist, namely a kind of human species resembling other animal species whose only ‘freedom’ would consist in ‘preserving the species’” (438).

By eliminating uniqueness and the connected capacity to give birth to the unpredictable, reality itself becomes eliminated. Totalitarian reality, then, the fabricated reality that should not be called ‘reality,’ bases its falsehood – or, better yet, the indifference toward the distinction between reality and fiction – on the absence of a shared common space. The reality of appearance, as Arendt calls it in *The Human Condition*, the five-sense reality of the shared perceptions of *The Life of the Mind*, becomes a mere superfluous matter, since the fabricated reality of ideology is undoubtedly less frail in its coherence. “[...] ideological thinking becomes independent of all experience from which it cannot learn anything new even if it is a question of something that has just come to pass. Hence ideological thinking becomes emancipated from the reality that we perceive with our five senses, and insists on a ‘truer’ reality concealed behind all perceptible things, dominating them from this place of concealment [...]”. But, “since ideologies have no power to transform reality, they achieve this emancipation of thought from experience through certain methods of demonstration. Ideological thinking orders facts into an absolutely logical procedure which starts from an axiomatically accepted premise, deducing everything else from it; that is, it proceeds with a consistency that exists nowhere in the realm of reality” (470–471).

## ***2.7 Reality and Abyss***

Thought emancipates itself from reality, reducing human action to behavior, to predictable reactions, fabricating a pervasive net in which no element is accidental. This is, according to Arendt, the effect of ideology. At the same time, it is also the new phenomenon with which Arendt is faced with. The fatal encounter between history and ideology, between ideas and facts, begins a process that is both dangerous and suspect. In fact, it is possible that no atrocities would have happened, history could have taken another direction, the reaction could have failed to even begin. This contingent aspect is very important in Arendt’s account. She never wishes to trace the causes that would explain totally, that would exhaust the unprecedented feature of Totalitarianism in some satisfying explanation. The perplexity toward any satisfactory explanation finds

suitable expression in the mood of the analysis that, I would suggest, is always conscious of the unresolved or paradoxical nature of the account. Somehow similarly to the Benjaminian “angel of history” – who observes destruction but cannot prevent it from happening, since a universal storm traps her wings – Arendt’s account is trapped between a helpless fatalism and casualness.

Destruction has happened. This is our burden. At the same time, though, the way in which we observe destruction must not signify that we accept it as inevitable. The attitude toward this past is that of “neither denying its existence nor submitting meekly to its weight”.

I suggest that what I have called the “paradox of reality” should be read as a responsible assumption of the “gap,” the “abyss” that separates facts as they take place in history.<sup>16</sup> The “grotesque disparity between cause and effect” plays a major role in her account. Interestingly enough, this image of the gap emerges several times in the text, and is sometimes described as a “gap” and some others as an “abyss”. Arendt, in fact, writes: “There is an abyss between the men of brilliant and facile conceptions and men of brutal deeds and active bestiality which no intellectual explanation is able to bridge” (183).

Reality lies somewhere in between, in the gap, or abyss, that the facts and events of this century have created. No explanation can bridge the abyss, but, at the same time – and here, I think, the connection between ethical and methodological issues becomes visible – there should be no explanation possible. In other words, what is at stake here is the strong will not to justify the happened, and this is possible only by assuming responsibility for the existence of the abyss. The Arendtian analysis is, I think, centered on this specific issue – the impossibility and refusal of bridging the abyss.

The public sphere is “violated” to the largest possible extent in modern times first during the imperialist era and then during the totalitarian era. The absurd conviction of “power for the sake of power,” which guides the imperialist mentality, is well expressed in Cecil Rhodes’ sentence: “I would annex the planets if I could”. By overcoming the shared earthly space for the sake of conquest, and by fulfilling the desire to go beyond national boundaries,<sup>17</sup> imperialism testifies to how the common human perception of reality had been perverted long before the creation of concentration camps. Imperialism is already an ideology: Expansion for its own sake is the generalizing and justifying idea by which reality is read and through which arbitrariness is justified. Ideology as a process finds ulterior legitimization by expanding itself in the total web of reality: “in their claim to total explanation, ideologies have the tendency to explain not what is, but what becomes, what is born and passes away. They are in all cases concerned solely with the element of motion, that is, with history in the customary sense of the word” (470).

In order to legitimize itself, the element of movement inherent in the imperialistic perspective cannot rely solely on history as a past to be ‘interpreted,’ but also on a future to be projected in spatial terms, the boundaries of which, however, transcend the earth. Imperialism legitimizes itself by positing infinite domination, by foreseeing expansion in terms of the planetary dimension, in terms of the entire universe, for that matter. Reality in its concrete and unpredictable dimension is swept away: Within the imperialistic horizon no contingent obstacle can hinder the actual realization of the expansion project. This holds true for the racial project of Nazism as well, since it grounds its legitimization on the universal spreading of ideology, or, better yet, on the planetary supremacy of one race.

Successful ideology – which by means of its logical consistency devours reality – bases its efficacy on the magnitude of the project. Ideology relies enormously on such magnitude – the dimensions of which escape all human measures and possibilities of control, but which, of course can find their plausibility in the abstract character of general concepts. Reality as such, in its concreteness and particularity, in the bond that it must have with human finitude, is irreversibly lost in the universalistic and abstract dimension of general concepts. This generality, this magnitude in its abstract and meaningless character, are the constituents of the abyss that Arendt detects, the abyss that “no explanation is able to bridge”. That is, no explanation, at least no meaningful explanation, can account for successful ideology, since explanation, understanding, in Arendt’s terms, is significant only when related to the shared and concrete reality of our being in the world.

Reality is no longer at stake in Totalitarianism. Reality is merely a planetary waste, which ideology easily rids itself of. This is why Arendt obstinately wants to recover reality, wants to re-gather the threads of it by reading through the history of the abyss. Re-reading this history, though, does not necessarily imply its justification. Justifying such a history would involve the ability to explaining it *in toto*, exhaustively. This ability is lost simply because the abyss has ruptured historical continuity. If we assume that we can exhaustively explain – that is, locate enough plausible causes and explanations for everything that has happened – then we must pretend that history is still conceivable in terms of continuity, we must pretend not to see the abyss. Pretending would be inconceivable, though, since the irreversible nature of facts as they have happened remains visible to us in the form of tangible corpses.

Vexed reality, therefore must be recoverable or regained. The abyss must be bridged. The core of the entire issue here is to prove that Arendt carries out the task of fair understanding without falling prey to historical apology. The abyss remains, unavoidable – our task is that of facing it, remaining on its dangerous threshold, aware of its immensity. Since observing the abyss from its threshold

does not necessarily mean to dive into it head first, by the same token, facing up to the reality that Totalitarianism has concealed and violated does not necessarily mean understanding it. Although there might well be a comprehension of the phenomenon, it cannot and must not be neutralized within an abstract theoretical perspective.

The way theoretical knowledge works implies predictability, which is strictly connected with the epistemological status of theory as such. The efficacy of such knowledge, in fact, lies in its ability to predict. Theory is able to accept the new since it subsumes it as the empirical occurrence of a general idea, or a general conceptualization of phenomena. Theory abstracts the single occurrence and inserts it into a general vision, into a totality. Unpredictability, that is, in our case, the unprecedented nature of Totalitarianism, exists for theory only insofar as it can be abstracted, or deprived of its constitutive characteristics. The modality of the comprehension of reality is, therefore, linked to the ability to abstract from it. Reality can be comprehended insofar as it is deprived of its basic feature: contingency. Understanding through abstraction and generalizing concepts, that is, through analogies and precedents, implies the use of stereotypes. The significance placed by Arendt on the accidental and contingent aspect of historical facts is tightly interwoven with her conception of history as a history of events, or as togetherness of stories.<sup>18</sup>

“That every individual life between birth and death can eventually be told as a story with a beginning and end is the pre-political and pre-historical condition of history, the great story without beginning and end. But the reason why each human life tells its story and why history ultimately becomes the storybook of mankind, with many actors and speakers yet without any tangible authors, is that both are the outcome of action” (HC: 184).

History deals with action, that is, with the unpredictable and unexpected aspect of our ability to act, to give birth to “the new”, to modify the changeless and cyclical movement of nature and biological human life through the possibility of “beginning”. History, therefore, is the result of these human deeds, but not in the sense of its being a ‘product,’ as if men were able to master the course of events. Man is the agent, the ‘protagonist’ of the story, never its author. Arendt, therefore, assumes a position *generis sui* in the landscape of the narrativist and anti-narrativist notions of history (see *Supra*, Chapter Two). On the one hand, narrativists à la Ranke, conceive of history only as a recount of official events and great characters. Arendt does not agree with this position insofar as she does not consider men to be the authors of their own destiny. On the other hand, the anti-narrativist position of Braudel, just to give one example, who emphasizes long-term changes and trends, and stresses the importance of super-human factors rather than individual –political – activity, does not coincide at all with Arendt’s view, which is, so to say, linked not only to the

contingency of human life *tout court*, but to the contingent dimension of the *vita activa*. This contingency, which was paradoxically connected to immortality in ancient times, should not convey the idea that history is the realm of the ineffable, the incomprehensible, the realm of chaotic indifference. Only by assuming the perspective of a narrative approach to history, of unpredictable yet interrelated human actions, that inevitably occur within the realm of the *vita activa*, can history be 'fair' to reality. In other words, only in this way can it respect its contingency without attempting to solve the irresolvable philosophical question of the possibility (or impossibility) of representing past reality as it really happened.

Such a broad concept as the "subject of history" can clearly never be "mankind" as a whole, since it "can never become an active agent". Mankind as a whole is an abstraction, a fictive character, which corresponds to no real experience. Mankind as a whole, or the "invisible hand," the "Spirit," "Nature" and so on, is the symbol "for the fact that real stories, in distinction from those we invent, have no author" (HC: 185). The philosophy of history contains a fictional aspect: the invention of a supernatural or superhuman force which acts behind the scenes, which would, according to philosophers, solve the perplexing riddle of how history is acted by men but not made by them. "The invisible actor behind the scene is an invention arising from a mental perplexity but corresponding to no real experience" (186).

History can be conceived of as a togetherness of stories, the meaning of which cannot be comprehended as a single entity. History as a whole discloses no meaning, no direction and no progress. Moreover, it is in such a generalization, in the subsumption of each single story within the general fictive aspect of History as a whole, that reality is lost. We can extend the analogy to the ideological field. If History as a whole can be invented and made effective through ideology, it is because it has eliminated the contingent, unpredictable and unexpected character of reality. Ideology subsumes reality under its categories, reducing and manipulating it. By avoiding unpredictability and contingency and instead tuning each single event to the "direction" or "meaning" of history as a whole, ideology uses theoretical tools to fabricate a new reality. In order to avoid the fascination with and the completeness of a theoretically fabricated reality, that is, to refrain from generalizations and stereotypes, Arendt seeks to maintain her distance both from historiographic models and conformism.

On the one hand we have unspeakable evil, an unimaginable landscape of terror. On the other hand, there is the apparently neutral and objective course of history depicted – and constructed – by ideology. On the one hand, the unexpectedness of reality has respected its principle, while on the other hand that same reality is a strange combination of false beliefs and terror techniques.

Arendt wants to defeat both; the unspeakable nature of evil needs a voice that remembers. Nevertheless, this voice must neither be neutral nor objective, it must not presuppose a 'sense' in everything that has happened. Moreover, it must not insert those events into a continual frame, neutralizing the impact that the horrible novelty has had and must continue to have.

What is at stake here is the importance, which is simultaneously political and moral, of remembrance. In order to remember the unprecedented, Arendt must stay true to the abyss; the analysis of Totalitarianism is, therefore, a form of remembrance that takes place on the threshold of the gulf between past and future. This is why understanding and remembering are strictly interwoven with one another and cannot refrain from consciously examining the abyss. If this abyss were to be totally bridged, then it would again be at the expenses of reality. It would be a demonstration that reality, no matter how cruel, bestial, unprecedented, can be masked, altered and adjusted to the comfortable view of continuity. Adjusting reality to ideology also means to "explain away factual contradictions as stages of one identical, consistent movement."

"Explaining away" Totalitarianism as a necessary stage of a "consistent movement" would not be difficult. It seems that both capitalist and communist ideologies have attempted such an enterprise.<sup>19</sup> The temptation of getting hold of reality and reinterpreting it according to a general view of history is the totalitarian heritage that the so-called "victors" of World War II have easily learned.

## ***2.8 Abyss and Redemption***

The thought of Walter Benjamin, and most of all his reflections on the "concept of history," offer an interesting insight into and fruitful patterns of interpretation as regards the Arendtian issue of the comprehension of the past. Benjamin was inspired to write his famous *Thesen* as a result of the events of those "dark times" when barbarism seemed to have conquered the entire earth. These reflections on history offer the possibility to understand how the will for salvation, or better yet, the feeble feeling of the hope for redemption from evil animated the intellectual engagement of the period (Benjamin 1977: 251–261).

Both Arendt and Benjamin, beyond a mere utopia of salvation, express the firm conviction that it is still possible, the evil of what happened notwithstanding, to find a meaning behind such events. In my view, what makes the comparison fruitful – independently from the political and theoretical differences between the two authors – is the extraordinary richness of Benjaminian thought, which, in its complex and elusive texture, can offer a nonconformist approach to reality.



In the *Thesen*, Benjamin elaborates on an interesting critique of History, insofar as History is always the history of victors. Benjamin develops the idea that “History” as such has always been a matter of victory. The victors have always controlled history and tradition – in the literal sense of transmission. The hypocrisy of knowing the past as “es eigentlich gewesen” conceals the adjusting intention of focusing the interpretation of what has happened on the outcome. As Benjamin notes, we always measure this outcome according to victory. History of victors, in its conformist essence, is continual.

Benjamin detects three major fallacies in historicism: the assumption of a universal history, the presence of an epic element according to which history “let itself be told” (*lässt sich erzählen*), and the empathy or identification (*Einfühlung*) between the historian and the past.

History, in Ranke’s view, is an interpretation of the past as homogeneous and empty time that constantly proceeds toward the future. Similarly, such a past would be narratable in its factuality, as it really occurred.

Dilthey founds historical comprehension on the concept of *Erlebnis*. *Erlebnis* is a modality of the “structure of the lived” by which psychic life is adjusted to experience. In other words, there would be an identity of structure between the psychic modality and the way experience offers itself to the subject. *Erlebnis* is, therefore, a kind of pre-reflexive modality of comprehension, which, by positing an identical structure between the lived and its comprehension, between experience and the subjective, psychical comprehension, guarantees continuity in the comprehension of history. History, then, is merely a collection of lived experiences, the structure of which is identical. As such, the subject understands the past from the point of view of the present – that is, his cultural and psychic present – by virtue of the fact that both have the same structure. The means by which the past is made present is through empathy. The historian empathizes with the events – comprehension means finding the “I” in the “you” (Gagnebin, 1978: 56–64).

By positing commonness (*Gemeinsamkeit*) between the present *Erlebnis* and the past – which the *Erlebnis* as pre-comprehension has decoded – the historicist historian relativizes his point of view as historical. In other words, by means of this empathy-identification, the historian adapts his view to the victors’ course of history, pretending that such a course is his own point of view. This relativizing practice contains a quiescent (*Beruhigendes*) element.

“In jeder Epoche muß versucht werden, die Überlieferung von neuem dem Konformismus abzugewinnen, der im Begriff steht, sie zu überwaltigen“ (Benjamin 1977: VI, 253).<sup>20</sup> Such a conformist position must be defeated in view of the redemption or salvation (*Rettung*) of the past. The past, if seen from the perspective of the oppressed, has never been told, has remained voiceless within the continuous stream of the history of victors: “Die jeweils Herrschenden sind

aber die Erben aller, die je gesiegt haben. Die Einfühlung in den Sieger kommt demnach den jeweils Herrschenden allemal zugut“ (VII, 254).<sup>21</sup>

The past as a history of oppression and lies, the lies of the victors, which substituted evil and suffering with continuity, must be redeemed, must be brought to the surface and activated in the present. According to Benjamin, the past is layered under the apparently tranquil surface of the present. The history of the oppressed that Benjamin has in mind is not at all a parallel history to that of the victors, as if it were a counter history, one which is also continuous. The history of the oppressed must be conceived of as aporetic and discontinuous. In this history the temporal flux must be arrested, put into a ‘temporal suspension’ or ‘immobility state’ (*Stillstand*). It is as if some events were suspended diachronically and magnified synchronically, polarizing the attention. This state of suspension or immobility state prevents the events from becoming mere precedents, necessary causes. It eliminates the necessary aspect attributed to the events by history as a continuum. Following this suspension, events ‘move again,’ are able to keep signifying although in a different way than before. The task of the historical materialist, says Benjamin, is “[...] fanning the spark of hope in the past”. He must let the past of the oppressed emerge and redeem it within a vision of history that opposes that of the victors. “[...] auch die Toten werden vor dem Feind, wenn er siegt, nicht sicher sein. Und dieser Feind hat zu siegen nicht aufgehört” (VI, 253).<sup>22</sup>

This new historical crystallization – the suspended event extracted from the historical continuum where it only functions as temporal link – fulfils the hopes and expectations of a past that has never happened. In other words, the aporetic nature of the history of the oppressed, its discontinuity, is a methodological and political tool through which the ‘tradition of the oppressed,’ the waste of official history, strongly opposes the linearity and smoothness of the victors by virtue of its discontinuity, constantly reaffirming its hope for liberation.

To oppose historical continuity, therefore, means to oppose a vision of reality that neutralizes its impact in an endless chain of causes and effects, the sequence of events “wie einen Rosenkranz” (“like the beads of a rosary”) (XVIII A, 261). Such a vision, while neutralizing the impact of oppression and suffering, adjusts itself to the perspective of the victor.

The victor is he who has usurped and suppressed reality and its remembrance for the sake of an idea. The victor takes hold of the ideology of the victors, the empty ideology of History as a process. He inserts himself in the flux of domination, simply erasing from his perspective the outraged and violated. The victor does not care about reality, but only about its projection in the temporal movement, the reality of which consists only in its ‘passing,’ as a mere instrument for the future. This is the perspective of historicism, but it is

also the perspective of whoever joins the parade of the victors, contributing to the transmission of the “cultural treasures” which, since they are the heritage of a history of victory, “have an origin he cannot contemplate without horror.” “Es ist niemals ein Dokument der Kultur, ohne zugleich ein solches der Barberei zu sein” (“There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism”) (VII, 254). Contrarily, “Auf den Begriff einer Gegenwart, die nicht Übergang ist, sondern in der Zeit einsteht und zum Stillstand gekommen ist, kann der historische Materialist nicht verzichten“ (XVI, 259).<sup>23</sup>

In Benjamin’s perspective, hence, the past is not yet concluded. The past makes claims to the present, since it is open on the present in its expectation of the fulfillment of old promises (Gagnebin 1978: 94). In this perspective of the ontologization of possibility the past is hardly a neutral field, a temporal dimension. Rather, it is a past that must be revealed, uncovered and fulfilled. The past is pregnant with desires and hopes that have yet to be fulfilled, and have simply been ignored or suppressed. This past-suspended time has nothing to do with the empty time of universal history. It is a time that is full of hope and messianic expectation: “[Der historische Materialist] begründet so einen Begriff der Gegenwart als der ‘Jetztzeit’, in welcher Splitter der messianischen einesprengt sind“ (XVIII A, 261).<sup>24</sup>

Both in Benjamin and Arendt, the suspension of continuity arises from the destruction and refusal of history as a continuous flux, as an exclusively “causal nexus between different moments” on the one hand, and, as aiming at enhancing the inherent suspension – as affirming the unwillingness to adjust the past to the present – on the other. The suspension of continuity means, in other words, accepting the abyss. In Benjamin, the destructive gesture of the historical materialist reassembles a history that begins from the perspective of its waste. A history that puts together the fragments that historical continuity has concealed and oppressed. These fragments become citations, powerfully subversive and unsettling. Citations have the power to bewilder the reader, to prevent her from a passive acceptance of the present. Arendt tells the totalitarian history through a narration that disrupts chronology as a structure. This way of telling history does not justify what has happened, but courageously confronts it, highlighting the fragments and the dead end streets in history (Benhabib 1990: 180–181).

In both cases the traditional perspective is destroyed. Tradition, in the literal sense of transmission – that is, according to Benjamin, the transmission of the culture of the victors – is refused. The will that animates both authors engenders non-conciliatory and non-justifying views of history. History must not adjust to the present. History must subvert its faithful compliance with continuity. “Über den Begriff der Geschichte visualises a temporal and textual confrontation

between linear and discontinuous concepts of time and history, and Benjamin's critique focuses on scattering the universality of the homogeneous understanding of time" (Lindroos 1998: 100).

The encounter between past and present is never quiet, as much as the interest in the past is never "antiquary," but always revolutionary. Historical discourse is a matter that is implicitly located in the present. The particular constellations and crystallizations of elements formed in the present supply a methodological tool for the understanding of their past meaning (Benhabib 1990: 172).

Moreover, the encounter between past and present actualizes history. For Benjamin, "actual" means both "active" and "present". The historical "montage" is actual in the sense that redeeming past phenomena always concerns acting in the present. The now-time or *Jetztzeit* is a present repletion of fragments from the past and, because it is concerned with the redemption of these fragments, it actualizes itself in action. Historical action, therefore, is embedded in the conception of history as redemption, as opposed to history as a development or progress. The distance between these two ways of conceiving history is measured according to the political, and therefore actual-active, capacity of history (Gagnebin 1978: 102).<sup>25</sup> Thus, the gesture common to both Arendt and Benjamin is that of the suspension of historical continuity, which at the same time is the political gesture of *inciting* to action in the present. History connects to political involvement and a responsibility toward reality. "The 'real' political experience creates a new perspective on the past and the present, since it primarily makes the institutions and their continuity questionable" (Lindroos 1998: 101).

The suspending gesture and the consequent construction of historical constellations – a construction that denies traditional continuity and plausibility to the cause of victors – are above all citations. The only possible way to oppose a continual vision of the past is to recover its fragments. Only through fragments can we oppose a continual vision of the past. Citations of the past are epiphanies that unsettle our comfortable vision of the present, disrupting its continuity. By allowing the past to *aufblitzen* (flash up) into the present, the unfulfilled hopes of the oppressed unsettle history as a continuum and turn historical constructions into political issues, or better yet, into political actions. To save past phenomena, to be fair to them, means to take a political stand in the present. This political stand begins with comprehension.

Both these authors, in my opinion, are seeking a means of bridging the abyss that has taken place, but at the same time both are aware that this bridge is not conceivable in traditional terms. No Hegelian *Versöhnung* is possible in times of horror and bestiality. The past must be comprehensible, even after the break with tradition. The only way to allow a new comprehension is to cite the past, that is, to

conceive of the past as disrupted, fragmented, and non-recoverable in its continuity.<sup>26</sup> Citation is an arbitrary composition of past elements into an historical construction. The arbitrariness of such constructions, though, is arbitrary only for those who join the victory parade of the vanquishers. In our perspective, citations must unsettle the reader, must take her away from the comfortable position of the spectator.

If reality – whatever it may be – must be unpremeditatedly and attentively faced, and if reality is the “infinitely improbable,” Arendt succeeds in keeping such political precept alive in her historical crystallization of Totalitarianism.<sup>27</sup> The past of the oppressed must be “re-discovered” in the present of the victors. This can only take place if the past is not neutralized in an historical tale of continuity, a history of “wie es denn eigentlich gewesen”. The redemption of the past, together with its ‘fair’ comprehension, can only take place where the past is recovered as a fragment and inserted into historical constructions that suddenly jump in and challenge the present.<sup>28</sup> Benjamin’s redeemable past is just an uncomfortable view of past events from the perspective of their being “infinitely improbable,” of their not being representable.

The infinitely improbable has taken place, but we must continue to face it with a sense of wonder, with a conscious indignation that can be re-created only through a daring historical composition of fragments. Because reality has been violated, because the gap between past and future has taken place, fragments can be freely used. Both Arendt and Benjamin are conscious of this. Perhaps the redemption of the totalitarian past cannot fully occur, perhaps in this case is difficult to attempt a “sea-change” of the fragmented past into “something rich and strange”<sup>29</sup>. What must be possible, though, is to make this attempt. The political engagement involved in this attempt must dig into the multiple layers of history and bring to the surface the complex and non-representable reality of the drowned and the saved<sup>30</sup>.

## NOTES

- 1 The interpretation that follows takes its major arguments from Arendt's often criticized interpretation of Hegel. In the previous chapter I specify that my debt to Arendt with regard to my reading of Plato, Descartes and Kant is evident but I do not hold her responsible for the implications deriving from that reading. This reading of Hegel, on the contrary, owes most of its arguments to Arendt.
- 2 In a brilliant 'introduction' to Hegel's thought, G. Rametta (Rametta 1992) notes that the aim of Hegel's philosophy in subsuming (*aufheben*) all events under a philosophy of history is that it wants to become a science of truth, therefore even surpassing the 'limited' notion of a philosophy of history : "la *Fenomenologia* non è né narrazione storica pura e semplice, né costituisce in senso stretto una filosofia della storia. Quest'ultima, infatti, dovrebbe collegare la trattazione di epoche ed eventi nel senso della storiografia con la loro 'organizzazione concettuale'. Soltanto a partire dall'unificazione di questi due momenti si può produrre una comprensione concettuale della storia, ovvero costruire una filosofia della storia come conoscenza e *sapere* di quello che la storia è in verità.  
La *Fenomenologia* costituisce soltanto il lato dell' 'organizzazione concettuale' dei contenuti storici, poiché in essa vengono espone solo le tappe più significative e rilevanti dal punto di vista della *meta* che lo spirito deve conseguire nel corso del suo divenire; o meglio, dal punto di vista della meta che esso ha raggiunto nell'esser *già* pervenuto al sapere di sé, cioè all'attuazione di se stesso nella forma del 'sistema della scienza'" (206–207).
- 3 As J. Taminiaux (Taminiaux 1997) observes: "In Hegel action is hypostatized into the chronological efficacy of the World Spirit, and the thinker remembering it is merely its witness" (161). Therefore, not only is action subordinated to thought, but thought itself becomes a mere instrument of chronological time flow.
- 4 As Simona Forti has pointed out, the denial of contingency in the sphere of human affairs, the famous Hegelian *Versöhnung*, is carried out by erasing the specificity of both *theoria* and *praxis* and by re-affirming, along with the mainstream of the tradition, the identity of Thought and Being: 'Ecco cosa si nasconde dietro la "riconciliazione" hegeliana di *theoria* e *praxis*: un'unificazione del pensiero con l'azione che si compie a spese dell'autonomia di entrambi. Detto altrimenti, Hegel finisce per rafforzare, con nuovi argomenti, la tradizionale equazione filosofica di Essere e Pensiero' (Forti 1994: 190).
- 5 For many philosophers, as well as political and social scientists, the equation between the conceptualization of contingency and the neutralization of politics would not be so 'selbstverständlich'. Kari Palonen (Palonen 1998) dedicates an entire work to the theme of contingency in political theory and praxis by proposing a new and very well documented reading of Max Weber's oeuvre.

Palonen traces a new notion of the political, which entails contingency not as its limit, its ineffable outside, but as the basic feature of political action. The *Weberian moment*, as Palonen calls it, is, therefore, the contingent chance of the political actor, an irreducible aspect of the political scene, or, better yet, the very ‘essence’ of the political, that which the political must make visible, as one of its first conditions. Politics is, for Weber, a mixture of order and contingency (“das Regelmäßige” and “das Zufällige”), but not simply as a realm of bureaucracy in which contingent actions represent the exception. “Ein anderes Verständnis der Freiheit, der Politik und des Handelns ist gefragt, das heißt ein Begriff, in dem die Kontingenz eingebaut ist, und dies nicht nur als ein Rest der *fortuna*, sondern als ein konstitutiver Aspekt des eigenen Handelns, bei dem jedoch keine vollständige Kontrolle der Situation vorausgesetzt werden kann”(209).

- 6 Koyré first published the essay that Arendt refers to in 1934 “under the misleading title *Hegel à Jéna*.” The essay was then republished in 1961 in the volume *Etudes d’Histoire de la Pensée Philosophique*, Paris.
- 7 Note, as Arendt does, what Heidegger (Heidegger 1993) says in relation to a future which somehow determines the past, and the encompassing notion of *Zeitlichkeit*: “Zukünftig auf sich zurückkommend, bringt sich die Entschlossenheit gegenwärtig in die Situation. Die Gewesenheit entspringt der Zukunft, so zwar, daß die gewesene (besser gewesene) Zukunft die Gegenwart aus sich entläßt. Dies dergestalt als gewesend-gegenwärtigende Zukunft einheitliche Phänomen nennen wir die *Zeitlichkeit*” (§ 65, 326). As regards the question of time and the relation to it – which is not as simple as it might seem from the brief analysis I dedicate to it in this work – from a Arendtian versus a Heideggerian perspective, see *Supra*, Chapter One, n.7.
- 8 This brilliant sentence by Virginia Woolf was originally brought to my attention by an article Lisa Disch published in *Political Theory* some years ago. The article was actually entitled *More truth than fact. Storytelling as critical understanding in the writings of Hannah Arendt*, “Political Theory”, vol. 21, n.4, 1993. Both this article and the book, *Hannah Arendt and the Limits of Philosophy* (Disch 1994), have been major sources of inspiration for the present work.
- 9 Lisa Disch (Disch 1994) traces Arendt’s original intentions of writing a book on the “Elements of Shame: Antisemitism – Imperialism – Racism” in an unpublished outline Arendt wrote for the editors of the book. This outline, says Disch, shows notable discrepancies with the published title “Origins of Totalitarianism”. “‘Elements’ – writes Disch – makes the break with historical narratives that chart the continuous evolution of an event from its causes” (122). See Disch 1994: 121–125.
- 10 Lisa Disch affirms: “Storytelling both situates our theories in the experiences from which they came and engages an audience in a different kind of critical thinking than an argument does. A story can present a dilemma as contingent and unprecedented and position its audience to think from within that dilemma. It invites the kind of situated critical thinking that is necessary when we

are called upon, in Arendt's words, to think 'without banisters'" (Disch 1994:110).

- 11 Annabel Herzog (Herzog 2000), in a truly illuminating article on Arendt's debt to Benjamin, as far as her notion of history is concerned, notes that the history which both Benjamin and Arendt had in mind, as the "stories of the defeated and the dead" (10) is a chronicle rather than an apology. The use of stories to disrupt the continuity of history is defined by Herzog as a means which provides a non-apologetic and therefore non-conformist view of the past. As such, Arendt did not write *The Origins* in order to oppose a *truer* history to that of the victors, but rather to gain a critical (and political) understanding of that reality instead of situating the perspective within the supposedly objective and scientific dimension of History: "her stories aim at replacing the public realm destroyed in dark times" (9). Herzog recognizes that Arendt's use of storytelling does not imply an empathy with the victims, but it is a means that allows a perspective which traditional historiography (Benjamin's despised historicism) ignores: "*The Origins of Totalitarianism* does not show empathy for the victims; it is written from the consciousness of the catastrophe, a consciousness that only the defeated and the dead could possess. Its purpose is not to comfort the victims but to reflect their historical experience of events" (12).
- 12 The narrative character of the book on Totalitarianism is also emphasized by Herzog, insofar as she notes that "the experience of the defeated is totally taken over by the experience of the storyteller." Herzog attributes to the telling of stories the redemptive power of putting into words that which remains unsaid, and also unconscious, in the historical experience of the defeated and the dead. By comparing Benjamin's remembrance (*Eingedenken*), of which he speaks in *the Storyteller* essay, with Arendt's revival of Kantian imagination (Einbildungskraft), Herzog affirms that in both cases what is at stake is to give voice to that which is speechless, to put into words the silence of the oppressed. (Herzog 2000:18).
- 13 "The organization of the *polis* physically secured the wall around the city and physiognomically guaranteed by its laws[...] a kind of organized remembrance. It assures the mortal that his passing existence and fleeting greatness will never lack the reality that comes from being seen, being heard and, generally, appearing before an audience of fellow men"(HC: 198).  
"The mortality of men lies in the fact that individual life, with a recognizable life-story from birth to death, rises out of biological life. This individual life is distinguished from all other things by the recilinear course of its movement, which, so to speak, cuts through the circular movement of biological life"(19).
- 14 Eric Voegelin reviewed Arendt's book and criticized it for being too emotional and also for "proceeding from a concrete center shock toward generalisations". Most of all Voegelin criticizes Arendt's account because of its inability to grasp the deep essence of both totalitarian movements (Nazism and Stalinism):



according to Voegelin there is an “essential sameness” in the two different occurrences, and namely their both being crises that follow from the agnosticism of modern age. In other words, Voegelin claims that “Totalitarianism is not unprecedented but, rather, ‘the climax of a secular revolution’”. Voegelin goes on to criticize Arendt’s attempt to “make contemporary phenomena intelligible by tracing their origin back to 18th century,” while he argues that such phenomena are merely the surface of a deeper “spiritual disease”. Arendt fails to grasp the essence and the genesis of this ‘spiritual disease’. Voegelin interpreted Arendt’s work as an “evolutionary tale that falls short of the origin and therefore misunderstands the essence of Totalitarianism.” Contrarily, Arendt did not want to “construct an evolutionary narrative of Totalitarianism because that would be the kind of laudatory, preserving historiography she wants to avoid” (Disch 1994: 124–125). The book, according to Arendt, does not deal with origins in the evolutionary sense, is not a ‘genesis’, but, rather, an attempt to account for how different elements crystallized into Totalitarianism (see Voegelin 1953).

- 15 Arendt accounts for the complexity and intermingled aspects of historical reality in a way that does not yield any general definitive solution to what she calls “the grotesque disparity between cause and effect”. In other words, the relations existing between phenomena, the apparently casual relations, are presented as smoothed over by interweaving strategies that multiply causes and offer many different explanations for a single phenomenon. Other scholars have also recognized this peculiar style in Arendt’s reconstruction of Totalitarianism but I have come to realize that even if one is able to perceive the peculiarity, one is quite unable to define it, to give it a proper name, to frame it as a specific style or mode of analysis. Annabel Herzog, for example, writes: “Arendt’s position is emphasized in a paradigmatic way when, at the end of *Imperialism*, she focuses on the ‘right to have rights’ as the most basic of all human rights. She attempts to determine the true loss of stateless people by a method that is neither purely descriptive nor purely normative, but consists of describing events from the point of view of a stateless person – which she was at the time of writing the book” (Herzog 2000: 11).
- 16 G. Agamben (Agamben 1998: 8) calls this the “predicament” of all historical comprehension: “L’aporia di Auschwitz è, infatti, la stessa aporia della conoscenza storica: la non-coincidenza fra fatti e verità, fra costatazione e comprensione.” We shall discuss this position on the *Shoah* and its comprehension when dealing with Primo Levi in the following chapter.
- 17 “The discovery of an expansion which was not driven by the specific appetite for a specific country but conceived as an endless process in which every country would serve only as stepping-stone for further expansion” (OT: 215).
- 18 Storytelling is, according to Arendt, the only means by which the fragile sphere of action can escape time. A story is the account of a person’s life from the point of view of those who have heard and seen it, and it is the guarantee of a solidity which the world of politics would otherwise be unable to achieve. Through storytelling, actions

and words lose their frail character and become reified in a 'work,' that is, in the story that is told. In other words, the narrative account is a means of understanding the world of contingency, a way that does not abstract from contingency as such, but simply reifies the 'not yet' as an event, as 'the happened'. Only through a narrative account can the irreducible differences that qualify each life story be saved. Storytelling grants a comprehension of phenomena that allows them not to be forgotten, whereas the omniscient and tyrannical vision of theory is unable to conceive of or understand them in fair terms (HC: 181–188, see also *Supra*, Chapter One).

- 19 The use by the Soviet regime of its victory over Nazism could be seen as a clear example. If one were to visit the old museums in the concentration camps in the former DDR, one would be able to see a clear example of the manipulation of reality through ideology. I was in Sachsenhausen, located just outside Berlin, in the region of Brandenburg, and I found that the Communist propaganda obsessively insisted on the dichotomy between Fascism and Communism (the latter as the 'illuminating sun after the dark night of Nazi-fascism'); among the vast and rare material this museum exposed on the Nazi period (pictures, uniforms etc.) not once was the word 'Jew' mentioned.
- 20 "In every era the attempt must be made anew to wrest tradition away from a conformism that is about to overpower it" (Benjamin 1969: VI, 255)
- 21 "And all the rulers are the heirs of those who conquered before them. Hence, empathy with the victor invariably benefits the rulers" (VII, 256).
- 22 "Even the dead will not be safe from the enemy if he wins. And this enemy has not ceased to be victorious" (VI, 255).
- 23 "A historical materialist cannot do without the notion of a present which is not transition, but in which time stands still and has come to a stop" (XVI, 262).
- 24 "[The historical materialist] establishes a conception of the present as 'the time of the now' which is shot through with chips of Messianic time" (XVIII A, 263).
- 25 Lindroos (1998) refers to this aspect of the present in Benjamin's thought as "cairological," as based on a conception of time as *Kairos*: "which emphasises the role of *singular temporalities* in both political and aesthetic experiences. *Firstly*, cairology differs from chronology with regard to the temporal order of historical events.[...]The cairologic approach neither searches for means of measuring or understanding movement through temporal continuity, nor attempts to control the dynamics of action through freezing them. Instead, this approach emphasises breaks, ruptures, non-synchronised moments and multiple temporal dimensions" (11–12). For an interesting and thorough discussion of time as *Kairos* see Marramao 1992.
- 26 "Insofar as the past has been transmitted as tradition, it possesses authority; insofar as authority presents itself historically, it becomes tradition. Walter Benjamin knew that the break in tradition and the loss of authority which occurred in his lifetime were irreparable, and he concluded that he had to discover new ways of dealing with the past. In this he became a master when he discovered that the transmissibility of the past had been replaced by its citability and that in place of its authority there

had arisen a strange power to settle down, piecemeal, in the present, and to deprive it of 'peace of mind', the mindless peace of complacency. 'Quotations in my works are like robbers by the roadside who make an armed attack and relieve an idler of his convictions'(Schriften, I, 571)"(MDT: 193).

- 27 There is a clear reference in Arendt's account of the totalitarian phenomenon to the Benjaminian term "crystallization," since, as Seyla Benhabib puts it, Arendt uses the term to delineate the process of the analysis of Totalitarianism: the metaphor of the crystal gives the impression of an amalgam of elements that develops unexpectedly. The term is used by Arendt to explain her technique of research: Totalitarianism is seen as a crystallization of elements, that is, a new structure of combination of different elements. The unprecedented nature of the phenomenon requires new metaphors in order to be explained. The crystal, therefore, implies a new combination, which forms a structure, but which also can be seen in its isolated nature as a crystal, that is, with little connection with the past (see Benhabib 1990: 184–189).
- 28 Annabel Herzog, whose parallels between Benjamin and Arendt are both very well thought out and very stimulating, affirms: "Arendt contends, like Benjamin, that past and present intermingle in the shock of crystallization, and that the essence of historical writing consists in recounting this shock"(Herzog 2000: 7). She also quotes Jerome Kohn ("Thinking/Acting," *Social Research* 57 (1) Spring 1990 ), for whom "the old is made new in this fragmentary recovery of the past: it is not the tradition that is recovered, but a *present* past".
- 29 Arendt, in her article on Walter Benjamin, quotes Shakespeare: "Full fathom thy father lies,/Of his bones are coral made,/Those are pearls that were his eyes,/Nothing of him that doth fade/But doth suffer a sea-change/Into something rich and strange." *The Tempest*, I, 2.
- 30 "The Drowned and the Saved" (*I sommersi e I salvati*) is the title of the famous work by Primo Levi (Levi 1986).

# CHAPTER FOUR

## 1. From History to Stories

### *1.1 Telling the Story of the Unprecedented: Joseph Conrad*

“Let us begin by accepting the notion that although there is an irreducible subjective core to human experience, this experience is also historical and secular, it is accessible to analysis and interpretation and – centrally important – it is not exhausted by totalizing theories, not marked and limited by doctrinal or national lines, not confined once and for all to analytical constructs.” Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism*

Let us attempt a horizontal, fictive and literary understanding of this incomprehensible reality by abandoning the great trends of official historiography and exploring the margins of that unbearable event. In other words, let us approach the darkness and become accustomed to the radical newness of history by following a literary hero, Conrad’s Marlow, who, by the way, was a genuine storyteller.

Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* is one of the most significant accounts of the colonial-imperialist experience of the late XIX century, an account which explores and expresses the cruelty and violence of an encounter with wilderness, or, better put, the cruel and violent attempt to conquer the entire planet with no regard for the ‘sacrifices of history,’ namely the risk of causing not only estrangement and frustration, but also madness, as in the case of Kurtz, the legendary protagonist of Marlow’s story.

In order to do this, however, we must take a step back, to the beginning of the story, which, as many literary critics have pointed out, stems from a real experience Conrad made as the commander of a tiny steamer in the upper Congo. The beginning of the fictionalized recount of this experience is, as is

often the case in Conrad's works, the marine context of a shipyard, or a harbor along the Thames, on the outskirts of London, "the biggest, and the greatest, town on earth" (HOD: 65). The atmosphere is that of the melancholic yet solid pledge of allegiance to the sea, with its adventurous tales of conquer and defeat, of life and death, a sea the anticipation of which is the stream of the Thames, which had served over the centuries, "to the rest of home or to the battles of the sea," as a dutiful servant of the nation. "What greatness had not floated on the ebb of that river into the mystery of an unknown earth!...The dreams of men, the seed of commonwealths, the germs of empires" (67).

The first narrating voice, which will soon step aside and let Marlow speak, provides us with a commemorative recount of the glories of the British Empire, not forgetting to celebrate the heroes and the ships that have sailed through that almost familiar tide of the river toward the unknown earth. As a sort of bridge from civilization to wilderness, from familiarity to mystery, the Thames suddenly becomes the anticipator of darkness and monstrosity, not only in its outer direction, but also toward the inside, toward London. "And this also," said Marlow suddenly, 'has been one of the dark places of the earth'"(67). The feeling of estrangement is immediately introduced through Marlow's words, the words of he who will tell the story of his journey into the depths of Africa in the first person, and he who symptomatically starts off with a remark on the darkness of London. We could sociologically interpret this reference as the description of the metropolis, the hell on earth where a modern slavery was in the process of construction in the factories and mines of industrial England. But Marlow, a seaman and a "wanderer," does not seem the sociological type, his story is not a simple one, as Marlow "was not typical, and to him the meaning of an episode was not inside like a kernel but outside, enveloping the tale which brought it out only as a glow brings out a haze, in the likeness of one of these misty halos that sometimes are made visible by the spectral illumination of moonshine" (68). He is a spectral seaman in the sense that his tales are not as simple and direct as those of typical seamen. Marlow is neither typical nor representative, he is a type all his own. Marlow's character is only sketched, from the outside perspective of the narrator; he will reveal himself through the darkness into which he leads us as the narrator of the journey.

Marlow is introduced as a character, or a mystery himself: a mysterious person who leads us through the mysteries of an unknown earth, a person in strong contrast with the typical and down-to-earth seaman, for whom "one ship is very much like another, and the sea is always the same. In the immutability of their surroundings the foreign shores, the foreign faces, the changing immensity of life, glide past, veiled not by a sense of mystery but by a slightly disdainful ignorance; for there is nothing mysterious to a seaman unless it be the sea itself, which is the mistress of his existence and as inscrutable as Destiny" (68).

It seems that the a-typical Marlow is the chosen storyteller for this a-typical tale. Marlow, in fact, continues his remarks on the darkness of London by recalling immemorial times, ancient and mysterious, “when the Romans first came here, nineteen hundred years ago-the other day... Light came out of this river since – you say Knights? Yes; but it is like a running blaze on a plain, like a flash of lightning in the clouds. We live in the flicker – may it last as long as the old earth keeps rolling! But darkness was here yesterday.” In an effort to imagine a possible landscape of wilderness where the civilized metropolis of London now stands, Marlow also imagines the remote condition of ancient Romans, and tries to fictionalize the unknown in an attempt to render it familiar: “Imagine the feelings of a commander of a fine – what d’ye call ‘em?– trireme in the Mediterranean, ordered suddenly to the north [...] Imagine him here – the very end of the world, a sea the colour of lead, a sky the colour of smoke, a kind of ship as rigid as a concertina – and going up this river with stores, or orders, or what you like.”

Marlow attempts an approach to the new from the ancient, and a sort of historical (one might say pre-historical) pre-condition of his story is the staging of a wild darkness in the heart of civilization. “Sand banks, marshes, forests, savages, – precious little to eat fit for a civilized man, nothing but Thames water to drink [...] cold, fog, tempest, disease, exile and death – death skulking in the air, in the water, in the bush.”

Marlow insists on the alterity of this experience of wilderness, which is first introduced through the fictive tale of the Roman legionaries. He also insists on its incomprehensibility and its fascination, “the fascination of the abomination”. As if the call of the wild would cast a spell upon the civilized man, Marlow seems to seek a primordial element from which to initiate his journey into the darkness. But as a storyteller, Marlow proceeds cautiously, as if slowly winding along the bends of the Thames, which, in his passionate description of the wild scenery, has become more like the kind of tropical river that might be found in Congo or Vietnam. “Land in a swamp, march through the woods, and in some inland post feel the savagery, the utter savagery, had closed round him – all that mysterious life of the wilderness that stirs in the forest, in the jungles, in the hearts of wild men. There’s no initiation to such mysteries” (69). This seems to be both the reason why Marlow needs to tell a story about the darkness and the impossibility of, so to say, being able to successfully tell it. By denying the possibility of an initiation, of an introduction to those mysteries, Marlow seems to warn his audience about the possible failure of his recount. He cannot tell this improbable and unbelievable story by following the traditional rule of “once upon a time”. There is no adequate beginning, nor possible initiation, for a story like this. At the same time, though, it seems that the impossibility of a traditional story, of a more or less a-problematic realistic account, is constitutive of the literary task Conrad perceives as his own.

## 1.2 *Telling the Horror*

Conrad's works are often characterized by a plurality (at least two) of narrators, who recount either a lived or reported experience. The context of a narrated experience, as on the deck of a merchant ship or in the midst of a smoky inn outside the harbor, retains a significant quality. On the one hand the narrating voice gives immediacy and concreteness to the tale, while on the other every story begins and ends as a sort of unfulfilled promise, frustrated in its aim at completeness. The context of a concrete and popular storyteller's relationship with an audience emphasizes an apparently unproblematic setting for marine adventures. It is often the case in Conrad's works that the revival of an old-fashioned presence of authorial intervention (as is often the case with Marlow, the narrator) is not simply a nostalgic or a manneristic attempt to revive the past, but rather, is the will to testify to such an impossible and frustrated recovery through literary representation (see Jameson 1980: 222).

It is in the form of a sudden beginning, with the ambiguous yet pregnant sentence "and this also has been one of the dark places on earth," that Marlow entertains his companions, who are patiently waiting for the ebb to run, with one of his "unconclusive experiences" (70). Marlow is humbly anxious to tell this strange story of when he was "fresh-water sailor for a bit" to his companions. In spite of his doomed beginning and lack of confidence in his ability to convey a meaning, Marlow goes on: "I don't want to bother you much with what happened to me personally" he begins, showing in this remark the weakness of many tellers of tales who seem so often unaware of what their audience would best like to hear." There is a drive that forces him to tell the story of his experience, in which the encounter with Kurtz, a European who turns to savagery by living in the isolation of a remote trading post in Congo, is also an encounter with himself, with the darkest part of his soul. "It was the farthest point of navigation and the culminating point of my experience. It seemed somehow to throw a kind of light on everything about me – and into my thoughts. It was somber enough, too – and pitiful – not extraordinary in any way – not very clear either. No, not very clear. And yet it seemed to throw a kind of light" (70).

The story of the estrangement deriving from the immersion into an altogether unimaginable context of life – savage, wild, yet human – narrates the experience through attempts, broken phrases, illuminating sentences and mysterious entanglements: "We were wanderers on a prehistoric earth, on an earth that wore the aspect of an unknown planet. [...] But suddenly, as we struggled round a bend, there would be a glimpse of rush walls, of peaked grass roofs, a burst of yells, a whirl of black limbs, a mass of hand clapping, of feet stamping, of bodies swaying, of eyes rolling, under the droop of heavy and motionless foliage" (105).

The monstrous and bewildering realm of nature, intermingled with a human presence not quite distinguished from the savage forest, offers itself to the eyes of the observers, who, frustratingly try to grasp of this newness through a language that seems unable to get hold of the otherness that haunts them, both as an external presence (the foliage, the feet and eyes, the limbs) and an internal one (“we were wanderers on a prehistoric earth...”).<sup>1</sup>

In his need to capture the overwhelming newness of the African landscape, Conrad-Marlow tries to represent it in the form of an original, ancestral experience, as if the voyage into the darkness of the Continent could take the civilized mind back into a pre-human memory, a sort of regression into the remoteness of a pre-historical time. Yet, the modern observer is unable to immediately experience this regression, and the frustration derived from this estrangement does not provide an ancestral return to nature, but a defeat of reason, the impossibility to apply the criteria of understanding given to a civilized mind by centuries of civilization and progress: “We were cut off from the comprehension of our surroundings; we glided past like phantoms, wondering and secretly appalled, as sane men would be before an enthusiastic breakout in a madhouse. We could not understand because we were too far and could not remember because we were traveling in the night of first ages, of those ages that are gone, leaving hardly a sign – and no memories.”

It is as if the very colonial enterprise, at the very heart of its grand project of moralizing conquest, were unable to properly conceal its treacherous intentions. A rational vision of the conquest, its historical justification, cannot properly contain its essential indecipherability, its nihilism: “A shadow lurks at the heart of Enlightenment. *Heart of Darkness* unveils this shadow, this deceitful rhetoric; but in this case the rhetoric is that of humanitarian idealism, which European societies promoted as moral justification for the Western conquest in Africa” (Harrison 1992: 137).

The journey into the darkness has no guiding measures that can offer a path beforehand, it is a journey that explores the boundaries of humanity and the boundaries of language. It is as if the wanderers’ identity itself would become a part of that exploration, they had been offered the opportunity to test their own ‘nature,’ to explore the limits of their own self-understanding in the first place. It is the frustration of a civilized mind that emerges in the words of Marlow, the feeling of bafflement provided by the clash between the imperious mind, which was made for grasping and understanding – a sort of last cry of humanism – and the radical alterity, which escapes meaning: “The earth seemed unearthly. We were accustomed to look upon the shackled form of a conquered monster, but there – there you could look at a thing monstrous and free. It was unearthly, and the men were – No, they were not inhuman. Well, you know, that was the worst of it – this suspicion of their not being inhuman”(105).



The customary behavior of the Western man, that of looking “upon the form of a conquered monster” as from a superior point of view, with powerful eyes that are able to understand and be satisfied with only that which is conquered, possessed, silenced, is no longer helpful. The syntax becomes shattered, unable to proceed on a linear course, with the main and subordinate clause: the very means of linguistic representation become entrapped in the wilderness of the experience, unable to exhaustively recount that which cannot be conquered. The frustration is relieved in the form of an outburst, in a cry of human pride which still hopes to offer a dignified version of this not quite human experience: “[...] but what thrilled you was the thought of their humanity – like yours – the thought of your remote kinship with this wild and passionate uproar. Ugly. Yes, it was ugly enough; but if you were man enough you would admit to yourself that there was in you just the faintest trace of a response to the terrible frankness of that noise, a dim suspicion of there being a meaning in which you – you so remote from the night of first ages-could comprehend”(105–106).

The remote kinship advocated by Marlow is a sort of ugly and unpleasant thought, which nevertheless shapes the encounter and diminishes that radical monstrosity, the closeness to nature, the initial undistinguishable juxtaposition of feet, limbs, eyes and foliage. The recognizing of this kinship, however, entails the eventual questioning of one’s own humanity, the testing of the boundaries of one’s own difference within oneself, the abandonment of the claim to autonomy and sovereignty of one’s own soul and body. The later encounter with Kurtz is a sort of backward journey from the clarity of one’s own rationality into the darkness of savagery, as if Marlow and his companions had witnessed and feared the possibility of their own regression into a state of being totally other, frightening and ominous yet very close, unreal yet possible.

### ***1.3 The Adventurous Path***

*Heart of Darkness* is one of the most unsettling novels about the alienation of the modern mind when faced with totally new experiences, which the men of the beginning of the century were completely incapable of understanding. The darkness that the narrator, Marlow, tries to communicate in the recount of his experience in Africa is not only that of the faces he encounters in the deep forests of Congo, but the darkness of his very heart, the strangeness within himself, which he discovers, as it were, only when confronted with a wild darkness outside. This darkness is the encounter and the impossibility to understand and deal with the ‘savagery’ and ‘brutality’ of different peoples and cultures. It also symbolizes a “literal hollowness,” a sort of “papier-maché”

rationality which founds its legitimacy on an “unhearted hole or cavity,” which, “like a festering wound in the depths of the forest, symbolizes the colonial enterprise” (Harrison 1992: 139).

The newness of this experience in the wilderness of the African continent does not lie in the encounter with savage tribes as such. The discovery of a totally other world, of a ‘natural’ humanity that lived in a symbiotic relationship with nature, had fascinated European culture in the XVII and XVIII centuries. Before the systematic and imperialistic scramble of Africa, the existence of “prehistoric men” exerted nothing more than an ethnographic influence on European civilization. Arendt notes that even when the Europeans came and deported Africans as slaves, or exterminated savage tribes for the ivory hunt, or even when isolated adventurers “had gone mad in the silent wilderness of an overpopulated continent where the presence of human beings only underlined utter solitude” (OT: 191), the influence of these phenomena on Western culture was very dim. It seems that only when Europe, or the Western world, became systematically interested in the expansion of its own capital and population – that is, when the “superfluous men” of Europe crossed the boundaries of their own civilization – did Africa, or the southern parts of the world, become a political and economic issue strictly related to Europe. The “sailors and wanderers” who ventured into the heart of the dark continent were no longer “lonely individuals,” as Arendt notes. In fact, “all Europe had contributed to the making of (them).”

As Marlow notes, at the beginning of his narrative when he compares his voyage to the Roman conquest of England, the specificity of his own mission in Africa differs from that of the ancient legionaries, as they “were conquerors” – as if the idea of being an invader and a conqueror would entail a dignity superior to that of being a mere colonist trader. “The conquest of the earth, which mostly means the taking it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves, is not a pretty thing when you look into it too much. What redeems it is the idea only. An idea at the back of it; not a sentimental pretence but an idea; and an unselfish belief in the idea – something you can set up, and bow down before, and offer a sacrifice too...” (HOD: 69–70). Marlow adorns the brutality of conquest with mythical elements, although not only in order to celebrate that which is remote and therefore more dignified. He is also trying to account for the specificity of his own experience, which is not as noble and not quite the same. “Mind, none of us would feel exactly like this. What saves us is efficiency – the devotion to efficiency” (96).

The imperialist experience was, in fact, characterized by a strange combination of brutality and efficiency, and this coupling has a notorious reputation amongst the central features of totalitarian phenomenon.

Arendt characterizes this new model of colonization as a combination of bureaucracy and racism, in which the efficiency of commercial companies could not be sustained without the racist belief in the superiority of white men. What is interesting is that Imperialism anticipated Totalitarianism in intentions, modes and proceedings. In the forests of Africa, far away from the ethical constraints of civilized Europe, in a manner reminiscent of a short-circuit, brutality became allied with efficiency, horror with laughter. The anticipatory character of African enterprises is appalling: *Heart of Darkness*, in attempting to convey the mood of that experience, prophetically anticipates some of the features of totalitarian rule. Not only does it do so in the shaping of the characters, those useless beings that Europe had expelled, “an inevitable residue of the capitalist system and even the representatives of an economy that relentlessly produced a superfluity of men and capital” (OT: 189), but also in underlying a sharp contrast between language and reality. As in the gap Marlow often detects between the language of bureaucrats, the gap between the aseptic language of efficiency and the reality of the experience he is personally witnessing, Marlow-Conrad prophetically anticipates one of the main features of Totalitarian ideology and propaganda.<sup>2</sup>

Conrad’s account of his experience through Marlow’s story is an attempt to convey the meaning, not only the individual or psychological meaning, of the complex amalgam that characterized the systematic and supposedly efficient encounter with other cultures as fashioned by Imperialism during the end of the XIX century. It is no coincidence that the story of Kurtz, a story of abandonment, solitude and madness, insists on a repeated *leit-motive*, which, even in its brutality and apparent insanity, mirrors the ideology that led the European colonization of Africa: “Exterminate all the brutes” (HOD: 123). An apparently criminal sentence like this becomes, during the high point of Imperialism, the very chore of English bureaucrats who, as Arendt reports, proposed “administrative massacres” in India, while in Africa some officials declared that “no ethical consideration such as the rights of man will be allowed to stand in the way” (OT: 221). These are simple yet significant hints of the potential yet unheard of nature of the totalitarian reality, which, began to surface and shatter all the previous standards of judgment and understanding during the imperialist era. “Lying under nobody’s nose were many of the elements which gathered together could create a totalitarian government on the basis of racism” (OT: 221).

The language of bafflement and frustration that Marlow uses and constantly reshapes and modifies, as in an effort to adjust it to the ‘subject,’ anticipates the literary attempts of other witnesses of horror and ungraspable evil. The vast literature on concentration camps and the need to report, to remember, to convey some glimpses of that unheard of experience, is roughly anticipated by

Conrad's voyage into the heart of darkness, into the senseless and ghostly reality of terror, exploitation, efficiency and trade. It is this very combination of distant factors that, according to Arendt, we should attempt to understand. We are not dealing with detectable and distinct causes which can be related to similarly clear effects, but, rather with an amalgam of elements that blend into a ghostly yet effective new reality.

The darkness into which Kurtz has descended – and which Marlow also experiences – does not represent a generic and universal evil, as in a Manichean admonition of the good and bad that lies at the bottom of each human soul. Nor is it the symbol for an archetypal or pre-Oedipal tale on the pre-historic origin of our species. The encounter with the “powers of darkness” is an historical one, unheard of, even adventurous if you wish – in the etymological sense of the Latin verb *advenire*, that which is about to happen and includes a sense of the future and of the unknown.<sup>3</sup> The darkness that characterizes Marlow's story is the darkness of language, the shattering of all the categories of understanding and judgment. Kurtz is at the very bottom of that darkness, a shadow that Marlow tries, unsuccessfully in his eyes, to shape into a concrete figure: “Everything belonged to him – but that was a trifle. The thing was to know what he belonged to, how many powers of darkness claimed him for their own. That was the reflection that made you creepy all over. It was impossible – it was not good for one either – trying to imagine. He had taken a high seat amongst the devils of the land – I mean literally. You can't understand. How could you?” (123).

The point is that something new is at stake here: the new elements that become crystallized into the historical experience of “race and bureaucracy,” of brutality and efficiency, find in Conrad's account a means of expression which does not aim at completeness, exhaustiveness, or factual validity. We perceive that there is no salvation at the end of Marlow's narrative, no light or clarity, but only emptiness, absence of meaning and senselessness. Marlow understands that Kurtz' genius “lies neither with his ideas nor with his eloquence. It lies rather in the extraordinary efficiency of his ‘unsound methods,’ which give up the pretensions of Western administrative practices and follow, as Marlow puts it, ‘no method at all’” (Harrison 1992: 139). Kurtz, therefore, represents the quintessence of imperialism: its unheard of nature, its incomparability with previous forms of conquest is paradoxically symbolized by an outcast, somebody who the system of conquest now refuses. Kurtz is the clearest representation of the colonial mind: “by virtue of a perverse symbolism, Kurtz, as he digs up the earth for ivory, delves into the moral cavity of his administrative genius and uncovers its skeletal nihilism” (140).

## 1.4 *The Impossible Community*

“...it is impossible to convey the life-sensation of any given epoch of one’s existence – that which makes its truth, its meaning – its subtle and penetrating essence...We live, as we dream-alone.” J. Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*

The experience that Marlow is trying to convey cannot be listed among what Benjamin calls *Erfahrungen*, namely those shared experiences that used to be the favorite material of popular storytellers in a bygone community of storytelling (“Gesellschaft des Erzählens”, Benjamin 1977: 400). Although the context of narration (an ‘oral’ context, though fictionalized ) seems to be the perfect setting for a traditional form of storytelling, that which Benjamin calls a “manual craft” (“Die Erzählung (...) ist selbst eine gleichsam handwerkliche Form der Mitteilung”, 393), we perceive that Marlow’s story is not a typical sailor’s story, simple, concrete and ‘common’. It is uncommon insofar as it is unprecedented, and also insofar as it is not shareable. It cannot be recognized by the listeners as something they have experienced before, and, similarly, no analogies can be made. As Benjamin points out, the storyteller should not convey the pure essence of a recounted thing (“...das pure ‘an sich’ der Sache”), as information does. The thing that is recounted must be immersed in the life of the storyteller, as the evocation of a lived experience, as a fact belonging to everyday life. The told experience is one that can be recognized and shared by the listeners, within a supposedly homogeneous community of storytelling.

This is precisely what is lacking in the community of those who listen to Marlow’s story. They do not form *any* community, insofar as they do not recognize or share Marlow’s experience. Yet the story lies there, before their eyes and ears, as the naked and totally exposed recount of a lived experience. It is as if Marlow, no matter how unsuccessful and frustrated his recount may be, enacts something with his story. Through the threads of his words, which attempt to penetrate the darkness, he gives life to something that did not exist before. The fragility of his exposed story is not a sign of weakness, its incompleteness and ambiguities are not testimony of simply relativism and senselessness. It is as if, paradoxically, the very absence of a common and shareable experience were the premise for a different community, a community emptied of its contents (identity, tradition, values), a new type of community, a community Jean Luc Nancy “inoperative”.

The French philosopher develops a very interesting mode of thinking about the community, which he does not describe neither in terms of belonging nor in those of the universal subject. Both perspectives are discarded insofar as they move within the same metaphysical horizon, in which the binary opposi-

tion between subject and object, inside and outside, does not allow a radical re-thinking of the political. Contrarily, Nancy proposes a view of the community which stems from the impossibility of a strong identification between 'members,' and, at the same time, as a result of this inoperative quality, the community, we could say, does not exist in a strongly ontological sense, but simply happens. Each of us is exposed to a radical encounter with others. According to Nancy, this radical exposure is the only real feature of the existent and, as such, it must be thought thoroughly in relation to our constitutive living with others. This radical exhibitiv condition manifests itself in the form of happening of relations (events) which, as such, are the basis of every community, conceived not as the realm of similarities but as the space of dis-identification.

Literature, in a very broad sense is, according to Nancy, an example of a community which enacts itself: "Chaque écrivain, chaque œuvre inaugure une communauté" (Nancy 1986: 169). If we apply this sentence on literature to our reading of Conrad, we could reformulate it this way: the performative character of Marlow's account does not shape a new reality simply by completing an exhaustive picture, as realistic or fictional as it may be. The new reality inaugurated by his story originates from the plurality of the listeners, readers and spectators for whom the story is exposed, in all its fragility and incompleteness. It is *because* of this fragility, or exposedness, that the story forms a community: it is in the difficulty of identifying oneself with Marlow's experience that the precious essence of the literary recount lies. It does not homogenize by offering an empathic account of an exotic experience. On the other hand it enhances difference, alterity and the impossibility of identity and identification, and by doing so it establishes relations between finite and unique beings.

In the impossibility of identification lies what Nancy calls the "partage," the partition of different voices in the community. This simply means that literature is exposed, with its own fragility, to the different unreconcilable perspectives, which constitute a new kind of community.<sup>4</sup> They do not form the traditional kind of community, the Benjaminian *Gesellschaft des Erzählens*, but a dis-identified community, a community whose common feature, literature, according to Nancy, is this partition of different voices, Marlow's, Kurtz's, mine, yours. The partition of voices refers to the plurality of perspectives on the world, each of which cannot be reduced to the other. Nevertheless, they all have a unique access to the story, in terms of its radically exhibitiv and exposed aspect (Nancy 1986:160–161).

The very story Marlow endeavors to convey as his own experience is also the story of another being, Kurtz. A second element of alterity and uniqueness is contained in the narrative representation. Not only are we presented with the unheard of experience of Marlow, but also the ghostly figure of Kurtz.

Marlow is wise enough not to venture to communicate Kurtz as such, as this would be impossible. Rather, he tells us how he encountered him, (Marlow's) impressions of Kurtz and the effects Kurtz had on him. Humbly yet powerfully, Marlow exposes Kurtz to both us the readers and his listeners. Conrad simply offers us the story of an encounter, of a voyage, of a path traced into the darkness. It is not a complete portrait of either Marlow or Kurtz, but a dim thread exposed to attacks by time and consistency. At the same time, though, the exposed nature of this story, its precious attempt of entering "the heart of an immense darkness," is there for us as a re-traceable path or a re-countable story we can visit, though never possess. "Le communisme de l'être en commun et de l'écriture[...] consiste tout entier – total en cela, non totalitaire – dans le geste inaugural, que chaque œuvre reprend, que chaque texte retrace: venir à la limite, la laisser paraître comme telle, interrompre le mythe"(Nancy 1986:169).

It is a sort of communal experience that we can have, for a while, by telling or listening to this story. Although there may be no 'clearing' at the end of Marlow's path, we can follow him in his unreasonable journey, visit all his perplexities, fears and disappointments, frustrations and enthusiasms, in a way which allows us an insight into the darkness of this century the likes of which no other account can provide us. In other words, the literary recount of a politically new – and politically relevant – reality opens up spaces of reflection and critique, as opposed to closing them according to its ideologically shaped ending.

In Chapter Two I briefly focused on some ant-narrativist positions, which emphasize either the ideological closure provided by narrative or the moralizing intent inherent in almost all forms of storytelling. The position I assumed by presenting the plausibility of a different metaphor for truth, thinking, and the representation of reality, probably seemed rather dogmatic at that point, or at the very least obscure, insofar as what I meant by a narrative form of understanding was not at exactly clear. The experiment I have just carried out in reading some fragments of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* should provide the reader with a practical example of a narrative form of understanding. Conrad's story is a story that unfolds both in time and in space (the space of his journey, but also the space of the written lines, the pages, the book). In this sense, I consider it a form of narrative. A nomological and conceptual approach to the same topic would not require the same time and space in which to unfold, to make itself understood, to produce knowledge. As a matter of fact, the knowledge produced could be contained in the word "Imperialism," a kind of shorthand for all the stories and experiences men and women lived and imagined in connection with the contact with a new, different world.

On the other hand, though, Conrad's account is *not* a traditional story, complete and realistic. Literary critics would prefer to ascribe it to the later

forms of anti-narrativist writers, such as James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, etc. By doing so, these critics make use of the term narrative in a specific way, according to the paradigms of literary theory.<sup>5</sup> My interest in a narrative, horizontal perspective lies its ability to spread out in different directions, not allowing a single version of a story (its given or not given ending), but producing, simply by virtue of its being recounted and not conceptualized, a plural version of truth. It is from this perspective that I read Nancy's notion of the exhibitivite character of an inoperative community: literature, in my reading – namely in the specific role literature can assume in understanding, criticizing, exploring reality when all the other cognitive instruments we have fail – represents this inoperative community. In other words, I see the text of a recounted story as the exhibitivite *par excellence*. The relationship between a concrete community and this text – as in the case of Marlow's listeners and readers – is the partition the text performs, namely the valorization of a plurality which is not simply the plurality of meaning, the postmodern proliferation of meaning.

The text is not the only reality we can access, nor is the partition a simple function of the text as such. The plurality of readers which gains access to the exhibitivite (exposed, contingent, unexpected) feature of the story finds in the very mode of unfolding of that story her/his path, and not simply by appropriating her/his own personal, private truth out of the story as such. In the very act of listening to the story, of being part of an audience that is witnessing the performance (story told, story enacted), each listener/spectator can experience her/his relation to the exhibitivite aspect of the story. I would say that *if* reality is a text, a narrative one offers more spaces of experience – within it and *around* it – insofar as it exposes a path, a storyline. Each listener/reader/witness can have his/her own way of walking through that path: both in space and time.

The story enhances this plurality of perspectives on it simply because nobody can possess it. Its very richness – the exhibitivite feature of its unfolding in space and time – is also behind its eternal existence as an orphan: it belongs to everybody and to nobody. The story provides us with a version of reality (really happened, or fictive) without compelling hierarchies, fixed identities or absolute truths.

Arendt would say that literature can guide us where theory cannot. I would claim that, given the unheard of nature of the historical phenomena of the XX century, and given also the impossibility to understand and judge the new political scenario of the century, literature can anticipate, hint at and explore the novelty of unheard of phenomena. It may not give us a complete and satisfactory account, it may be frustrated in its attempt to grasp the essence of that which is new and unforeseen. Nevertheless, or perhaps because of this



frustration, literature provides us with a different form of understanding, “inoperative” when compared to the operative and efficient instruments theory gives us. The stories literature exposes to our eyes and ears are precious recounts of that which theory is unable to accept, given the rigid boundaries of its own criteria of understanding.

One could also claim that the literary experiments which appeared at the end of the XIX and the beginning of the XX centuries are also revealing insofar as they do not claim to faithfully and exhaustively represent the new reality. As we have seen, Conrad’s account is continuously haunted by a lack of realism and plausibility.

Edward Said, one of Conrad’s most attentive interpreters, affirms that the very structure of the narrative of Marlow’s inconclusive yet poignant recount of the heart of Africa allows at least two opposed interpretations of Imperialism. On the one hand, Conrad emphasizes the historical force of imperialism and is concerned exclusively with the characters involved in that experience. We are unable to tell from his narrative what is “*outside* the world-conquering attitudes embodied by Kurtz, Marlow, the circle of the listeners on the deck of the *Nellie* and Conrad”(Said 1992: 24). Yet, on the other hand, Conrad’s position as a Polish exile allows him not to be totally absorbed by the imperialist machine. Said affirms that the narrative of *Heart of Darkness* can be defined as imperialist insofar as it speaks only on behalf of the white conquerors, either forgetting or violently including the Africans. At the same time this very narrative, namely its being plural and not bound to one version, one only possible ending, “can allow you actively to comprehend how the machine works, given that you and it are fundamentally not in perfect synchrony or correspondence” (25). In other words, on the one hand, the narrative of *Heart of Darkness* emphasizes the historical inevitability of imperialism, its violence notwithstanding. On the other hand, it enhances the contingency of the story. “The form of Conrad’s narrative has thus made it possible to derive two possible arguments, two visions, in the post colonial world that succeeded his. One argument allows the old imperial enterprise full scope to play itself out conventionally, to render the world as official European or Western imperialism saw it, and to consolidate itself after World War Two. [...] The second argument is considerably less objectionable. It sees itself as Conrad saw his own narratives, local to time and place, neither conditionally true nor unqualifiedly certain. [...] Since Conrad *dates* imperialism, shows its contingency, records its illusions and tremendous violence and waste (as in *Nostromo*) he permits his later readers to imagine something other than an Africa carved up into dozens of European colonies, even if, for his own part, he had little notion of what Africa might be” (25–26).

Moreover, I would like to add that completeness is neither the aim nor the result of Conrad’s account; by hinting at the incomprehensible magnitude of

new and incomparable events the story he exhibits is alien to closure, completeness. Closure and completeness are refused insofar as the experience of literature in this case is exploratory, its essence lying in its ability to illuminate and re-signify after and beyond its historical occurrence.<sup>6</sup>

The result of a narrative understanding is different from a theoretical one in the sense that a story told is an experience made. We accompany Marlow on his voyage into the darkness, and even in our almost total incapability to empathize with his emotions and feelings, we experience, as readers or listeners of his story, a sort of frustration and fragility that is far more precious, even politically, than any abstract category which could provide a general and logical comprehension of Imperialism by fixing the terms of its understanding as a rational inclusion into rigid boundaries.

Again, Said connects the very form of the narrative on Conrad with the effects of its content. He refers to the language of Marlow and Kurtz as “full of these odd discrepancies” which “leave his immediate audience as well as the readers with the acute sense that what he is presenting is not quite as it should be or appears to be” (29).

Comprehension, Arendt teaches us, does not mean justification: Conrad shows us that to comprehend means the inability to grasp completely, but the willingness to explore unheard of darknesses and, most of all, to consign that darkness to the memory of time, namely to entrust the incomplete, frustrated, inexhaustive recount to the inoperative means of literature.

It could also be said that the narrative and literary mode of comprehension succeeds insofar as it does not provide satisfactory answers, but only if it continuously opens new questions. It is in this ability to provide new openings, new stages, new voyages that the richness of literature lies.

That same, incontestable richness becomes more precious in times of darkness, when all the categories of the tradition are not able to illuminate reality, to account for its changes. The appearance of new literary styles, techniques and moods of representation at the end of the XIX century, polemical against the realism of the previous generation, testifies to the crisis of an entire culture. Hallucinatory and impressionistic (Jameson 1980:208), as well as strongly centered around perceptual and visionary descriptions, Conrad's works testify to a change in literary style which in many respects anticipated Modernism. The impossibility of and the refusal to represent realistically, to give a transparent and linear recount of facts and characters, cannot be dismissed as a mere aesthetic sublimation of a reified and alienated reality.<sup>7</sup> This is not the place to begin a debate over the features and styles of Modernist literature; however, I think that the critique of language and representation that emerges in the literary attempts of Conrad (and later of Joyce and Woolf) can be seen as an attempt to remodel and rethink our relationship with reality (given that it is

not *only* a text) in times of the political and epistemological crumbling of the frames within which reality used to be interpreted. Literature perceives, more than any other “discipline” or cultural realm, the need to make sense of a world that seems to be characterized by a violent senselessness. This does not mean that literature must make sense of the world, if only aesthetically, but, perhaps, it can test the boundaries and the possibilities of our understanding in a way that is alien to theory.

### *1.5 Provincializing History*

If the inoperative means of literature can offer both a visionary, hallucinatory account of an improbable future and a critical reflection on a senseless present, this is even truer in the historical moment of ascending imperialist and totalitarian realities.

If the traditional community of storytellers or narrators has disappeared because of the “corrosive effects of market relations, and, like so many other traditional, organic, precapitalist institutions, systematically fragmented by that characteristic reorganizational process of capitalism which Weber described under the term rationalization” (Jameson 1980: 208), this does not mean that the attempts to revive it in literature are a mere ideological act, namely the hope to contest or contain the obtrusive effects of capitalist *reification*. In other words, if we view, as Frederic Jameson does, the history of the late XIX century as an inevitable time of crisis due simply to the consolidation and worldwide diffusion of the effects of capitalism, and if we view literature as the mirror of this crisis, we are ourselves ideologically containing the effects of literature and its possibilities. What I am trying to contest in the historicist view of the past, and especially at the turning point of the end of the last century, is the emphasis given to the inevitable movement of history as such, the interpretation of changes and events in a greater frame of reference (be it the development of the objective spirit, the class struggle, the modes of production, the level of rationalization), *im Grossen*.

What should be contestable, in a view of the past as ‘whole,’ as an entity which we can access through scientific discourse and objective standards of measurement, is the fact that its plausibility, its efficacy depends strictly upon the perspective one chooses to assume. If concerned with more than economic transformations and mass societal changes, the historian must abandon the global perspective and create stories, or singular visions of the past. Politically speaking, these stories are more meaningful because they succeed in conveying the meaning of a singular, contingent instance, they are able to illuminate at least one corner of the complexity of reality. Moreover, a singular perspective

can perhaps be more fair toward the victims of history, can give voice to the “history of the oppressed” of which Benjamin speaks. The hidden story of those uncovered layers of history must be told not for the sake of objectivity (which, as we know from Nietzsche, is the property of the victors) but for the sake of justice: there must be at least *one* different version of the mainstream history of consciousness.

In fact, if Jameson seems to enhance the presence of an historical inevitability that is detectable also elsewhere than historiography or material history (of the development of the economy, population, means of production and so on), Said reads Conrad from a totally different perspective, as we have seen above. Literature, in Said’s perspective, becomes a means of expression which allows new, radically different insights into the dark reality of imperialism. For Said, what is important in the newness at which Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* hints, is the existence and radical alterity of the African continent. The acknowledged presence of a radical alterity will serve, according to Said, in the fight for independence in colonized countries.

“By accentuating the discrepancy between the official ‘idea’ of empire and the remarkably disorienting actuality of Africa, Marlow unsettles the reader’s sense not only of the very idea of empire, but of something more basic, reality itself. For if Conrad can show that all human activity depends on controlling a radically unstable reality to which words approximate only by will or convention, the same is true of empire, of venerating the idea, and so forth”. The contingency of Conrad’s stories makes the *chimera* of historical inevitability visible and palpable: “With Conrad, then, we are in a world being made and unmade more or less all the time” (Said 1992: 29). And it is only insofar as we can dismiss, deconstruct and de-legitimize the single perspective of historical inevitability that new instances of liberation emerge, not only as a text, but as a concrete political experience “in which the formerly silent native speaks and acts on territory taken back from the empire” (31).

This aspect is directly related to the next one: a vision of history as continuum, as a graspable whole of which we can dispose, tends, as I have already pointed out, to justify the past by transforming it into historical inevitability. This tendency is contained in all comprehensive visions of history, which, in their rational/ideological construction of abstract entities (working class, race, civilization) provide mechanical explanations for contingent happenings. Everything fits perfectly within the great movement of historical necessity, whether it be characterized by a *telos* as different as the classless society or the millenary Reich. By so doing, this perspective deprives historical happenings of their uniqueness, of that specific impact they must preserve in order to be able to baffle and bewilder. We should not allow Auschwitz to be painlessly absorbed into the historical fabric of our civilization.

Historicism and the universal perspective which it implies have recently been criticized by postcolonial thinkers. The notion of time that it implies, homogeneous and empty, a container into which events are inserted regardless of their qualitative differences, qualifies as a universal code the provenance of which, according to the postcolonial, subaltern perspective, remains uncritical, assumed to be “natural”. In a recent and provocative book, Dipesh Chakrabarty\* – one of the most interesting representatives of the *Subaltern Studies* project – problematizes this exact point, namely the fact that the historical perspective – as a result of the modern rationality originated in Europe during the Enlightenment period – and interprets reality as a totally historicizable matter. Colonized countries – India, in his case – are therefore included in the historical project of modernity as places where historical ‘development’ – be it in its economic, political or cultural aspects – is read as not yet fully complete. Historicism is essentially ‘Eurocentric’ insofar as it presupposes a history that began in Europe and then spread throughout the rest of the world. This perspective justifies colonialism insofar as it charges it with an inherent message of emancipation (the spreading of European ideals in ‘underdeveloped,’ still ‘primitive’ countries). Chakrabarty argues that this perspective fails to grasp the specific nature of social, political, and economic relations in a country in which the secular perspective required by history (and by the social sciences) as a European discourse does not belong to the ‘discourse’ of the majority. This linear history of emancipation does not fit in the scenario of “other collocations of memory,” where there are “other narratives of the self and community that do not look to state/citizen bind as the ultimate construction of sociality” (37).

His project is therefore that of “provincializing Europe,” namely of trying to displace or disrupt the universalistic claims of the modern historical discourse by illustrating – with many examples often taken from working class experiences in India – that there are different modes of accounting for social and political realities, modes that would not simply, or naively, get rid of the universal linguistic code of modernity, but instead would assume it from a critical perspective by intersecting it with that which that code is unable to grasp, represent, understand. “To attempt to provincialize this Europe is to see the modern as inevitably contested, to write over the given and privileged narratives of citizenship other narratives of human connections that draw sustenance from dreamed-up pasts and futures where collectives are defined neither by the rituals of citizenship nor by the nightmare of ‘tradition’ that modernity creates” (Chackrabarty 2000: 46).

Interestingly enough, for Chakrabarty the essence of this project of a critical and de-centered assumption of ‘Europe’ as a regulative ideal aims at enhancing

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\* I would like to thank Sandro Chignola for his precious suggestions.

that which history cannot (and does not want to) enclose – in force of its universal and teleological aim. The Marxist historical narrative of capital and commodity, if assumed critically, does not simply foreshadow (for countries like India) a teleological accomplishment of ‘mature capitalism,’ as if there would be only one history – that of the Western civilization – to which all other countries should comply. There is instead a possibility that the universal language of ‘capital’ – one of Chakrabarty’s most investigated instances – becomes contaminated with experiences of ‘development’ that are inherently different from the path available to the Western model of development or progress.

History – as a whole, according to the linguistic code of ‘Europe’ – should be enriched by ‘subaltern histories’ which, by exposing their radical specificity – and also their radically non-secular, often supernatural, magical features – ‘provincialize’ the universal history in which they can hardly be inserted. “Subaltern histories [...] will have a split running through them. On the one hand, they are ‘histories’ in that they are constructed within the master code of secular history and use the accepted academic codes of writing[...]. On the other hand, they cannot ever afford to grant this master code its claim of being a mode of thought that comes to all human beings naturally, or even to be treated as something that exists in nature itself” (93).

The perspective is eminently political insofar as it not only aims at criticizing the colonial mentality (and its derivative forms – as for instance – nationalism during the struggle for independence) but also at interrupting, deferring and hindering the total self-realization of the modern project (with its capitalistic implications). In other words, contesting the linearity, uniqueness and pervasiveness of history as a whole and continuum – that which I have referred to as a historical necessity or inevitability – is a task that is perceived as urgent and important, because what is at stake is also the political intention of contesting the direction the future is likely to take. “The point is to ask how this seemingly imperious, all-pervasive code might be deployed or thought about so that we have at least a glimpse of its own finitude, a glimpse of what might constitute an outside to it” (93).

Chakrabarty does not merely advocate for a “parochialism,” nor for a “cultural relativism”. His intention is that of a possible ‘translatability’ of apparently untranslatable experiences without presupposing a higher, overarching language, that would comprise the irreducible singularities of, say, religious experiences in both Hindu and Muslim India. In order to do so, he argues, the disenchanted and secular language of the social sciences must be discarded in favor of modes of cross-cultural translation “that are non-modern and interesting insofar as they do not assume a general term that comprises different singularities but exchanges singularities with other singularities” (83). The model for this kind of exchange is barter, a mode of translation that “makes no appeal to any

of the implicit universals that inhere in the sociological imagination” (85).

In order to make these subaltern histories visible, translatable, one must integrate the disenchanting language of the social sciences with the non-secular, the magical, the non-realist fiction typical of those narratives in which gods and spirits play a role. In other words, Chakrabarty does not simply advocate the substitution of history with fiction, for a shift from the disenchanting and abstract language of the social sciences to the magical language of Hindu religion. Rather, the two radically different languages should become contaminated, and, by doing so, the universalistic claims of the former can perhaps become ‘provincialized’ by contact with the latter. Neither of them aspires to a transparent comprehension – that is, a complete penetration of the other. The history of the capital, as the primary and decisive instance ‘provincialized’ by the author, can still perform important political and economic analyses only insofar as it becomes contaminated, displaced, de-centered by singular subaltern histories that expose their radical untranslatability into the language of abstract theory. “Subaltern histories will engage philosophically with the questions of difference that elided in the dominant traditions of Marxism. At the same time, however, just as real labor cannot be thought of outside of the problematic of abstract labor, subaltern history cannot be thought of outside the global narrative of capital – including the transition to capitalism – though it is not grounded in this narrative.”

What remains ‘outside’ the history of the capital is, according to Chakrabarty’s project, not simply what is “before or after the capital,” since this temporal dimension still belongs to the historicist perspective. “This ‘outside’ I think of, following Derrida, as something attached to the category ‘capital’ itself, something that straddles a border zone of temporality, that conforms to the temporal code within which comes into being even as it violated that code, something we are able to see only because we can think/theorize capital, but that also always reminds us that other temporalities, other forms of wordling, coexist and are possible” (95).

By displacing History as such, we cannot simply celebrate the ‘return of the native’ or the ‘end of history,’ but celebrate rather a political and intellectual realm that must be assumed as necessarily amendable and contaminable, where the traces of both “violence and idealism” inherent in the Eurocentric model become necessary starting points of a tension within history – a tension which, as such, can become useful means of critique insofar as it becomes integrated by “subaltern histories” (Chakrabarty) or singular, illuminating stories (Arendt).

## 2. Historia more poetico demonstrata

### 2.1 To Fictionalize History

Historical science doesn't win against the temptations of *narrative* and literature; it wins by the involvement of *mimesis* in narrative. J. Rancière, *The Names of History*

It is the aim (although perhaps not fully attainable) of this work to propose a political means of historical analysis by contaminating historical objectivity with literary narrative. In an interesting analysis of the *poetics* of history, Jacques Rancière argues that history bases its specificity on a mixture of scientific objectivity and literary fiction. In French and Italian the term designating 'history' (*histoire, storia*) is irresolvably homonymic, insofar as it contains both terms which in English (history, story) and in German (*Historie, Geschichte*) remain distinguished (Rancière 1994: 3). To give up one or the other constitutive aspects of a typically contemporary notion of history (as it has been forged, for example, by the *Annales* school) would mean to annihilate history as such, reducing it to a mere chronicle (when abandoning a certain scientific objectivity) or to an instrument of the social sciences (when reducing it to mere scientific standards and statistical data).<sup>8</sup>

Rancière, therefore, recognizes that history is primarily a symbolical space, in which what is at stake is the representation of a reality of which we can never be sure. In other words, the historian recounts history by means of a constitutive fragility, which can never be eliminated, or else history itself disappears. History bases itself on a twofold absence. First, because it is both passed and past it is absent, and, secondly, it is absent because the account the historian provides is always different from the actual happening (63). History as a mimetic representation cannot be truthful, transparent or coincident with reality. It can be mimetic in the form of the *diegesis*, namely in the form of a narrative recount in which the voice of the narrator is not hidden from the listeners.<sup>9</sup> The Greek word *diegesis* means narration, the narrative form of representation, the form which, according to Rancière, allows the historical space to become meaningful "The space of historicity is first a symbolic space, a surface of inscription of time as productive of meaning" (81).

History can allow a recount which must not expect to reproduce "things" as they are, originally, behind "words." The twofold absence upon which history has built its fragile foundation must be put into words as an improbable story, a story that is inimitable and therefore true: "The subject that one cannot imitate



becomes the guarantor of the true, the witness to the occurrence of the spoken word, henceforth silent, to be made to speak anew in a discourse radically other than that of *mimesis*" (55).<sup>10</sup>

An overtly objective notion of history, constituted by trends, great changes, statistics and abstract objects is easy prey for revisionism. By virtue of a supposed transparent mimesis (of saying and representing things as they have happened) that history should possess (which, according to Rancière characterizes both the pre-modern chronicle and the modern notion of history), by the very arrogance of its capacity to account for happenings in an exhaustive way, history becomes falsifiable, annihilable, it turns itself into a 'no-where,' an 'un-happening'.

Since the realm of history is the realm of the *vita activa*, of contingent happenings and entangled events, of words and deeds, there can never be a full possession of that which constitutes history objectively, from an external standpoint. In quoting Rancière again, history is characterized by an "excess of words," since reality in its political fabric is characterized by "excessive, illegitimate speech"(28). Each textual representation of that reality can never master all the meanings that are pronounced, or even hinted at by words. Every text can aim at a faithful representation of reality, but it can never attain it ontologically. Reality exceeds, history exceeds its representations; no text can actually guarantee what lies behind its words. It is at this level that revisionism intervenes by making sure that the chaos is amplified and that nothing corresponds to anything anymore, that reality is somehow vanquished by its own excess. If history cannot stand this excess of the word, of a reality which cannot be exhausted by words, and instead conceives of itself as scientific history, in which each sign corresponds to a meaning, in which the object of history must necessarily adhere to a linguistic propriety and exactness, then history annihilates itself, negates itself, its own chaos, its own inexactness, its foundationlessness (which is and must be its own richness), its own space.

A "perpetual suspicion of words" is the nourishment through which a supposedly scientific history is intended to grow. The very danger, according to Rancière, lies in this suspicion, or better yet, in the assumption, disguised as 'critical,' that "*nothing happened such as it was told,*" which comes down "to saying that nothing happened at all". By indulging in all these negations history reaches its most dangerous boundary: "This limit has a theoretical name that is also a political name: it is called *revisionism*"(36).

Paradoxically, the possibility of revisionism arises when history is canonized,<sup>11</sup> when one wants to possess history entirely and totally, as transparent discourse, in which things correspond to words, or in which the very meaning of words can be controlled. This attitude toward the control of meaning is a feature which becomes historically visible in the modern era, when a certain hostility

toward an excess of words and the confusion of meanings which characterized revolutions became a matter of political importance.

Rancière refers to these enemies of the excessive and revolutionary word as the “royal-empiricists”, among whom he counts Hobbes. The political emergence of a need to control meanings is typically modern and testifies to the important implication of history and politics, of epistemology and action, of understanding and justifying. “Revisionism in history is not the circumstantial consequence of political biases or of the intellectual taste for paradox. It is the final term of this politics of suspicion by which the social sciences must exhibit their belonging to science – with even more force, since this belonging is increasingly contested” (36).

This becomes clear in the famous *Historikerstreit*, which animated the intellectual debate in Germany in the Eighties. It was occasioned by the article published in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* by the historian Ernst Nolte in 1986<sup>12</sup>. Nolte ventured an interpretation of the Nazi regime as consequence of the “Asian” danger of Bolshevism, and the *Lager* as the (later) counterpart of the *Gulag*. Nolte inaugurated a revisionist treatment of the Nazi period and the genocide that received scientific attention as well as a wide public fortune. The debate which followed is known, as it is also the dead-end into which it entered. I do not intend to deal with the issue of the Historians’ Debate in detail, but simply recognize that insofar as both sides of the fence (revisionists and anti-revisionists) dealt with history as a matter of which one can dispose objectively, the truth of which one can master or possess, they failed to grasp the political nature of every historical understanding, but most of all of *that* history.

An intrinsically historical perspective fails to grasp the inability of history to tell ‘wie es eigentlich gewesen’. In spite of the many critiques of a naïve notion of history, still this Rankean precept seems to be valid for most historians. Following Rancière, we could say that the entire *Historikerstreit* fails exactly because of its reducing the homonymy of history to the historiographic aspect of it, leaving the ‘story’ dimension out. In other words, the ‘truth regime’ in which historians move is a regime of objectivity taken as verifiable, as if language were transparent to itself, as if words corresponded to things. In the hope of grasping (on both sides of the Historians’ Debate) the historical truth on Nazism, the compact and objective verifiability of relations among various elements (advent of Nazism, ghettoization, deportation, extermination, war, relations with the Allies etc.) those historians move within a terrain they take to be neutral: a togetherness of data of which they can dispose and on which they can produce a verifiable discourse. The past is assumed uncritically as a text to decipher, as if it can yield a truth formula. There is, among these historians, an insufficiently problematized positivistic notion of history. On both sides, by invoking professional know-how, privileged access to the matter of the past

they simply enhance the undecidability over a comprehension of the past. Exactly as Rancière states, by assuming history as scientific, as a producer of verifiable objectivity one simply favors revisionism, the possibility (inherent in all historical reconstructions pretending to be true) of negating everything that happened.

History as a whole is easy prey for revisionism, since, we could say by referring back to Benjamin, history conceived of as a whole is *already* a political-revisionist matter. Conversely to this monolithic and objective notion of history we should emphasize its *homonymy*, its being both story *and* history, a fragile narrative construction that is familiar with literature, storytelling and reality – a temporal mimesis of reality, or, in ancient terms, a *diegesis*.

The aim of my treatment of storytelling and literary narrations does not pretend to offer a substitute for historiography, to reduce all historical representations to a matter of literature. My aim is to provide alternative forms of comprehending the past insofar as conventional forms of understanding have been proven insufficient, to say the least. Moreover, it seems to me that these alternative forms of historical understanding (narrative configurations of meaning, fictive or ‘real’) tend to address the ethical question of “understanding without justifying” in a more fruitful way.

## 2.2 *History Revisited*

By using its antimimetic powers, wouldn't narrative be suitable to offer poetry a regime of truth? And why not the same for democracy? J. Rancière, *The Names of History*

The experiment of a narrative voyage into the complex layers of historical evidence, in which history has been criticized as a great ideological narrative that must be displaced, fragmented, refused as a whole, as a continuum, can serve as a test of the boundaries of both our self and cultural understanding. The need to make sense of our world, to provide ourselves and our children with an acquiescent, conciliatory view of our past as well as our future, can perhaps be as dangerous and irresponsible as that of not providing anything at all. The complex yet fully political question of our relationship with the recent past cannot be easily dismissed. As I have mentioned before, in times of the refusal of great narratives that in some sense provided views on the past and the future, history as a whole, as an all-embracing field of study and reflection, cannot be of guidance. We must attempt a reading of history that recognizes its truth regime as radically fragile, as founded on a void, as imperfectly representative of reality.

This does not mean that history as such cannot be of guidance in the understanding of ourselves and our world. Only insofar as we de-legitimize history as a scientific knowledge, as a recount of the “wie es eigentlich gewesen,” indisputable and authoritative, faithful and transparent, perfectly coincident with its object, can we gain a political understanding of it.

A reading of history through the de-legitimization of its authority is a gesture we are allowed to carry out, if not epistemologically, at least politically. I shall attempt to explain this notion as follows: I hope that I have been able to show over the course of this work how Arendt's reflection on politics stems from her personal, concrete, witnessed experience of Totalitarianism. Arendt herself often remarks on the impelling need to make sense of a world gone senseless. This very need to make sense clashes abruptly with the impenetrable wall of a new reality, or, by using a better metaphor, remains suspended over a void – the categories of comprehension shattered, the incommensurability of the new reality, a baffling mixture of terror and ideology, bureaucracy and violence, the impossibility to judge. The feeling of being allowed to de-legitimize the authority of history does not simply mean to dismiss it as entirely ideological. It is not simply a problem of cognition, of knowledge (as if this history would not fit within the rational and transparent project of Modernity). The denial of authority to *that* history means to act politically, namely to refuse an acquiescent continuity between that past and this present.

Zygmunt Bauman, in his book *Modernity and the Holocaust*, shows how the rationality which produced gas chambers and implemented genocide is, more or less, the same rationality that is employed in sociology and empirical analysis today (Bauman 1988: 2–3). To understand the history of state genocides means to question the very rationality which is at the foundation of the modern state<sup>13</sup>. To understand the history of bureaucratic mass murder also means to criticize bureaucratic rationality. Bauman correctly centers the epistemological question around our un-questionable rationality, the rationality upon which our entire civilization has been construed<sup>14</sup>. He affirms that no matter how the Holocaust has been interpreted, it has always been inserted within familiar frames of reference, “shunted into the familiar stream of history [...] One way or the other, the bomb is defused; no major revision of our social theory is really necessary; our visions of modernity, of its unrevealed yet all-too-present potential, its historical tendency, do not require another hard look, as the methods and concepts accumulated by sociology are fully adequate to handle this challenge – to ‘explain it’, to ‘make sense of it’, to understand. The overall result is theoretical complacency” (2–3).

Bauman correctly understands that in order to fairly ‘make sense’ of the Holocaust one must primarily question the theoretical framework in which it occurred and has been located by interpreters. He refers mainly to sociology,

which has pretended that “nothing really happened to justify another critique of the model of modern society that has served so well as the theoretical framework and the pragmatic legitimation of sociological practice” (3).

To view Totalitarianism as an event that happened but that was not inevitable, namely to see it as a possibility of modernity but not as its intrinsic necessary outcome,<sup>15</sup> means, above all, to refuse the authority of history conceived, in Hegelian terms, as the necessary process of self-consciousness.

To refuse history as a whole enables us to accept it as a web of stories. One might even dare to say that history may be told exclusively through fragile attempts, through recounts which are exposed to the effects of re-telling and re-remembering. History cannot simply be transparent to itself, totally accountable for, possessed as consciousness-building material. If it were, one would be allowed to justify that which has happened. Arendt’s admonition to “understand without justifying” remains vividly important fifty years after its formulation: to attempt an experiment in understanding does mean, today as it did then, to act politically, to take care of the world in which we live.

The implication put forth in this work, as modest and imprecise as it may be, is that literature might offer a way of understanding without justifying. It is as if in times of destruction the art of storytelling could be preserved real only insofar as it is fictionalized. As, in the words of Rancière, the homonymic features of its truth-regime remain unsolved, story and history go together. It is as if a modern *istor*, a witnessing Thucydides, would have to give up the hope of faithfully recounting facts, but not the need to recount them as such, for the sake of future memory.

History has lost its unity, its continuity. The past *is* insofar as it is fragmented – no matter what kind of interpretation we make of the past, it is always a text. No matter how we understand history, it always remains an “absent cause” to us, we access it only as a textualization (see Jameson 1980:103). The obvious aspect of this position remains hidden by an ever-present means of considering the past only as a text, as the product of a code. This attitude is not only postmodern but intrinsically Western. To possess a text means to possess the key to reality. What is obvious about that position is that we always access reality through texts, although this does not mean that reality can be exhausted by them. The relationship between text and reality becomes vital to those witnesses of the horror who, in different ways, tried to convey at least some aspects of it. Marginal access to history through literature does not mean to reduce all happenings to fiction, but to recover some aspects of a reality which, in its very texture, bears the signs of improbability.

Story and history together, conceived as an indissoluble couple, engender a “place of truth through a narrative – or a myth – that itself is not assignable in terms of truth or falsity” (Rancière 1994: 55).

## 2.3 History Sublimed?

Hayden White has pointed out that to view history as fully explicable is a prerogative of ideologies – conservative and radical alike. They deprive history of the kind of meaninglessness that alone can allow what he calls a “visionary politics.” By referring to Schiller’s idea of the Sublime in history, White advocates a sort of opaqueness that does not allow history to be viewed as totally clear and explicable. For him, historiography is political insofar as its view of the past is neither “totally transparent” nor “fully explicable.” Only this kind of historical approach to reality can see the future as open, projectable anew (White 1987: 73–75).

A genuinely political dimension, namely a perspective on reality and on its understanding and transformation, must refrain from neutralizing time (both past and future) and instead take time as its primary dimension. As Kari Palonen has pointed out, a genuinely political dimension must take contingency into account, or better yet, must conceive of contingency not as a lack or limit to be neutralized and suppressed, but as constitutive feature of action (Palonen 1998). It is precisely by positing contingency at the core of political thought that Palonen analyses Weber’s thought with the intention of allowing new dimensions of the political to emerge. Only insofar as we assume, as Palonen does, that contingency is the main feature of political action can new meanings of the political itself become fruitful.

Arendt was well aware of the problem of time in political theory. In her own way, by suggesting the notion of action as novelty, unexpectedness, surprise, she was attempting to revive the paradox of ancient ethics: the Greeks attributed the highest value to the sphere of human action, which, strictly speaking, was the least stable, the most futile of all spheres. Immortality, then, was the task of history: to preserve the memory of otherwise futile acts and deeds.

Inasmuch as both the philosopher and the historiographer conceive of history as a discipline, as a field of either laws and trends or ethical and aesthetic values, history will lose its essentially political aspects.

The idea of the Sublime that White takes from Schiller, that is, the irreducible presence of that which is unmeasurable and awesome, is, for him, the precondition for a properly political historiography. In other words, only if we look at history as a sublime object, and not as a sequence of totally explicable facts, transparent to consciousness, can we gain the possibility of truly “understanding without justifying.” Viewing the past as something we cannot possess, a text we cannot fully decipher, means the possibility to prevent that past from *passing* completely, becoming homogeneous and rational material that precedes and celebrates the present.

Moreover, and paradoxically, to refuse a view of the past as a sequence of totally explicable facts, transparent to consciousness, allows the possibility of looking at the future as unpredictable. And only insofar as the future remains unknown, unforeseen, unpredictable, does time become a political dimension, renegotiable and projectable anew.

The paradox of political time, then, is represented by this aesthetic figure of the Sublime. It is precisely because we do not know our future that we can attempt a political project, that we can go toward it with the hope of changing the present. Only if we view the past as equally as unpredictable as the future, namely, only inasmuch as we conceive of history as a Sublime object, says White, can we gain a political grasp on the present. By dismantling the chain of causality that comprises our past, we can uncover the layers of unpredictability that lie in that same past.

Hayden White points out that historical narrative is not a 'natural' means of telling facts, as if they presented themselves in time as well crafted and complete stories. We have seen in the second chapter how this position clashes with the narrativist one represented by Paul Ricoeur (see *Supra*, Chapter Two). Historiographers tend to view history as historical narrative, as if events happened as coherently as they are told. It seems that a real story must be proven by a true story, or, in other words, as if the narrative preceded reality. There is no natural correspondence between a historical consequent narrative and the real dimension of happenings. Nevertheless, what White makes clear, and by doing so also enhances an important aspect of narrative, is that what is vital to a narrative emplotment is the meaning it confers to historical happenings; historiography shares with myth and literature the means by which the production of meaning is carried out. Historical narrative fictionalizes events, that is, the mode of emplotment of real facts is not supposed to adhere to reality, but, on the contrary, is meant to endow real events with meaning, in the same way as literature fashions patterns of "imaginary events" (White 1987: 43–45). The question of narrative in historical representation, then, is a question of 'imagination': "One can produce an imaginary discourse about real events that may not be less 'true' for being 'imaginary'".

How do we reconcile the historical time with the time of stories? Or, how can we conjugate a rhetorical analysis of the narrative mode of historiography with political storytelling, as Arendt fashions it? In other words, can we view political storytelling as a rhetorical device? Can we delegitimize its supposed adequacy to represent reality and at the same time 'save' a political perspective on reality, namely a perspective that is still engaged in transforming such reality?

In a recent book on the use of narrative in political theory (Dienstag 1997), the author stresses the importance of the plot when dealing with political matters. By drawing examples from Locke, Nietzsche and Hegel, Dienstag

affirms that what is peculiar to a narrative account is its openness, the fact that it is contestable, or, in other words, that it is contingent. For example, Locke's story of rebellion – in the *Second Treatise* – aims at breaking the continuous patriarchal narrative told by Filmer. Locke presents the past as re-narratable, as re-negotiable, and therefore as subject to change. Locke's account, then, is merely a different way of seeing the past, and therefore of shaping the future (Dienstag 1997: 63–64).

Nietzsche opposed a “dreamlike story” to the narrative of causality in order to redeem the past, to liberate it from the determinacy and stagnation of historicity. In much the same way, Nietzsche believed that rewriting the past creates a new future. It is a redemption of that past. In the words of Dienstag: “To plot in the manner political theory means to take up the challenge of altering the connection between past and future, thereby taking responsibility for both”(207).

In other words, Dienstag affirms that the rhetorical device of politics is narrative, namely a means of representation that respects the contingency of its subject matter – political actions. Simply because a narrative account deals with temporality and unfolds in time, its arguments are constantly subjected to temporality, namely are open-ended and therefore constantly subject to contestation, to a different means of telling. This very contestation transfers open-ended stories into the realm of history. Stories are needed in order to eliminate the category of historical inevitability.

The Arendtian critique of History as a process, which is carried out in her critique of Hegel (as unjust as her reading of Hegel may be), becomes precious insofar as it can be suited to both rhetorical and hermeneutical readings of politics.

History is, as the ancients believed, a set of single instances and gestures, precious and meaningful in their singularity. This can be read both as an ontological premise on the value of actions and events and as a rhetorical means of delegitimizing history as the realm of trends and patterns. In other words, by delegitimizing history as a readable process, we are able to preserve a contingent attitude toward our future. Paradoxically, only insofar as this future remains unknown, will we be certain to live and experience it.

History is described by Arendt as the realm of contingent happenings, upon which we can neither impose a self-conscious rationality nor a logical causality. In this way, then, we can perhaps also be aware of the contingency of the future, although this perspective must not be frustrating and deceiving, as it has always been for philosophers. Only a truly contingent vision of the future – as well as the past – can allow what White calls a “visionary politics,” in which new political subjects might find the possibility of tracing their own unforeseen path.<sup>16</sup>



### 3. Telling the Story of the Unprecedented: Primo Levi

#### 3.1 *The Drowned and the Saved*

Let us now move from Conrad's exotic and estranging descriptions to another literary witness of the unbearable novelty of our times. Italian writer and Auschwitz survivor Primo Levi is probably one of the most important witnesses of the Shoah. Almost all his literary productions have been characterized by both a strenuous will to remember and by the personal frustration inherent in experiencing the *impossibility* of recounting the horror.

In his literary work, the memories of the witness are integrated by a certain degree of fiction. He, as a direct witness, cannot rely only on the sterility of information, on the realm of facts and figures, but since his writing is also a practice of understanding – and of self-understanding – he must transcend pure scientific objectivity. In the preface to his last book, *I sommersi e i salvati* (Levi 1986), a collection of short essays each of which analyzes a different aspect of life in the *Lager*, Levi warns against easy generalizations and glorification when dealing with the complex and multilayered reality of the “univers concentrationnaire”. The commemorative aspect of ‘monumental history,’ the glorifying and celebratory role of ancient historiography, undergoes a radical change during the dark times of which Levi speaks. It might be true, he says, that monuments and sepulchers contribute to the improvement and enhancement of civil society, as it was in the mind of the Italian 19<sup>th</sup> century poet Ugo Foscolo, but one must also remain wary of engaging in oversimplifications. In other words, this specific past – the very past which, according to Levi, still represents a *unicum* in our world history – cannot undergo the usual standardization, namely the rhetorical process of either glorification or condemnation.

Levi constantly warns of the risk of an incumbent conformism: “Ogni vittima è da piangere, ed ogni reduce è da aiutare e commiserare, ma non tutti i loro comportamenti sono da proporre ad esempio”(Levi 1986: 11)<sup>17</sup>.

The question of objectivity, of the possibility of uncovering the truth (“verità”) of the *Lager*, remains problematic throughout the book. Levi considers himself more as a survivor than a witness. The perfect witness, the person who has explored the very bottom of the *Lager*, is the one who did not survive, the one that never came back from hell. In his fragile recount, Levi positions himself somewhere in this distinction between survivor and witness. He does not consider himself a historian either: “Non ho avuto intenzione, né sarei stato capace, di fare opera di storico, cioè di esaminare esaustivamente le fonti”(11)<sup>18</sup>.

He was not interested in becoming a historian: he chose literature as a means of communicating his experience and an attempt to quench his need to communicate, his obsessive need to convey at least some glimpses of this inconceivable experience. Nevertheless, the aim of his writing, says Levi, is ambitious insofar as he not only wants to contribute to the understanding of the “*Lager* phenomenon,” as he calls it, but also insists on the possibility that his work may help in understanding the present, in discerning that which, in that experience, can be considered both past and passed, and that which, conversely, might return, or has never disappeared to begin with. In other words, his recount, even if consigned to the realm of literature rather than the realm of scientific, objective discourse, claims a validity that transcends a mere aesthetic purpose. A different notion of truth emerges in the first pages of *I sommersi e i salvati*, the essence of which resides neither in evidence nor in adequacy, but in a complex unfolding of elements, the representation of which is even more complex, more obscure.

Levi's entire prose is torn between an obsessive need for clarity, a very crystalline use of the Italian language, and the haunting obscurity of the subject matter, the impossibility, as it were, to illuminate through the form the impenetrable darkness of the content. As a matter of fact, the chapter I would like to analyze blends together these two dimensions of light and darkness and, to continue the metaphor, produces a very efficacious image of a colorless zone, in which light and darkness are combined, not in order to produce a harmonic chiaroscuro but an almost ineffable gray zone, “la zona grigia”.

### 3.2 *The Gray Zone*

“E' una zona grigia, dai contorni mal definiti, che insieme separa e congiunge i due campi dei padroni e dei servi.”  
Primo Levi, *I sommersi e i salvati*

“Siamo stati capaci, noi reduci, di comprendere e di far comprendere la nostra esperienza? Ciò che comunemente intendiamo per ‘comprendere’ coincide con ‘semplificare’: senza una profonda semplificazione, il mondo intorno a noi sarebbe un groviglio infinito e indefinito, che sfiderebbe la nostra capacità di orientarci e di decidere le nostre azioni. Siamo insomma costretti a ridurre il conoscibile a schema: a questo scopo tendono i mirabili strumenti che ci siamo costruiti nel corso dell'evoluzione e che sono specifici del genere umano, il linguaggio ed il pensiero concettuale” (Levi 1986: 24).<sup>19</sup>

To simplify, to reduce reality to a binary opposition between good and evil, friend and enemy, can be seen as a ‘natural’ tendency of our own species, an

innate promptness to divide the world into “us” and “them”. This Manichean tendency is clearly detectable throughout history, be it the popular version – the *vulgata* – or history taught in schools – Athens versus Sparta, Rome versus Carthage and so on. Levi says that while the *desire* for simplification might be justified, the simplification as such might not always be appropriate (25). He explores the possibilities that he has been given, according to the so-called reasonable means of expression and understanding, in order to convey his experience.

Simplification, he says, is a need, a desire, but it also presents dangerous aspects. He often finds himself applying this same simplification to his own experience, perhaps in order to make his precious message more understandable to younger generations. Young people prefer clear oppositions, they are not at ease with ambiguity. Still, the problem of communicating his experience goes hand in hand with the problem, never fully solved by Levi himself, of understanding that experience personally. This entanglement between understanding and representing, re-telling, does not find a clear solution in Levi’s works, in the sense that these two aspects go together, indissolubly. In order to understand, Levi must recount, and in order to recount he must understand. The vicious circle becomes a paradox. Not a paralyzing one, but an energetic force which guides the text. This very desire for simplification must be suspended, but also must be kept in mind.

Young people today do not like ambiguity; the newcomers to the *Lager* were similar to these young people – they expected to find something terrible but not at all undecipherable. They expected to apply to their new experience the same old distinction between “us” and “them,” inside and outside. The reality of the *Lager* could not be lived according to this opposition, and, similarly, Levi cannot provide us with a recount that applies an artificial simplification to that reality. If this kind of sharp opposition is the idea, the model, the *sollen*, then the indistinct gray zone reveals the concrete inadequacy of that model, and, even more, the displacing incapacity to use that model in any way.

When entering the *Lager*, the clash of that inadequacy was initially surprising; the world into which they sank was not only terrible but also undecipherable, it did not conform to any model. “Il mondo in cui ci si sentiva precipitare era sì terribile, ma anche indecifrabile: non era conforme ad alcun modello, il nemico era intorno ma anche dentro, il ‘noi’ perdeva i suoi confini, i contendenti non erano due, non si distingueva una frontiera ma molte e confuse, forse innumerevoli, una fra ciascuno e ciascuno”(25)<sup>20</sup>.

The distinction between friend and enemy blurs in what Levi calls the “laboratory” of the *Lager*, in which the normal actions and reactions of a human being undergo horrible transformations, all aiming at denying human dignity, at killing the soul. Levi vividly describes the complex situation of the ambiguities

which characterize the indistinct zone, which both separates and joins victims and perpetrators. His description involves a series of frequent distinctions. In order to avoid easy generalizations he finds himself forced to multiply these distinctions, to carefully separate the different levels of power and command within the *Lager*.

In a sort of analytical attempt to meticulously isolate, dissect and scrutinize the complex material of which he disposes, Levi is forcing his own experience – he is striving to make it comprehensible, not easily comprehensible but at least possible to uncover some of the layers of obscurity.<sup>21</sup>

The gray zone refers to all those privileged people who collaborated with the SS. Still, there were many differences between these people, according to the position they held in the elaborate Nazi hierarchy. Moving from the lowest levels represented by the aids in the barracks to the strange hierarchy between old and new prisoners, to the unlimited power of the *Kapos* (31–34), Levi proceeds to analyze the situation of the *Sonderkommando* (36), the special unit, composed of Jewish prisoners, whose job it was to lead the victims into the gas-chambers and then to move the corpses from there to the crematory ovens. In Levi's recount, the initial need for clarity and analytic distinctions gives way to an increasing difficulty in judging, to a progressive resolution not to formulate any moral judgment about these people. If, on the one hand, he insists on the objective and moral distinction between prisoners and perpetrators, on the other he admits that this gray zone which characterizes the behavior of those “privileged” prisoners who cooperated with the SS, poses a specific problem that no human tribunal is able to judge.

The ambiguity which characterizes the story he tells and the people who populate it, cannot be easily dismissed within an historical perspective or in a moral judgment. Our own human fragility, says Levi, makes it impossible, as we all belong potentially to that gray zone. “Da molti segni, pare che sia giunto il tempo di esplorare lo spazio che separa (non solo nei *Lager*) le vittime dai persecutori, e di farlo con mano più leggera e con spirito meno torbido, di quanto non si sia fatto ad esempio in alcuni film. Solo una retorica schematica può sostenere che quello spazio sia vuoto: non lo è mai, è costellato di figure turpi o patetiche (a volte posseggono le due qualità ad un tempo), che è indispensabile conoscere se vogliamo conoscere la specie umana, se vogliamo saper difendere le nostre anime quando una simile prova si dovesse nuovamente prospettare, o se anche soltanto vogliamo renderci conto di quello che avviene in un grande stabilimento industriale” (27–28).<sup>22</sup>

The actuality and urgency of this ethical and political issue is palpable in Levi's writing, in which this impossibility to judge is constantly challenged by a strenuous will to understand. The question he poses, regarding these complex positions of privileged (yet desperate) people within the *Lager*, is very interesting

insofar as it addresses a problem I have been investigating throughout this book – namely the perspective from which one should observe and then account for this new reality. I have often questioned the arbitrariness and violence of a vertical perspective, of a detached and uninvolved Archimedean point. This perspective is politically useless and unfair, insofar as it is too distant and, as such, unable to grasp differences that are crucial to the political plural realm. It is what Levi would call a “schematic and simplified version of truth”.

Needless to say, the vertical perspective, the vision from above is privileged. It offers a broader view, a complete pattern, an objective dimension given the uninvolvedness of the observer; the eye of God has always been considered the perfect model for impartiality. Conversely, Levi affirms that the privileged position within the *Lager* cannot – and perhaps *must* not – offer the best position from which to understand that reality. Levi ideally divides the different levels of prisoners according to a “bottom to top” scheme in which those inhabiting the lowest level were those prisoners who were too concerned with surviving to be able to even attempt to observe and understand what was going on (8). The normal prisoners, who made up the majority, were those ‘witnesses’ to which Levi refers by opposing them to the survivors. At the opposite pole of this hierarchy were the privileged, comprising a small minority, who, according to Levi, had a better observatory, since were positioned higher, hence dominating a larger horizon (9). The apparent vantage point of these privileged prisoners turns out to be a false perspective, as a mere broader horizon does not guarantee a better understanding. It is not simply a matter of positions, as if the privileged prisoner could offer his higher ‘knowledge’ for the sake of truth. In the laboratory of the *Lager* there seems to be no space for solidarity and cooperation. The privilege of some does not benefit the rest, but instead enhances the most sordid instincts of the human animal. This is why, according to Levi, the perspective of the privileged was falsified, deceived, by the existence of the privilege itself (9).

According to Levi, therefore, it was those in the middle, namely those who were able to obtain a vantage point without collaborating with the authority of the *Lager* (hence without enjoying privileges), usually political prisoners, who were the best observers. Why political prisoners? First of all, writes Levi, because the *Lager* was a political phenomenon, secondly because these political prisoners were equipped with a cultural background that allowed them to interpret the facts they lived and witnessed, and thirdly because these people, as anti-fascists, knew that to bear witness, to produce a testimony, meant to actively fight, to declare war against Fascism: “I migliori storici dei *Lager* sono dunque emersi fra i pochissimi che hanno avuto l’abilità e la fortuna di raggiungere un osservatorio privilegiato senza piegarsi a compromessi, e la capacità di raccontare quanto hanno visto, sofferto e fatto con l’umiltà del buon cronista, ossia tenendo

conto della complessità del fenomeno *Lager*, e della varietà dei destini umani che vi si svolgevano. Era nella logica delle cose che questi storici fossero quasi tutti prigionieri politici: e ciò perché i *Lager* erano un fenomeno politico; perché i politici, molto più degli ebrei e dei criminali [...] potevano disporre di uno sfondo culturale che consentiva a loro di interpretare i fatti; perché, proprio in quanto ex combattenti, o tuttora combattenti antifascisti, si rendevano conto che una testimonianza era un atto di guerra contro il fascismo” (9).

To testify, to bear witness from a perspective which is not privileged, which is neither detached, nor necessarily higher, therefore meant to attempt a recount of that undecipherable reality. Moreover, to produce a testimony – as imperfect and inexhaustive as it may have been – meant, and still means, to fight actively and consciously against fascism.

As in Arendt and Benjamin, the realm of historical understanding in Levi connects and receives its ultimate legitimization from the realm of politics, of active involvement, of producing a pattern of sense, a *constellation* which might be totally different from an historical account, but which turns out to be the only means of resistance, the only possible action available when all the categories of philosophy, history and culture in general appear useless in an attempt to decipher reality.

For Benjamin, the abandonment of consequent history meant to revive the past and its unfulfilled promises, to deprive the victors of their trophy: history. For Levi, the abandonment of the traditional objective vantage point, the denial of epistemological value to the privileged view, involves more than a simple revision of epistemological criteria – it calls into question the ethical and political status of privilege as such, a privilege which, for Levi as it is for Benjamin, is connected to the way in which history has been written: “in ogni modo il vincitore è padrone anche della verità, la può manipolare come gli pare”(5)<sup>23</sup>.

In my opinion the central point is that history can never be a matter of victory and defeat, or, in other words, Levi attempts to deprive history of its rhetorical and hagiographic character. No easy generalizations can serve the truth, no comprehensive view (vertical and homogeneous) can be fair to the absurd reality of the *Lager*, no simple recount, consequential and finalistic, can serve in the political aim of both understanding and avoiding the return of that absurdity. The testimony Levi consigned us is an uneasy legacy, ambiguous and dissonant, and, as such, it must be handed down to those future generations Levi had in mind in order to avoid, not the desire for simplification, as Levi put it, but its instrumental use.

### 3.3 *Stories of Survival*

Conchiuso il tempo in cui i giorni si inseguivano vivaci, preziosi e irreparabili, il futuro ci stava davanti grigio e inarticolato, come una barriera invincibile. Per noi la storia si era fermata.

Primo Levi, *Se questo è un uomo*.

The point I am trying to make in this chapter has to do with the ability stories (whether fictive or real) have to aid in the understanding and representation of a new, unforeseen reality. Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* has been taken as an example of the simultaneous richness yet deep ambiguity of his work. This 'yet' might not be appropriate in this case, since the two opposed terms, richness and ambiguity, are not mutually exclusive – they belong together. *Heart of Darkness* is rich because of this ambiguity, and, as I mentioned earlier, because of its impossible success as both an experience and a fulfilling recount, it allows a precious form of understanding.

I have chosen to examine Levi's work for a different, yet similar reason: his works related to the *Lager* phenomenon in particular and Totalitarianism in general belong to a genre we might call "survivors' literature," vast and differentiated. Yet, I would like to consider Levi as more than a survivor, or not only a survivor. Levi was a scientist, and his prose bears the signs of the scientist's familiarity with transparent accounts. There are still traces in his recount of the *Lager* experience, of his former attitude toward reality and truth. As I said before, the crystalline style is one of these traces. However, Levi himself is aware of the impossibility of applying that clarity and transparency to what haunts him from within. If Conrad's language captures the reader through its strongly perceptual, almost visceral appeal to the soul, Levi, on the other hand, fascinates because of the apparently ice-cold attitude with which he poses tragic dilemmas and undecipherable stories. These are examples of two different aesthetic experiences for the reader – one wild and capturing and the other rational and dissecting.

These different styles share a similar aim: to explore and take the representative capacities of language to its limit. We have already talked extensively about Conrad. Levi forces the limits of the representability of a rational, objective and rather abstract language in order to test how far it can go, how forcefully it can clash against the wall of an experience that, technically, cannot be referred to at all as an experience. The fragile position of his own 'character,' which lies somewhere between the witness and the survivor, is the only stand he can take, the only one he feels legitimized to take, having survived to tell. This is why, I think, in Levi's works – more intensely in his proper

literary works, although very visibly, and perhaps more interestingly for our purpose, in his essayistic ones— the crystalline hope to attain a spotless use of language becomes contaminated with traces of pain, of the unbearable incomprehensibility, of elegantly posed raw and hopeless half-sentences, broken images, unfinished reasonings.

Among others, Levi tells the story of the infamous Chaim Rumkowski, who was head of the Łódź ghetto until 1944. Rumkowski was a strange person who ruled the ghetto under Nazi orders, and who himself became a ‘little Hitler’ within the ghetto, while outside of it he was a pathetic collaborator whom the SS constantly made fun of, treating him as a puppet of sorts. According to Levi, Rumkowski is neither a monster nor a common man. Who is he, then? Fragile yet arrogant, he was responsible to a great extent for having helped the Nazis to deport many of his peers. At the same time, however, he was also a degraded victim, who was brought to the level of his perpetrators by means of a system, which deprived the victims of their innocence. The tragedy of these collaborators, from the *Judenräte* to the the *Sonderkommandos*, was that they were forced to become as inhuman as the perpetrators. There is a great deal of difficulty in understanding and judging that is inherent in this particular situation.<sup>24</sup>

After telling the story of Rumkowski, Levi wonders whether there is an ‘ending’ to this story: can it be complete simply by telling its end (the death of Rumkowski and his family in Auschwitz)? The story is not “complete” or enclosed within itself (“chiusa in sé”), it unfolds the whole issue of the gray zone in the form of a story, but instead of answering any questions it poses new ones. It cries out to be understood: “Una storia come questa non è chiusa in sé. E’ pregna, pone più domande di quante ne soddisfa, riassume in sé l’intera tematica della zona grigia, e lascia sospesi. Grida e chiama per essere capita, perché vi si intravede un simbolo, come nei sogni e nei segni del cielo” (50). This passage, although badly paraphrased in English, is a sort of opening up, a clearing in which the chilly prose of the scientist leaves room for a different resonance, humbly poetic.

In the last page of the chapter “La zona grigia,” after having exposed and explored all the different levels of guilt and collaboration in the *Lager*, after having told stories of strange characters representing the inner ambiguity of each human being, Levi ends his analysis with some poignant, desperate, vivid and absolutely poetic images: “Come Rumkowski, anche noi siamo così abbagliati dal potere e dal prestigio da dimenticare la nostra fragilità essenziale: col potere veniamo a patti, volentieri o no, dimenticando che nel ghetto siamo tutti, che il ghetto è cintato, che fuori del recinto stanno i signori della morte, e che poco lontano aspetta il treno” (52).<sup>25</sup> Here, the distance that separates the two distinct uses of language becomes increasingly clear.



What makes Levi an interesting narrator of undecipherable stories is his ability to pose the indecipherability in sharp contrast with an apparently neutral, objective language. His seemingly unproblematic use of a scientific prose vividly underlines the incapability of that language to understand, represent, name and communicate. It is in the hiatus of this distance between reality and its representation that the message Levi wants to convey lies. Impossibility must remain the cipher of that experience – not as if it never happened, but as if its return can seem as impossible as it appears to us according to an unproblematic use of language. Improbable, impossible and unrepresentable, Levi seems to think that his experience cannot find voice, and yet he constantly tells and retells it.

Levi does not consider himself an historian, but, rather, a survivor. He says that a true historian would have analyzed documents and sources, relating to the *Gulag* as well as the *Lager*. At the same time, though, Levi also defends his position as a survivor, in the sense that he attributes to it a very important political mission: to tell and preserve the memory. What Levi fears the most are simplifications, a schematized vision of that past, which he has outlived and is still unable to account for.

In a previous paragraph, following Rancière, I dealt with the notion of history as a blend of story and history, as a mixture of its own of truth and fiction, of art and reality. To resist revisionism means to resist canonization, namely a dead history embalmed in a mainstream, directed by a dangerous *Zeitgeist*. Can I dimly venture to say that Levi refuses history because of its tendency to become canonized? Better said, Levi refuses the ‘eye of God’ aspect of history, the privileged position in understanding the political phenomenon of the *Lager*. He cannot give up stories, namely the lower perspective, in the midst of human affair, as Arendt would say. This is why Levi consigns his stories to a constitutive linguistic tension: *it is his way of avoiding canonization*. It is only by preserving what he refers to as “ambiguity” and “indcipherability” that he can surpass, perhaps even rid himself of, that strong *desire* for simplification.

In Levi’s work, the unsolved tension between history and stories is the tension between an objective and detached language – sustaining a will to understand and account for – and the sudden discrepancies and insufficiencies that language displays in attempting to grasp and define.<sup>26</sup> Those discrepancies are filled by what I have called tragic and poetic images, performed through a totally different use of language.

Hayden White refers to this as an example of “modernist literature”: “What happens, I think, over the course of Levi’s career as a writer is his discovery and patient working out of a distinctively modernist mode of expression, a manner of writing peculiarly adequate to the representation of the kinds of events which Levi experienced in the camps, the kinds of ‘totalitarian’ events that distinguish our historical epoch from all previous periods of history”(White 1997: 4).

White refers to the novelty and unpredictability of the totalitarian phenomenon, which we amply discussed in Chapter Three. What is interesting is that he differentiates between modern and modernist, with modernist referring not to that which is simply new, but to that which is utterly “imprevisto,” that which is not only unforeseen or unanticipated by any previous age or historical epoch but literally “unthinkable” or “unimaginable”. The point White wants to make is that radically unthinkable (what Levi also calls “indecifrabile”) events do not lend themselves to study by the “commonsensical techniques utilized in conventional historical inquiry nor even to verbal representation by the techniques of writing typically favored by historians from Herodotus to Momigliano. [...] Not only has the nature of historical events changed, so too has our way of explaining them” (5).

The radical ‘ontological’ change of historical events requires a new means of representation. White refers to “modernism” as the revolution in representational practices, referring to the tremendous changes that took place not only in literary techniques but also in the evolution of the new media. According to White, the traditional narrative mode of making history is no longer valid: “It is very difficult to write the history of our century because both the content (the events) and the form (the narrative) of traditional historical writing have changed”(6).

Levi, as I have pointed out earlier, does not want to be an historian of the *Lager*, and throughout his corpus of written work he insists on the recognition of his role as witness/survivor. Both literature and science seem to be inadequate in terms of his testimony. The discrepancy I detected in his use of the Italian language has been identified by White as the tension between the historian and the witness: “Like the historian, he wants to tell the truth, but as a participant in the events he reports, he knows that his memory of those events is likely to be colored and deformed by psychic defenses”(6).

Levi, in fact, at a certain point in the book, warns his readers of the special nature of his recount. He says that the book is drenched with memory, and, as such, it must be defended against itself, since it contains more considerations than recollections. In other words, Levi warns against the deforming action of his “considering memory” as opposed to its mere recording effect: “Questo stesso libro è intriso di memoria: per di più, di una memoria lontana. Attinge dunque ad una fonte sospetta, e deve essere difeso contro se stesso. Ecco: contiene più considerazioni che ricordi, si sofferma più volentieri sullo stato di cose quale è oggi che non sulla cronaca retroattiva” (Levi 1987: 23).<sup>27</sup> In this passage Levi once again underlines his distance from an historical, recording text; his incapability of being an historian is as vital a part of his writing as his paradoxical use of language.

For Levi, to give up, or refrain from being an historian, does not mean to commit the sin of humbleness, but, I suggest, to produce, in a modernist way, a new prose. Considerations are preferred over mere recollections (“ricordi”) not because they are less verifiable, but because the very objective verifiability of mere recorded events does not make any sense in this respect. Recollections, “ricordi,” can be either true or false, can be more or less precisely verified. “Considerazioni,” on the contrary – as the etymology of the words suggests – are products “of an imaginative projection of figures onto a field of phenomena which lacking both a frame and outlines must be constituted by the observer on the basis of his own expectations and notions of possible worlds” (White 1997: 8). According to White, Levi’s considerations are a sort of grouping together of elements in order to constitute them as possible objects of understanding. Where a mere recollection of events has to do with whether they are true or false, the realm of “considerazioni” does not explore the limits of verifiability or evidence, but the possibility of meaning. White affirms that by moving from recollection to consideration, Levi practices a work of imagination, therefore moving from “history” to “fiction.”

This does not mean that by going from “history” to “fiction” Levi is moving from “reality” to “illusion”. Fictionalizing history helps in building configurations of meaning in which the problem is not knowledge or truth, but understanding and reality. The problem for Levi was to “establish, not only for his readers but also for himself, the ‘reality’ of that ‘monstrous’ world he experienced in the camps. And this is much more the task of literature than it is of historiography, for it is literature that locates, probes, investigates and establishes the boundary between the real and the imaginary”(8).

The ambiguous reality of the camps requires a special means of representation, because there is no clear line between victims and perpetrators. Reality in the camps is never entirely black and white, but, rather, is an undistinguished gray zone. In order to understand what is complex, what is ambiguous and equivocal but also what is new and monstrous, we need a certain degree of imaginative power, even if the reality of what has happened exceeds imagination. As we have seen, Levi tells stories: Rumkowski, the members of the *Sonderkommando*<sup>28</sup>, and many others. In one single chapter of his book of considerations – namely a book *not* conceived of as pure narrative – stories emerge as the unforsakeable source of his considerations. Considerations can test the meaning of those stories, their force or inability to understand the *Lager* phenomenon. There, we are moving on the level of the imaginary, not because we want to suppress reality, but because that reality is in itself unimaginable. The reality of those who populate the gray zone is investigated through the telling of lived or reported stories, followed by considerations (usually regarding the impossibility to judge, as we have seen).

In order to establish a reality for those protagonists of the “zona grigia,” Levi cannot base his understanding on mere recollection or chronicle. Instead, he must move on the level of the imaginary, of the level of a constructive ability to produce a constellation of possible meaning. In order to establish a reality of that species one needs fiction: paradoxes multiply.

It is because paradoxes multiply and predicaments silence our inquiring minds that we need stories; stories are better equipped than concepts to bear the paradoxes and absurdity of reality. This is the case not in order to neutralize them – as many, including White himself, would have it – but in order to keep the paradoxes unsolved, alive, bewildering. This is why conceiving of a narrative as a means of expression which is not necessarily followed by a probable ending, by a completion that would direct the entire unfolding of a story, means, in this and also in the other contexts I have analyzed, to preserve the memory and the trauma of the memory. It is as if literature, or a certain degree of imaginative power and the use of language, could succeed in avoiding the clichés of history. This is the political force of storytelling: “the purpose of political theory, as Arendt understands it, is not to make a descriptively accurate report of the world but to ‘transcend the limitations of facts and information’ to tell a provocative and principled story” (Disch 1994: 140).

Stories preserve the kind of indignation and bewilderment that must accompany a responsible and critical understanding of the catastrophe. In other words, stories are necessary in order for us to reconcile ourselves with reality in a way that retains a sense of ‘fairness’ to that horrible reality, namely in a way that does not reduce it to a cliché. In Arendt, as in Levi, reality is at stake: “‘Truth’ always present itself in the form of a stereotype. ‘Reality’ never conforms to the ‘truth’” (White 1997: 13).

## 4. Ineffabilis Historia?

“Each event in human history reveals an unexpected landscape of human deeds, sufferings, and new possibilities which together transcend the sum total of all willed intentions and the significance of all origins.”  
H. Arendt, *Understanding and Politics*

“The *real story* of the Nazi constructed hell is desperately needed for the future. Not only because these facts have changed and poisoned the very air we breathe, not only because they now inhabit our dreams at night and permeate our thoughts during the day – but also because they have become the basic experience and the basic misery of our times.”(EIU: 200, my emphasis).

In one of her first articles on the specific theme of Totalitarianism, (“The Image of Hell”) Arendt refers to it by using three decisive terms: real, story, experience. It is from this perspective that her work in understanding begins: from the given, unchangeable fact of the “misery of our times”. It is a situated perspective, that which Arendt chooses almost inevitably. Although she was not a witness in the *Lager*, her concrete life was changed by history. Her perspective, therefore, acknowledges the misery of our times as a burden, as a fact that inevitably occurred. Nevertheless, the tangible inevitability of that fact (so inevitable that it changed her life completely) must not become the feared cliché common to all past events: it has passed, let us accept it, let us “aufheben” it and make it a part of ourselves. This is, I dare say, what Arendt willingly and combatively opposes. No clichés can tell that history, no given means of expression or theorization can tell that horror.

Similarly, Levi has an obsessive fear of generalizations and what he calls the “inevitable simplifications” that go together with any historical account. This fear of conformism, simplifications and clichés is the fear that the future will look at this past with acquiescent eyes, untroubled and unaware of what has taken place. Levi fears this outcome because it seems to fulfil what the SS prophetically told the *Lager* prisoners: “in qualunque modo finisca, la guerra contro di voi l’abbiamo vinta noi; nessuno di voi rimarrà per portare testimonianza, ma se anche qualcuno scampasse, il mondo non gli crederebbe. [...]La storia dei *Lager* saremo noi a dettarla”(Levi 1986: 3)<sup>29</sup>.

Levi, in fact, explains that one of the most haunting fears he and his inmates experienced in the *Lager* was a common recurrent dream. The dream was that they would return home and passionately tell the story of their suffering to a person close to them. The person would not believe such a story and would often turn around and walk away in silence (3–4). To disrupt the enormity of that experience in order to be understood, or at least in order to be listened to, is to some extent the aim of Levi’s writing. In order to disrupt this enormity one must fragment, crumble and deconstruct the compactness of the whole, of history as such. The challenge is, as for Arendt and Benjamin, to recognize the impossibility of a true story of the dead, the drowned or the oppressed, while simultaneously founding the very telling of their experiences and stories on that impossibility. The recognition of the abyss means to assume it as the radical perspective from which one must fix one’s eyes on the ruins of the catastrophe, on the impossibility of being neither a complete and perfect witness, nor an omniscient spectator. To speak for the dead does not necessarily mean that one has empathy for the victims but, rather, implies the disruption of historical continuity and totality in order to break the monolithic progressive direction of time, and to contest the monopoly of truth, the monologue of a single version of past occurrences. History is not ineffable, or *infans*,<sup>30</sup> history only speaks through stories.

The very interesting perspective upon which White (see *Supra* this chapter) elaborates regarding history must not, in this context, be seen as the final exhaustion of all historical discourses or reflections on past events. History as such is not, as I dared to state above, ineffable or ungraspable, a sort of unconscious side of the Hegelian consciousness; this perspective would end up celebrating relativism and condoning any fabricated truth about history. Instead of being ineffable or simply monstrous, awesome and irrational, history could be seen as an unsolvable predicament, and only insofar as the predicament, the abyss, the tension remains open and alive can there be comprehension.

History cannot be told as a “grand récit,” as Lyotard would say, but only as stories, which, to some extent, are all products of imagination and fiction. Stories are constellations of meaning, suspended from the implacable flow of linear time<sup>31</sup>. Only the openness these stories preserve (as an unfillable gap) and produce (the constant re-telling of stories) can save us from both forgetfulness and simplification.

## NOTES

- 1 In analyzing Conrad's masterpiece, *Lord Jim*, Frederic Jameson writes: "a wholly new narrative texture appears and you have that new surface which is the first half of *Lord Jim*, *écriture* that, approaching its narrative presence, its anecdotal center, at once denies the possibility of such presence and spills us over into yet further sentence production and the further frustration of presence affirmed and denied" (Jameson 1980:223).
- 2 See EIG 1963, see also Disch 1993: 669.
- 3 Edward Said, in one of his early books on literary criticism, defines Marlow's narrative technique as a "roundabout narrative approach," which Conrad shares with Ford Madox Ford. They differ from previous novelists insofar as the roundabout narrative approach grants the author a maximum level of psychological realism since, as in real life, "one does not comprehend an event all at once; instead, knowledge of an event comes to the mind in small pieces and is only gradually pieced together. The concentrated, prepackaged 'reality' presented by earlier novelists, they felt, cannot do justice to life's diffuse complexity" (Said 1975: 122).
- 4 Esposito (Esposito 1998) offers an interesting etymology of the Latin word *communitas*, which is derived from *munus*, the gift understood as a mutual (*munus-mutuus*) exchange (as opposed to *donus*, the un-mutual – "unilateral" – gift)(XIV). If the *communitas* is the realm of a sharing, mutual *munus*, Esposito asks himself what this *munus* is, what is this common interest that characterizes the belonging to a public sphere? Is it a substance, an interest, a good? By virtue of another interesting etymological research we find out that *communis* was originally intended to refer to the person "che condive un carico (una carica un incarico)"("who shares a public position, who is equally in charge"). What is common and shared is therefore a task, an obligation, a *Pflicht*. *Communitas*, therefore, is a community of persons united not by a 'property' but by a duty or a debt, it is a "being together" that is characterized by a lack, a limit understood as something absent. "Ne risulta che *communitas* è l'insieme di persone unite non da una 'proprietà', ma, appunto, da un dovere o da un debito. Non da un 'più', ma da un 'meno', da una mancanza, da un limite che si configura come un onere, o addirittura una modalità difettiva" (XV).
- 5 Ricoeur, on the other hand, criticizes this specific approach within historiography, namely the difference between a purely narrative historiography (persons and events) and a structural, objective one (trends, long duration changes etc.). In his opinion, the narrative relationship with temporality, namely the ability narrative has to solve the major predicaments of temporal experience, goes far beyond the technical distinction between narrativists and anti-narrativists. See Ricoeur 1983: 190.
- 6 The use that has been made of Conrad's text by Francis Ford Coppola in his

magnificent movie *Apocalypse Now* is an excellent example of the capacity this text has to be re-signified, re-appropriated in a totally different context. The story has been rightly used as an exposed text consigned to the attacks of time and propriety. On the making of the film and its complex re-visitation of Conrad's text see Coppola 1991.

- 7 See Jameson 1980 and his attempt to combine a dialectical approach to literature (in the mainstream of Marxism and, above all, of Lukács) with the semiotic/structuralist approach (Althusserian). By criticizing and by simultaneously combining both approaches, he nevertheless tends to confine literature to a merely symbolic realm, which politically speaking, has an influence only insofar as it mirrors or represents a specific ideology (with all its ambiguities and *non-dits*). He does not consider the genuinely political means that literature can offer in anticipating, hinting at, or even censuring a new and unforeseen reality. Due to the Marxian approach to history, which, in any case, is the preeminent horizon in which Jameson dwells, it does not surprise.
- 8 History, in order to maintain its meaningful specificity, must fight on opposed fronts: “against the firely glows of the event and of the chattering of the kings, the ambassadors, or the poor; but also against the conquering rationality of the economic laws and social science” (Rancière 1994: 81).
- 9 The famous Platonic condemnation of poets in *Republic* III considers *diegesis* to be a good form of art, insofar as it is not as deceptive as *mimesis*, in which the voice of the poet is supposed to ‘transform’ into the voice of different characters, such as in tragedy.
- 10 The witness of which Rancière speaks has a lot in common with the witness of the Nazi concentration camps of which Primo Levi speaks. The real witness, according to Levi, is not the survivor, the fortunate *superstes* who writes or recounts his/her experience. The real witness, or the complete, integral witness, is the one who has never come back from the horror, he who witnessed the complete destruction but, obviously, has not been able to testify to it personally: “Noi toccati dalla sorte abbiamo cercato, con maggiore o minore sapienza, di raccontare non solo il nostro destino, ma anche quello degli altri, dei sommersi, appunto; ma è stato un discorso ‘per conto di terzi’, il racconto di cose viste da vicino, non sperimentate in proprio. La demolizione condotta a termine, l’opera compiuta, non l’ha raccontata nessuno, come nessuno è mai tornato a raccontare la sua morte” (Levi 1986: 65). In this precious distinction between the real and the mediated witness lies the very source of historical knowledge, insofar as the two roles are different yet strictly interdependent.
- 11 Interesting reflections on the canonization of history and the relative ‘revisionist’ implications as regards the famous *Historikerstreit* have been formulated by Dominick La Capra (La Capra 1994: 43–67).
- 12 “Vergangenheit, die nicht vergehen will”, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 6 June 1986. See also Piper (ed.) 1987 and *New German Critique* 44 (Spring/Summer 1988).



- 13 A similar thesis, developed in relation to the rise of *biopower* in 19th century societies, has been popularly formulated by Michel Foucault. Biopower, the interest of the State in the health of the population and the species, in life itself, is, according to Foucault, what made genocide conceivable and possible. See Foucault 1997. Giorgio Agamben has taken up this thesis and developed it further in connection to genocide in general and to Nazi concentration camps in particular. See Agamben 1995 and 1998.
- 14 An important part of the self-interpretation that our societies forge for themselves has to do with the historical ‘incident’ or ‘deviation’ represented by the Holocaust. “One way is to present the Holocaust as something that happened to the Jews; as an event in *Jewish* history. This makes the Holocaust unique, comfortably uncharacteristic and sociologically inconsequential. [...] In so far as it is defined as, so to speak, the continuation of antisemitism through other means, the Holocaust appears to be a ‘one item set’, a one-off episode, which perhaps sheds some light on the *pathology* of the society in which it occurred, but hardly adds anything to our understanding of this society’s *normal* state. Less still does it call for any significant revision of the orthodox understanding of the historical tendency of modernity, of the civilizing process, of the constitutive topics of sociological inquiry.
- Another way [...] is to present the Holocaust as an extreme case of a wide and familiar category of social phenomena; [...] At worst the Holocaust is referred to a primeval and culturally inextinguishable ‘natural’ predisposition of the human species. [...] At best, the Holocaust is cast inside the most awesome and sinister – yet still theoretically assimilable category – of genocide; or else simply dissolved in the broad, all-too-familiar class of ethnic, cultural or racial oppression and persecution.” (Bauman 1988: 2). Dominick La Capra (La Capra 1994) also criticizes the “canonization of the Holocaust and writes: “In the case of traumatic events, canonization involves the mitigation or covering over of wounds and creating the impression that nothing really disruptive has occurred”(23).
- 15 See Bauman 1988: 12 “I propose to treat the Holocaust as a rare, yet significant and reliable, test of the hidden possibilities of modern society.”
- 16 Hayden White (White 1987), in this respect, writes: “...and precisely insofar as historical reflection is disciplined to understand history in such a way that it can forgive everything or at best to practice a kind of ‘disinterested interest’ of the sort Kant imagined to inform every properly aesthetic perception, it is removed from any connection with a visionary politics and consigned to a service that will always be antiutopian in nature”(73). Arendt wrote many polemical articles on the role played by scientific detachment in matters of historical understanding, in the years before and right after the publication of her *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951). See especially: *Understanding and Politics, On the Nature of Totalitarianism, Social Science Techniques and the Study of Concentration Camps, The image of Hell* now all included in EIU.

- 17 “We should cry for every victim, be merciful and helpful with veterans. Nevertheless, not all their behaviors should be taken as examples”. All the following translations of Levi’s passages are mine.
- 18 “I did not intend – neither would I have been able – to become a historian, namely to exhaustively examine the sources.”
- 19 “Have we been able, we survivors, to understand and to let others understand our experience? What we usually intend by ‘understanding’ coincides with ‘simplifying’– without a deep simplification, the world around us would be just an infinite and indefinite web which would challenge our ability to orient and act. We are indeed forced to reduce knowledge (“il conoscibile”) to a scheme. For this purpose all the remarkable instruments we have forged during our evolution, have been conceived of – properly human instruments such as language and conceptual thought.”
- 20 “The enemy was around but also inside, the ‘us’ lost its boundaries, the contenders were not two, there was not only one frontier but innumerable ones, between each one.”
- 21 Hayden White, in an illuminating unpublished paper on *I sommersi e i salvati*, presented in Verona in 1997, analyzes this aspect of Levi’s writing in reference to his frequent practice of comparison, “comparazione”: “In his work of ‘comparazione’ Levi displays an almost obsessional attention to detail and to the exceptional case, a scientist’s interest in fine discriminations, attention to the choice of the precise adjective to qualify a person or place or event or of an adverb to modify an action. [...] ‘Comparazione’ is necessary, Levi suggests, in order to establish different degrees of responsibility for actions or failures to act, to determine different kinds and degrees of ‘guilt’, and to complicate our tendency to rush to judgement of persons and actions who inhabited a world which resembles our own only in its diabolical rather than in its beatific aspects.” H. White, *Comparare. Considerations on a Levian practice*, unpublished manuscript, presented at the Società Letteraria in Verona in 1997.
- 22 “It seems, from many signs, that the time has come to explore the space which separates (not only inside the *Lager*) victims from perpetrators, and to do it in a lighter way, less obscurely than it has been done in some movies. Only a schematic rhetoric can affirm that such space is empty: it is never empty, it is populated by pathetic and terrible figures (at times they possess both qualities simultaneously), whom we must know if we want to know the human species, if we want to be able to defend our souls should a similar challenge return, or simply if we want to be aware of what is going on in a big industrial plant.”
- 23 “The victor is also the master of truth, he can manipulate it as he wishes.”
- 24 The problem of judging guilt and responsibility, together with the ability to understand and judge the subtle distinction between victims and perpetrators – as Arendt did in her controversial report on Eichmann – is very well treated by Tuija Parvikko in her book: *The Responsibility of the Pariah*, (Parvikko 1996). Parvikko analyzes Arendt’s debt to Bernard Lazare in her conception of

political judgment in extreme situations and interestingly applies it to the issue of the Eichmann trial. By distinguishing between political and personal responsibility Parvikko argues that what is at stake in judging extreme situations (as in the case of totalitarian regimes, but also in terms of the complex issue of Jewish responsibility for their own genocide, which touches on the theme treated by Levi in his “zona grigia”) is not political responsibility (whereas it implies a political identity which Jews more or less did not possess) but an “inescapable personal responsibility,” which she identifies in the figure of the “conscious pariah” theorized by Lazare. “It is my argument that what illuminated Arendt’s considerations of Jewish leadership during the execution of the Final Solution was the concept of modern conscious pariahdom which she adopted from Bernard Lazare. [...] However, this is not to say that she directly applied Lazarean ideas to the context of Jewish Holocaust but rather let them illuminate her evaluation as a general framework of interpretation and judgement. This is why her view of why and how the destruction of European Jewry was possible differed significantly from most other interpretations” (198). Of course, personal responsibility – in the Lazarean sense individuated by Parvikko – *is still* political in its significance. See Parvikko 1996: 192–201.

- 25 “We are, like Rumkowski, so blinded by power and prestige, that we forget our essential fragility: we come to terms with power, willingly or not, forgetting that we all are in the ghetto, and the ghetto is enclosed, and behind the fence are the lords of death, and a little farther away a train is waiting.”
- 26 G. Agamben (Agamben 1998) characterizes the predicament of the survivor as an irresolvable tension between an obsessive memory of that which has happened and the very unimaginability of those events. The very reality (material, cruel, bestial) of that experience becomes unreal, or exceeds its factual elements: “Il divario riguarda la struttura stessa della testimonianza. Da una parte, infatti, ciò che è avvenuto nei campi appare ai superstiti come l’unica cosa vera e, come tale, assolutamente indimenticabile; dall’altra, questa verità è, esattamente nella stessa misura, inimmaginabile, cioè irriducibile agli elementi reali che la costituiscono. Dei fatti così reali che, in confronto, niente è più vero: una realtà che eccede necessariamente i suoi elementi fattuali: questa è l’aporia di Auschwitz” (8).
- 27 “This book is drenched with memory, with a far memory. It originates from a suspect source and it must be defended against itself. It contains more considerations than recollections, it prefers to linger on the present state of affairs than on the retroactive chronicle.”
- 28 An Italian edition of the memoirs of some members of the *Sonderkommando* in Auschwitz has recently been published. In the form of hidden manuscripts – pieces of scrap paper, cigarette boxes – these memoirs have been found near Auschwitz many years later, and they are shocking insofar as they probably offer us the perfect testimony of which Levi speaks, namely the testimony of those who experienced the bottom of the *Lager* and did not come back.

Interestingly enough these memoirs are all in the form of a literary, fictive recount. A fictive narrator is supposed to take a fictive listener to see, to witness, to experience the entire journey of the deported persons, from the ghetto evacuation to the train journey to their final destination – the camp. A literary study on these memories should be interesting and revealing with regard to the issue of a fictionalized or imaginary reconstruction of the unimaginable. See Carlo Saletti (ed.) 2000.

- 29 “However it may finish, we won this war against you: none of you will remain to bear witness, and even if someone might survive, the world will not believe him. We will dictate the history of the *Lager*.”
- 30 On the fascinating issue of infancy as the time of our life when we do not possess speech (*infans* literally means ‘speechless’) see Agamben 1978. According to Agamben, it is precisely because we do not possess speech naturally and must experience a period of infancy, that our use of language (he opposes “lingua” and “discorso”, a semiotic dimension to a semantic one) is constitutively lacking, characterized by an irresolvable gap at its core, a sort of founding trauma of our being (50–51).
- 31 Once more, analogies between Arendt and Benjamin come to mind in this reading of Levi as a storyteller: Herzog emphasizes an important aspect of this analogy by referring to Stéphane Mosès, (*L’Ange de l’histoire*, Seuil, Paris 1992) who explains that “Benjamin’s concern was to find a way to recount the chaos of past events, and to achieve ‘a new historical method, leading no more to follow historical processes in their evolution, but to immobilize them, that is to describe (synchronically and not diachronically) some of their major connections’” (Herzog, 2000: 7).



# CHAPTER FIVE

## 1. Narrative And Feminist Identity

“I wish you would write about What it is in people that makes them want a story. The telling of tales. Ordinary life of ordinary people, Simenon-like. One can't say how life is, how chance or fate deals with people, except by telling the tale...We seem unable to live without events; life becomes an indifferent flux and we are hardly able to tell one day from the next. Life itself is full of tales. What made the tales disappear?” Hannah Arendt, *letter to Mary McCarthy*.

In this chapter I will analyze the (possible) connections which might exist between a politics of uniqueness as it has been formulated by Arendt, and the current debate within feminism concerning the question of identity.

The reader might be bewildered (if not annoyed) by the sudden shift from Totalitarianism and the Lager experience to the question of women's identity. The aim of this chapter is to read a part of history, namely the present time and women's present experience in politics, with the eyes of the storyteller. In other words, by displacing some common notions on what a woman is, what gender is, what feminism is, I would like to explore a possible re-telling of these issues. To some extent, the aim of this investigation is to contaminate the philosophical question of identity with some narrative elements (the Arendtian “who” as the protagonist of a story, the desire for a story, the performance of political action as an enacted story) in order to provide a different notion of identity. An identity that is neither linked to the limits of gender parameters, nor to their re-combination as disloyal citations (Butler), but as a contingently emergent performance, tellable and re-tellable as story. I will also offer examples of this practice of contamination, of the narrativization of fixed terms of inclusion/exclusion, by focusing on an interesting study on “birth stories,” on how women narrate their experience of pregnancy and child-delivery and by doing so offer counter-narratives to those imposed by medical science.

The historical and political implications of this re-telling of the issue of female identity will hopefully become clear. In my opinion it is the “who” of Arendtian origins, understood as radically performative and contingent, the protagonist of a truly new history. There are no apocalyptic tones in this, but simply the hope that the truly unpredictable subjects of politics will fill the historical space and tell their different stories.

Bonnie Honig, as we shall see, speaks of a political space that is understood as augmentable and amendable (Honig 1993). I propose the consideration of this aspect also in connection to time and temporalization: a history which is constantly amended and augmented by stories. A history which does not exclude from its unfolding the multiple directions that different protagonists ( in this case women) incorporate into their political disclosure.

What use can we make of the narrative practice, then, or the narrative approach to politics? How can it become fruitful in terms of a feminist critique? As Adriana Cavarero has pointed out, the narrative approach to identity, namely the fact that our identity becomes unified and tangible only in the form of a story told to us by somebody else, can be precious inasmuch as it can account for a uniqueness that even a feminist approach to identity cannot ‘grasp’.<sup>1</sup> In other words, there is also a fake and abstract nuance in the feminist need to ‘theorize’ womanhood, ‘the woman’ or ‘women’. These names can be useful means in the critique of the supposed universalism of a conversely male-based language. At the same time, though, general names such as ‘the woman’ tend to universalize a particular condition (for example, as many black feminists have pointed out, of the white, middle class female) that conceals a precise, biased origin (See Spelman 1988). A general name presupposes (and performs) an essence, traces boundaries between what is included and what is not.

Politics and identity: this coupling seems to constitute a starting point for a political action that renounces the juridical formalism of the liberal tradition. In the recent feminist debate over gender identity and the strategies of a gendered politics that should aim at the recognition of differences, interesting positions have emerged which refuse both the emancipatory perspective and the radical assertion of a pure femininity. The alternative to a strong recognition of a sexual binary difference is not, then, a formal recognition of differences within a given system, but the possibility of augmenting and amending the political scene. New and diverse subjects enter the political sphere not by adjusting to given political rules, but by constantly criticizing and transforming the very space of politics.

Against a politics of principles, which is determined by a theoretical foundation based upon self-evident truths (God, law, community), some

feminists propose to displace politics, or a displaced notion of politics, a way of theorizing politics that begins from the “imperfections” or “remainders” of a given system. That is, from those aspects which are automatically excluded by foundational truths (Honig 1993). A performative notion of identity seems to offer, within the American feminist debate, an interesting viewpoint on the recent political questions over a displacement of both the rules and the spaces of traditional, state-centered politics.

The need to displace an obsolete vision of the political has been manifested both by the theoretical and the practical approaches to political matters. In this globalized and globalizing era, the old boundaries of both representation and citizenship seem to be unable to both face radical transformations and to account for the need for new recognitions. It has long been an established fact that the political structures of the West, together with their legitimating theoretical definitions and norms, systematically exclude. In order to guarantee political rights, the system must expel those who do not comply with the national, class, ethnic, sexual, historical and professional requirements. The direct subordination of politics to philosophy has been highlighted by important feminist thinkers for a long time (Irigaray 1974; Braidotti 1991 and 1994; Cavarero 1991, Cavarero & Restaino 1999).

## 2. Politics between Gender and Uniqueness: Am I that Woman?

I would like to experiment with a different reading of Arendt’s notion of storytelling, by ‘intersecting’ it with Judith Butler’s views on identity and politics expressed in her books *Gender Trouble* and *Bodies that Matter* (Butler 1990 & 1993). As Butler points out, not only does the term “gender” belong to the linguistic domain of culturally produced entities, but also “sex” has a “constructed” origin - “it is what Foucault has called a ‘regulatory ideal’. In this sense, then, ‘sex’ not only functions as a norm, but is a part of a regulatory practice that *produces the bodies it governs*, that is, whose regulatory force is made clear as a kind of productive power, the power to produce – demarcate, circulate, differentiate – the bodies it controls” (Butler 1993: 1, my emphasis).

To work with a term as general as “sexual difference” implies the division of the human realm into two categories of male and female, which, as Butler shows, excludes anyone and everyone who cannot be categorized as either one or the other. Butler further argues that what is at stake in the regulatory ideal of



“sex” is the hegemony of the heterosexual practice. What she questions is whether it is possible to act within the regulatory ideal of sex and disrupt its normative exclusions – the central aspect of her question is how to understand the “production of bodies through constraint without falling into the trap of cultural determinism” (x).

The importance of Butler’s position lies in the fact that, starting from a post-structuralist and constructivist perspective, she seeks new modes of political action, new scenarios for political agency. In other words, she seeks to overcome the political impasse derived from a Foucauldian perspective, on the one hand, and to propose strategies of democratic action overtaking Derridean intellectualism on the other.

In her perspective, the heterosexual norm has created boundaries between the normal and the abject (which, of course, includes many different forms of non-heterosexual preferences), and the abject is “the excluded and illegible domain that haunts the former domain as the spectre of its own impossibility, the very limit to intelligibility, its constitutive outside” (xi).

Heterosexual norms are not once and for all given and established; it is only through a forcible reiteration of norms that “sex” materializes bodies. In other words, heterosexuality is not a fact but, rather, is the result of discursive reiterated practices. Discourse works by repeating its norms and by producing the “effects that it names” through repetition (2). This is what Butler refers to as “the performative”<sup>2</sup>. Discourse consists of reiterating a norm, the authority of which does not exist prior to the reiteration, and, as such, the effects of the discourse are at the same time those aspects which the discourse names and pretends to represent. Again, there is no prior reality to be named, but only the naming performative practice which has the potential to provide us (discursive) access to reality.

What is interesting in this perspective is that the performative approach to language enables us to see all norms and prescriptions as contingent<sup>3</sup>. If they were to lose the possibility of being repeated, they would cease to perform their effects. In other, more Butlerian words, the fact that norms must be repeated or reiterated, testifies to always incomplete materialization of “normal” bodies; bodies never quite comply with the norms, which is why the process of materialization itself can be “turned against itself” (1-2). This is also why the task of “abjection,” namely of what is excluded from the truth regime, is to threaten and disrupt the system of regulation and constraint, providing “a critical source in the struggle to rearticulate the very terms of symbolic legitimacy and intelligibility”(3).

How is this disruption to be carried out? As we have said, it is because of the discovered contingency of all norms, of the constantly reaffirmed and repeated legitimacy of “the law” that we are able to even attempt a dismantling of such a

fragile construction. It is by virtue of the reiteration of norms that “gaps and fissures” are opened up as the constitutive instabilities in such constructions, as those which escape or exceed the norm (10). The aim of her critique is “to ‘cite’ the law in order to reiterate and coopt its power, to expose the heterosexual matrix and to displace the effect of its necessity”(15).

I am interested in using this critique of the system of exclusion/inclusion inasmuch as it can illustrate how theoretical knowledge, separately from the political intentions of its own content, inevitably proceeds through exclusions and simultaneously produces “remainders”. In this case what Butler sees as excluded are all those sexual practices not included in the so-called “heterosexual norm”. Moreover, the violence with which theoretical knowledge proceeds, conceals what has been excluded. In other words, can it be possible to read the violent practice of abstraction as a reiterated performance of a violent act, which is never fully complete? Can conceptual abstraction be regarded as ‘contingent’ and unmasked in its violent and arbitrary character?<sup>4</sup>

Could we, in other words, shift Butler’s attention from the contingency of all norms to the contingent mode of producing those laws, namely the formation of concepts? Not only is the content of norms contestable, but so is the very legitimacy of its formulation, the very mode of abstraction. This is what I have sought to demonstrate in Chapter Two. Through my deconstruction of the metaphors of verticality I have attempted to expose the very mode of abstraction and conceptual mastery to a radical reversibility. And this, of course, has also been my intention in the following chapters: to contingently read not only the conceptual formulations of philosophy (as with Plato, Descartes and Kant) but also the very notion of history that proceeds directly from a philosophical (speculative) notion of time and truth. In order to demonstrate the reversibility, i.e. the contingency of the so-called metaphysical mode of thinking, one must simultaneously also accept its performativity, namely the fact that it produces the effects it pretends to name.

As we have seen, the need to delegitimize concepts and their supposedly universal usefulness derives from the specific need to question the universality of a language that imposes its rules through exclusion and the constant repetition of that same exclusion.

Arendt, in *The Life of the Mind*, questions the very legitimacy of the terminology derived from the Greek language, its abstractions and conceptualizations, namely, the aforementioned “frozen analogies” that have shaped our philosophical tradition: “Our knowledge of the so called primitive languages has taught us that the grouping together of many particulars under a name common to all of them is by no means a matter of course”.

This means that, for Arendt too, the legitimacy of our concepts can be displaced, delegitimized, contested. “These [primitive] languages, whose

vocabulary is often so remarkably rich, lack such abstract nouns even in relation to clearly visible objects” (LOM: 1,170). Can we connect what Arendt says about the legitimacy of the “frozen analogies” that we still call concepts and the analysis carried out by Butler as regards the contingency of norms?

For Butler, heterosexual practice delimits the boundaries between normal and abject, but is forced to repeat its normative boundaries over and over in order to conceal their contingent nature. Similarly, to abstract from stories in order to build a definitory knowledge conceals the contingent nature of conceptual thinking as such. Definitions (conceptually constructed) need to be constantly reformulated because their inclusive practice can never be fully exhaustive. Concepts are constantly re-cited, re-performed in order to produce the reality they name and (wish to) control. In this perspective can stories be ‘disruptive’ to the conceptual, can they re-cite the conceptual by displacing it, namely by differently disposing of its spatiality?

What I am arguing is that perhaps stories can be seen as ‘dis-placed’ concepts, namely as ‘horizontalized concepts,’ or as concepts cited horizontally, disloyally. By once again applying the ‘freezing’ metaphor, perhaps we can turn to stories to unfreeze concepts and displace their supposed universality. The project of ‘liberating’ stories from within concepts should not be a mere intellectual task, but should also become a useful means of critique. We should attempt to displace concepts as boundaries and norms, in order for unpredictability, newness and future to emerge to the light of publicity.

To return now to Cavarero, we might ask whether we can displace a law – that of the father, of an entire tradition of oppression – by simply detecting the presence of a *desire*, that of being told by a story rather than comprised by a concept?

### 3. Performing Uniqueness

Storytelling, as Arendt proposes it and as I appropriate it, refrains from presupposing a ‘rule’, an ‘ideal’, a norm. This narrative practice neither presupposes nor constructs boundaries. It does not aim at excluding because it does not aim at building a solid system. What we are investigating here is the importance of a narrative form of representation and knowledge, a way of attributing meaning to political situations.

As Bonnie Honig points out, following Butler’s idea of performativity, Arendt develops a “politics of performativity” that “instead of reproducing and representing ‘what’ we are, generates ‘who’ we are by episodically producing

new identities, identities whose newness becomes ‘the beginning of a new story’”(Honig 1993: 124-125).

By primarily attributing to political action the capacity of giving birth to a new and unheard of story, Arendt proposes a way of understanding the political as the (discursive) realm in which every new action performs new subjects. Or, in other words, there is no being behind the doing. The actor does not express a previously existent identity, nor is her previous existence consequent of her public appearance.<sup>5</sup>

Action within a public space involves taking a risk; it is a hiatus, a breaking of the circular movement of labor and survival. Action itself is a “second birth,” an openness to novelty: not necessarily in the sense of heroic deeds, but in the visibility the actor gains through public appearance, in her disclosing herself to others: “The hero to the story discloses no heroic qualities; the word ‘hero’ originally, that is, in Homer, was no more than a name given to 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 the willingness to act and speak at all, to insert one’s self into the world and begin a story of one’s own” (HC: 186).

To begin a story, to be willing to enter the ‘world’ testifies to a political courage that is one with the desire of exiting the mere biological dimension, the dimension of indistinctness and homogeneity, in which we all are equal.

Arendt’s actor, then, is a ‘nobody’ until she/he has acted; until then she/he is an undistinguished being whose behavior can be controlled and predicted. Action, on the other hand, cannot be controlled or predicted, and in these features lies its disruptive force: “Action transcends ‘intentions’ in that it produces or gives birth to the actor or performer rather than merely express his antecedent character, to the extent that it creates new relations and realities rather than consolidate old ones” (Honig 1993: 78). The actor or performer who discloses her/himself in action is what Arendt calls the “who,” as opposed to the “what” of a character or type. The difference between a political appearance and a philosophical description of ‘identity’ is that the former can never be grasped or reified exhaustively (the “who” discloses itself only in a political situation), while the latter gains credibility inasmuch as it can be reified (the “what” that philosophy or conceptual knowledge wants irremediably to possess and manipulate).

The perspective that is delineated here through the intersection of the thought of four different women thinkers (Arendt, Honig, Butler and Cavarero) appears to question the legitimacy not only of the supposed universality of a biased language (phallogocentrism), but also the very ‘necessity’ or inevitability of theoretical thinking as such. Can we displace theoretical architecture by

supposing that the very rules of construction are not in themselves compelling? Can we rhetorically deconstruct and delegitimize a theorem?

Arendt affirms that political agency is such that it cannot be accounted for theoretically, that is, it cannot be 'named' successfully by a concept or a set of concepts. In Butlerian terms this means that no 'identity' can exhaust the plural nature of a subject: "To prescribe an exclusive identification for a multiply constituted subject, as every subject is, is to enforce a reduction and a paralysis" (Butler 1990: 116). Every attempt to fix, reify as it were, the subject as 'identity,' as a set of distinguished features, implies the exclusion of difference, the production of abjection. Not only is this abstracting practice violent, but it fails to account for the multiplicity of a subject, of the richness and unpredictability of political possibilities that is inherent in dis-identified actors.

As Arendt puts it: "The manifestation of 'who' the speaker and doer unexchangeably is, though is plainly visible, retains a curious intangibility that confounds all efforts toward unequivocal verbal expression. The moment we want to say *who* somebody is, our very vocabulary leads us astray into saying *what* he is; we get entangled in a description of qualities he necessarily shares with others like him; we begin to describe a type or a 'character' in the old meaning of the word, with the result that his specific uniqueness escapes us" (HC 181). The uniqueness of the political actor is such that it cannot be 'grasped' verbally.

We are not dealing here with a metaphysical uniqueness, an essential feature of the self. What Arendt seems to emphasize is the fact that the political sphere, as a public and exposed realm of actions and change, refrains from being 'identified', organized through exclusions: "[...] the impossibility, as it were, to solidify in words the living essence of the person as it shows itself in the flux of action and speech, has great bearing upon the whole realm of human affairs, where we exist primarily as acting and speaking beings. It excludes in principle our ever being able to handle these affairs as we handle things whose nature is at our disposal because we can name them" (HC: 181-182).

In the realm of human affairs we can never handle actions as we handle things. That is, we can never conceptually possess a political reality or phenomenon, we can only tell its story.

As Adriana Cavarero argues, we perceive of ourselves as unique only when we realize that we actually desire a unique story for ourselves. In other words, when we feel that a story tells us more about ourselves than any other kind of discourse. The uniqueness of the "who" is something that we opaquely perceive until we hear our story told from somebody else's mouth. This is the point at which we instantly realize (as Oedipus and Ulysses did) that we are actually the protagonists of a unique path.<sup>6</sup>

In the story, we are the protagonists who act in the public sphere. That is, when acting, we simultaneously perform and become aware of the story of our uniqueness,

the story of our “who”. Action produces stories “as naturally as fabrication produces tangible things.”

## 4. Citing Disloyally

Stories are paths traced by acting agents in the political sphere. The recount of these paths is a reification of the fluxes of action and speech; stories are different from their ‘telling’. In other words, Arendt distinguishes between actions that are stories ‘in-progress’ and all the possible reifications of action and speech: “documents and monuments [...] objects and art works, they may be told and retold and worked into all kinds of materials.” Enacted stories are different from made up stories, fiction, in that the latter have a distinguished author, while the former “reveal an agent, but this agent is not an author or producer. Somebody began it and is its subject, in the twofold sense of the word, its actor and sufferer, but nobody is its author” (HC: 184).

These distinctions are emphasized by Arendt in order to underline the peculiar features of the political sphere. Arendt’s critique, as I have mentioned above, is primarily against the reduction of *praxis* to *poiesis*. What Arendt’s inquiry into the tradition contests is not only the content of different models of order, but also the method of their procedure. Abstract criteria that deal with the plurality and unpredictability of the realm of human affairs with a sort of attitude of manipulation, are imposed on the political sphere from the outside. They are different versions of the Platonic idea, a model contemplated intellectually and then realized concretely. This notion of politics as *techne*, as a specific ability, which rests on the sole deductive capacity of the mind, is strenuously opposed by Arendt.

This is why she emphasizes the ‘ungraspable’ nature of political action. At the same time, however, she admits that “the specific revelatory quality of action and speech, the implicit manifestation of the agent and speaker, is so indissolubly tied to the living flux of acting and speaking that it can be represented and ‘reified’ only through a kind of repetition, the imitation or *mimesis*, which according to Aristotle prevails in all arts but is actually appropriate only to the *drama*, whose very name (from the Greek verb *dran*, ‘to act’) indicates that play-acting actually is an imitation of acting”(186).

Interestingly enough, the ‘correct’ means of representing the living flux of political action would be by imitating it, by repeating the actor’s gestures and words, letting the ungraspable nature of that living flux re-emerge. Paradoxically, though, the very *mimesis* of the living flux of action can never be completely

faithful. Once the fleeting moment of action is past, the importance of a narrative repetition lies in the fact that its imitation 'respects' the contingency of action.<sup>7</sup>

How could we 'respect' the contingency of a political action by inserting it into a category that explains either the motives or aims of that action? What is vital to Arendt's notion of action is its revelatory quality. Acting reveals to others "who" we are. Action is unpredictable and unique, it differs both from behavior and conduct that is merely means-ends based. To tell a story once the action is past means to save the fleeting moment from the futility of human temporality.

Moreover, to tell a story means to imitate a contingency, in a way that is impossible for concepts. Stories imitate 'contingently' - that is, they are different each time, contingent. I shall try to explain this further. Concepts deprive novelty of its impact. Concepts, as we have seen, can be investigated genealogically, can be delegitimized in their supposed universality. But why do we need to delegitimize them? Because while abstracting they also exclude, they control, they produce abjection. To narrate stories, to imitate the fleeting moment of action by re-telling it does not mean to preserve the original structure of that action. It would be naïve to presuppose that there is a real correspondence between reality and narrative.<sup>8</sup> To imitate contingently means to do away with the origin, with the first 'once upon a time' and to be ready to change the finale every time the story is told. To imitate contingently means to preserve surprise, unexpectedness and novelty as they should emerge from human actions, whether they are "disloyal citation of norms" (Butler) or "unexpected miracles" (Arendt).<sup>9</sup>

Butler, in fact, expresses an interesting 'version' of the Arendtian capacity to act through her notion of performativity. She argues that in order to simultaneously escape social determinism and remain faithful to the notion of language performativity (namely to the fact that language performs identities, norms and the corresponding exclusions), we must consider the citation or reiteration of a norm as *disloyal*.

Butler argues that there is a possibility for what she refers to as "agency"; this possibility lies in the "hiatus in iterability." For political action to produce novelty there must be the possibility of discontinuity in the citational chain, namely the possibility of citing differently, displacing the chain of political signifiers by simply forcing its legitimization device: the citation of the law.

Can the repetition of action - in Arendt's terms, namely the possibility of representing it without violating its "immaterial flux" - be accounted for in terms of the "citation of the law"? It seems to me that if we read Arendt with disenchanted eyes it becomes clear that she is advocating a way of conceiving of both action and the realm of plurality that emphasizes openness. At the same time, Arendt is well aware of the compulsory influence of language. She actually notes that real stories, as opposed to fictional ones, have no author,

which is to say that real stories are neither enacted willfully nor performed with precise knowledge of their outcome.

Arendt is also aware of the impossibility of accepting novelty within the frame of theoretical knowledge. She is seeking a different mode of approach: the imitation of action in tragedy; the telling of a life story in as the disclosure of the uniqueness of an actor; the importance of preserving a story as the memory of unique deeds and words; the notion of history as togetherness of stories in which each one is able to be meaningful for itself. All of these different points of view on the realm of politics can be seen as separate attempts to displace the theoretical approach to politics, the manipulating, violent, boundary-tracing practice of politics as *techné*.

I am arguing that following Arendt, we can find an interesting and explorable path that goes in the direction of storytelling, of dramatic imitation, of the *narrative disruption* of the abstract unity of concepts. Can this displacing practice be seen as a disloyal citation of “the law”? Can we take Arendt’s notion of the “who” and the intangibility of this uniqueness as the protagonist of a disloyal story? Uniqueness is *not* unspeakable, abnormal, extraordinary, heroic. Uniqueness simply cannot be told other than in a story that imitates the actions of the actor’s performances. In order for this uniqueness to be preserved - that is, in order not to assimilate it to a stereotype, a character, an *exemplum* - we must admit the paradoxical notion of an imitation that is always new. Retelling the story of the actor’s life is always contingent, yet it is nonetheless a vital practice of the political realm. Only by constantly re-assessing, amending and augmenting the political space can we avoid fixed and deadly boundaries. A political space conceived of as always amendable is a space in which norms are always cited disloyally, a space in which we can host novelty and surprise.

As Honig shows, Arendt conceives of identity as performative: word and deed in the political sphere bring “something new into being that did not exist before” (Honig 1993: 84). Politics conceived of as the theatre or scene of performance must, therefore, rely on citational practices that refrain from abstracting. In order for this newness to be remembered, as in the Homeric epic poems, the story of its appearance must be imitated, that is, enacted as a drama or story - not by subsuming the event under a concept, but by representing the event by following the path of its unfolding in time. Unlike in epic poems, though, in the narrative practice I have in mind, every telling of a story is different from the previous one. Each acting agent is a potential storyteller, each story told is a different version of an ‘original’ but delegitimized norm.

In order for the narrative citation of concepts to be disloyal we must not presuppose a ‘correct’ or truthful narration, as was the case for the epic poems. The necessity of not altering the narrative was an inherent aspect of the



mnemonic technique of that oral tradition.<sup>10</sup> The sequence of events, as well as the outcome of the story, had to be maintained. If we instead assume the perspective of a narrative displacement of conceptual ‘freezing,’ the narrative approach to identity, the ‘liberation’ of a story for each of those “remainders” that the normative discourse of theory confines to the unspeakable or the unconscious, then the stories we can tell are not limited to a single outcome.

Stories, in other words, are *always* disloyal insofar as they imitate contingency. How can we imitate contingency loyally? The imitation will always be paradoxical: if we want to imitate the “who” of a political story, if we do not want to restrict her/him to a frame of inclusion/exclusion, then the fairest imitation is disloyal. *Only by disrupting the faithfulness to the original can we be faithful to the “who”. Only by abandoning the fixity of definitions can we preserve the uniqueness of the political actor.*

Neither concepts nor stories that are always reproduced identically to the original can fairly recount the political realm. Only a fluid dimension of continual imitation and the citation of former stories can escape the fixity of definitory boundaries. The narrative practice I am advocating cannot presuppose a closure, a given ending. The outcome is always different, as it is the narrative itself. This is what I refer to as the horizontal displacement of conceptual verticality.

## 5. Augmenting the Myth

Re-tracing the path of a performance, re-performing an action by re-telling the story of its entanglement with other stories, is what Honig calls the “augmentation” and “amendment” of the political realm. The political realm is constantly augmented and amended by new appearances, by new deeds and words performed in public. Arendt’s notion of action as being a story that becomes real only when it is told and remembered by others is simply the proposal of a political interaction in which identity is constantly called into question, mobilized and de-structured insofar as the story becomes a “community property”. In addition to speaking of narrative epics, drawing examples from Homer,<sup>11</sup> we could shift our attention to myths. The mythical ‘archive’ of our culture is so rich and varied that not only are there many versions of a myth, but every re-appropriation of a myth displaces the previous one. In other words, since the etymology of the word “myth” (*mythos*) is “narration” (“tale”), we can assume that there are many narrations and no ‘originals’. Or, in other words, the narration constantly becomes adjourned and augmented, amended and re-cited.<sup>12</sup>

Every time the story is re-performed (re-told or re-enacted) the “law” - that is, the norm or the fixity of the norm - undergoes a disloyal citation.

The emphasis on performativity “opens up possibilities of political proliferation [...] reclaiming the practice of politics from representative, state-centered, and state-centering institutions” (Honig 1993: 125). In the words of Judith Butler, performativity conceived of as a disloyal citational practice must be played against “the cultural specific identities” compelled by liberalism.

The aim of a politics of performativity is also that of creating better conditions for those “abject” beings for which the system does not supply a name. Butler advocates for “creating the kind of community in which surviving with AIDS becomes possible, [...] queer lives become legible, valuable, worthy of support, in which passion, injury, grief, aspiration become recognized *without fixing the terms of that recognition in yet another conceptual order of lifelessness and rigid exclusion*” (Butler 1993: 21, emphasis mine).

Butler rightly affirms that a deconstruction of identity does not necessarily imply a deconstruction of politics. What is at stake here is the possibility to rethink political practices in ways that would renounce those self-evident truths and their normative implications. It is the possibility to rethink the political from an “imperfect” starting point, namely, as Bonnie Honig says, from the remainders and imperfections that a normative notion of politics and political representation/inclusion inevitably produces (Honig 1993: 61-75).

To rethink politics by beginning with its imperfections and remainders means to displace the notion of politics as both identity and rule, or, to do away with a notion of politics as belonging and politics as *techné*. As Hannah Arendt reminds us, the inevitable price to pay for a politics reduced to *techné* is the loss of freedom, namely the loss of the experience of political action in which what is at stake is not the instrumental outcome of public action but the disclosure of a uniqueness that cannot be reduced to categories. It is the disclosure of a “who” as opposed to a “what” that qualifies, in Arendtian terms, the political. It is as if the “who” who discloses her/himself in the context of public audibility and visibility did not exist prior to this public appearance. Moreover, it is as if this “who” who discloses her/himself could be regarded as the “remainder” or “imperfection” of political order, rule or administration, in one word *techné*.

As Bonnie Honig points out, by originally appropriating this exhibitivistic and relational dimension of politics as Arendt formulated it, the Arendtian “who” is a performative identity, a mere appearance which is not the superficial phenomenon of a more intimate and true ‘essence’. There is no being behind the doing, as we have already noted.

Nevertheless, there is another aspect of Arendtian thought that can be of use in a radical rethinking of politics, and it should take its bearings from a

displacement of the rigid frames of inclusion. According to Arendt, in fact, the decisive element of her notion of political action is, above all, the *novelty* of each acting “who”. This is the element that should be recognized and valorized above all others. Action in a public space involves taking a risk; it is a hiatus, a break in the circular movement of labor and survival.<sup>13</sup> Action itself is a “second birth,” and as such it is an “unexpected miracle”. Action is giving birth to something radically new, unheard of and unforeseen.

Arendt appreciates the founding act that characterizes the American Revolution because, according to her, it was a political act of foundation that did not receive its legitimacy from the past but from the future. Arendt thought that the American Constitution offered an example of this, as its authority “resides in its very capacity to be amended and augmented,” to be able to receive future modifications as a part of its inherent ‘nature’. To bind itself to possible or impossible future unexpectedness was, according to Arendt, the richness of the Declaration of Independence. Let us now examine how and why.

Arendt refers to the Roman model of *auctoritas*, which derives from the verb *augere*, to augment, to increase. Arendt connects the Founding Fathers’ notion of Roman authority, namely the augmentable source of legitimacy, with the founding act, as it is contained in the Declaration of Independence. “We hold these truths to be self-evident,” the Preamble to the Declaration. According to Arendt, a truly political act is contained in this Preamble, but not as a foundation upon a transcendent source of power (God, the law, the community). The founding act is implied not in the abstract and absolute element (“self-evident truths”) but in the concrete and plural act which follows from a public deliberation (“We hold”). The Preamble sentence is a strange combination of concrete and abstract elements. Where the first part of the sentence implies a deliberation, a political agreement, the second part, abstract truths, do not need public deliberation, they are themselves cogent, self-referential, self-evident. What characterizes the American model is the concrete and unique act of attributing authority to the deliberative moment, to the experience of novelty, of giving birth to a new body politics. In other words, what is important in the aforementioned Preamble – the true source of the *auctoritas* of the American system – is the concrete statement “We hold”. What counts in that specific founding political experience, as opposed to the French Revolution, is the act itself (“they had constituted themselves into ‘civil bodies politic’”) and not a legitimation on a higher ground (“self-evident truths”). The foundational model of the American Revolution distinguishes itself from the French one (which, as we know, founds itself entirely on absolute truths) by virtue of its contingent foundation, a foundation that binds itself to the future rather than to the past, and therefore *authorizes* (increases, amends) the political dimension of novelty.

This future orientation and capacity to be amended is possible only insofar as the founding act does not seek legitimization in a remote or legendary origin, but, rather, views openness to modification and amendments as its greatest source of legitimacy. “The very concept of Roman authority suggests that the act of foundation inevitably develops its own stability and permanence, and authority in this context is nothing more or less than a kind of necessary augmentation by virtue of which all innovations and changes remain tied back to the foundations which, at the same time, they augment and increase. Thus the amendments to the Constitution augment and increase the original foundations of the American republic; needless to say, the very authority of the American Constitution resides in its inherent capacity to be amended and augmented” (OR: 202).

Openness to modification, alteration and amendment implies a denial of orthodoxy, but also an acceptance of the contingent foundations of legitimacy.

The newness of politics requires a constant re-contextualization and re-problematization of the terms and boundaries of both political action and space. The politics of *techné*, namely the dimension of mere administration and rule, of order and homogeneity, denies instances of novelty, amendment and augmentation, qualifying them as disturbances. In the same way, a political dimension strictly confined to the boundaries of national or ethnic identity, legitimated by a supposedly self evident pure and common origin, is not willing to expose that same source of legitimacy, to displace it and therefore to highlight its contingency and resistibility.

It becomes clear, then, that the qualifying elements of a displacement of politics are not conceivable within the frame of a strong notion of identity, rooted and anchored to a community or a self. Can the Arendtian “who” be seen as the precursor of performative identity? Bonnie Honig claims that the founding act to which Arendt attributes authority, the deliberate “we hold”, is a perfect example of a politics of performativity (Honig 1995: 137).

According to Honig the instance Arendt discusses, the sentence in the Preamble, displays a conflict between the constative, unnegotiable, transcendent element (“self evident truths”) and the performative, unpredictable, genuinely new element of the founding act (“We hold”), a speech act which declares that which performs or enacts. There is no prior political reality to this performative act, which is action *par excellence*, the founding moment of a political reality insofar as it is pronounced in front of others in a public context. According to Arendt, in fact, the public appearance is what is essentially political: politics depends on the appearance in front of others and owes its very existence to this constant disclosure of novelty. Honig therefore claims that Arendtian politics can be seen as a performative dimension which renounces constative utterances (in the case of the American Constitution: God, Natural Law, self-evident truths) because of their completeness and closure, their irresistibility (138). These

constative, immobile, abstract and non-negotiable elements “petrify power.” The reduction of the performative dimension (new appearance, disclosure of a unique “who”) to constative elements (normalized subjects, bearer of rights) inevitably implies a closure of politics and its spaces, reifying the “new,” the “not yet,” the unique who by subsuming it under a category, qualifying it as political subject with specific characteristics, nullifying its augmenting potential.

A politics of performativity is therefore a politics of resistibility, of the disavowal of founding principles and self-evident truths. Thinking of politics in terms of resistibility means also considering those truths and principles as contingent, removable, renegotiable.

## **6. Bodies that (do not) Matter?**

Honig presents an interesting juxtaposition of Arendt and Butler. She is, however, less radical than Butler in accepting parodical and drag practices. If, according to Honig, the performative carries with it the decisive element of novelty, to give birth to something that did not exist prior to the pronunciation of words in front of an audience, for Butler, drag does not necessarily innovate but simply ironically combines the discursive elements of a symbolic code in different ways. For both thinkers, though, the undeniable starting point of a politics of performativity is to reject essentialism and belonging, a critique of the constative dimension of language. Discourse does not describe an already existing reality but, rather, simultaneously constructs and normalizes that same reality.

This is why feminism must not fall prey to the binary mechanism according to which an oppositional logic would be able to exhaust reality. To reduce politics to a mere representation of interests can entail the risk of falling back into the binary scheme of exclusion and abjection, which finds its strength on the ability to produce remainders and imperfections. The ambiguity of such a term as “representation” for feminist politics lies in the difficulty of establishing who is the subject to be represented. Juridical subjects are always the result of exclusionary practices, which are difficult to detect once the legitimating juridical structure is established. Therefore, a politics of gender can, on the one hand, grant visibility and legitimacy to women as political subjects, but on the other hand it does not question representational mechanisms as such, but instead simply submits to the exclusion/inclusion regime, to the normative and normalizing functions. Discourse normalizes insofar as it would exhaust “woman” in a set of universal and quantifying features, law normalizes insofar as it represents only those who can qualify as “subjects”.

Butler, then, uses the notion of contingent identity as a critical stance that is able to displace and disrupt the theoretical and political mechanism that lies at the heart of representative and identity politics. Simply because excluding and normalizing norms do not function perfectly, and because the continual reiteration of the law produces “gaps and fissures” in the functioning of that same law, it is possible to question the very notion of identity, as well as that of representation. “My suggestion is that the presumed universality and unity of the subject of feminism is effectively undermined by the constraints of the representational discourse in which it functions. Indeed the premature insistence on a stable subject of feminism, understood as a seamless category of women, inevitably generates multiple refusals to accept the category” (Butler 1990: 4).

According to Butler, the term “woman” cannot be exhausted by gender. The elements that qualify the signifier “woman” are the result of multiple discursive practices, which undermine the unity of the category “gender”. “The term fails to be exhaustive, not because a pregendered ‘person’ transcends the specific *paraphernalia* of its gender, but because gender intersects with racial, class, ethnic, sexual, and regional modalities of discursively constituted identities” (3).

The Arendtian “who,” the uniqueness that appears in the political realm and gives birth with words and deeds to a completely new story, can give voice to that which is not included in the sphere of representative politics. The Arendtian “who” cannot be exhausted by a name (the signifier “woman”), nor is it namable in terms of its being a juridical and political “subject”.

The uniqueness of which Arendt speaks seems to elude not only gender features, which, according to Butler, are never exhaustive or coherent, but also the various racial, class, ethnic, sexual and regional modalities qualified by Butler as further specifications of identity. To state that identity is constructed through intersecting modalities which are interdependent and complex is quite different from speaking of the curious intangibility of the “who”. Butler advocates an interesting new modality of thinking about gender and politics, although she still seems to remain bound to the realm of the “what,” to precisely the reifying perspective she criticizes. Not surprisingly, then, the complex and multiple identity she supports is not able to give birth to the new, but simply rearticulates, in parodic, disloyal and critical ways the normalizing injunctions of a code we cannot deny. We could say, then, that the signifier “woman” cannot be exhausted by gender categories, by biological and cultural *paraphernalia* that are prior to its embodiment as uniqueness.

I would claim that the Arendtian “who” displays performative features that are even more radical than those advocated by Butler, since the unique “who,” the real and concrete agent, leaves behind all cultural, regional, biological and gender insights (the many “whats” which cannot grasp the “who”). The identity

of the acting “who” is inasmuch as it “proclaims” her/himself by entering the public sphere. The Arendtian “who,” by appearing in a context of public visibility and audibility performs the political by exhibiting radical nudity and unexpectedness.

Politics revisited outside the categories and subjectivations of modernity should, then, qualify as the realm of a nomadic “who” which does not belong anywhere and risks her exposed and unexpected fragility in front of others. Furthermore, this “who” is the remainder of a politics conceived as rule and normalization. This “who” is pure contingency, unredeemable by abstract categories and rigid signifiers. This imperfection or remainder cannot be said or told either as “lesbian” or as “woman”: by tracing a multiple identity as the result of intersecting and incompatible fixed identities, that are irreducible to the unitary person certainly implies a displacement and disruption of the normalizing mechanism and its logic. Nevertheless, by so doing, the notion of performative identity as it is expressed in the works of Judith Butler, offers an *ars combinatoria* which still moves within the realm of the typical, the average, the endless “what” that is already present in the complex arsenal of the Western tradition. Each combination of the various “whats” (as Bonnie Honig puts it: the “what-ness” of Being as opposed to the “who-ness” of doing) as paradoxical as it might be, will never be as unheard of and unpredictable as the story of a “who”.

As Adriana Cavarero (Cavarero 2000) points out, both the universalizing claims of traditional philosophy and the deconstructive claims of post-philosophy are unable to grasp the subversive potential of the acting “who”. Both perspectives deny the possibility of an irreducible uniqueness, which is different from both the universal subject and the infinite combinations of discursive practices that constitute a contingent, unessential identity. Neither perspective attempts a radical rethinking of political subjectivity. Only by abandoning the reifying perspective, that of a theoretical and discursive possession of identity, can we consider a truly amendable politics, a politics that constantly exposes its inclusions and principles.

The reifying perspective, on both sides of the fence, reduces the “who” to a “what,” assimilates it to common features, to a type. In the Arendtian perspective, the “who” is not permeable to concepts, to the theoretical gaze; maybe one can tell a story about it.<sup>14</sup> For Arendt, “who” someone is is not ineffable at all, but rather is revealed and manifested through that person’s actions and speech - words and deeds which, *ex post facto*, form the unique life-story of that person. Arendt writes: “Who somebody is or was we can know only by knowing the story of which he is himself the hero - his biography, in other words” (HC: 186).

The uniqueness of a “who” always leaves behind a unique and unrepeatably story. Uniqueness, therefore, is the singularity of a life-story, which is detectable as a path, chaotic and incoherent as it may be, but undoubtedly different from all the other life-stories. The story, therefore, is the only tangible proof of the appearing and acting “who”.

Our identity is not possessed in advance, as an innate quality or inner self that we are able to master and express. As Arendt says, the “who” is visible only to others, it stems out of what we do and say in front of others. Cavarero adds: we have a primary need to receive this “who” from others in the form of narrative. To detect a unity in the uncontrollable contingencies that lead us, means to perceive our “who” not as a rigid feature – a “what” – but as a story that we hear from the voice of others. Moreover, the desire longs for a story to be heard here and now, since it is through the fulfillment of this desire that we perceive ourselves as real. The need for identity qualifies not as a politics of gender or race, but, rather, as a reciprocal narrative practice which is also an ethical reciprocity of identities.

It becomes clear, then, how the “who” and its story, the appearance of a uniqueness which becomes real only in the words of others who have seen and heard, depends on a scene of public reciprocity rather than theoretical frames of intelligibility. Both the appearance and the story are *performances*, and both are consigned from the very beginning to the presence of others, who can alternatively be spectators, judges, storytellers. “Greatness [...] or the specific meaning of each deed, can lie only in the performance itself and neither in its motivation nor its achievement” (HC: 206).

As a matter of fact Arendt perceives a signifying affinity between politics and the performing arts: “The performing arts [...] have a strong affinity with politics. Performing artists – dancers, play-actors, musicians, and the like – need an audience to show their virtuosity, just as acting men need the presence of others before whom they can appear; both need a publicly organized space for their ‘work’, and both depend upon others for the performance itself. Such a space of appearances is not to be taken for granted wherever men live together in a community” (BPF: 154).

One could add that this space of appearance cannot be labeled a priori as a territory within which rights are exclusively and excludingly valid. Arendt, in fact, quotes the famous words uttered by Pericles in his Funeral Oration: “Wherever you go you’ll be a polis,” and interprets them not as the mere “watchword of Greek colonization,” but as the ultimate glorification of politics as a space that is simply created, performed by action and speech, a “space between the participants can find its proper location almost anytime and anywhere” (HC: 198). A performative space that grants visibility to the “who”



and its story, can perhaps not be conceived of as either as structure or as a safe territory with rigid boundaries. The mobility of those boundaries is what needs to be considered and practiced. The exhibitiv scene of politics can be renewed, amended and augmented by each newcomer: each unrepeatable uniqueness modifies the boundaries, and each story augments the memorial asset. This increasing asset must not be jealously preserved, as a perfect origin, but should constantly be reenacted and re-performed. Politics belongs to performance, to visibility and audibility.

## 7. Telling Birth Stories

In a very interesting book on “birth stories,” Della Pollock (Pollock 1999) engages in the political task of telling birth differently, namely of depriving medical discourse of its hegemony over narratives of pregnancy and delivery. By interviewing different women and allowing them to tell their different and challenging birth stories, Pollock wants to expose these disturbing narratives with a visibility and memorability they otherwise would not have. A woman at a grocery store told a traumatic story of her difficult and painful delivery to the authoress, who was herself pregnant. Pollock was traumatized and shocked by this unheard story, and at the same time she realized she “accepted the burden of this unimagined and unimaginable experience and, with it, the possibility of a new kind of pleasure, a pleasure drawing me toward a place unkempt with desire, shorn of social convention, constrained only by a deeper, tacit contract that stipulated she would tell and I would listen – and bear her story to others” (3). The unorthodox story of a difficult, painful, almost monstrous physical experience displaced and put into question the acquiescent “nine-months and counting model of birth storytelling” (4) that is constructed as container and neutralizer of pain.

In this sense, the stories Pollock narrates in her book “challenge the comic-heroic norm of birth storytelling with news of its failures and injustices.” What is interesting in our context is that Pollock draws from these unconventional stories in order to assess a marginal realm of life experience that would otherwise remain excluded, silenced, ruled out by “heterosexual, marital and medical norms”(7). Interestingly enough, Pollock individuates a form of narrative which is itself compliant with these norms, the consequent and transparent none-months narrative. On the other hand, the stories she enhances, “resist shame and silence, at least in part, by throwing off narrative norms.”

As Pollock interviews her own mother about her own birth she realizes that her story “had a beginning and end – but no middle. She was “knocked out” for the delivery, eager but able only to construct a story out of conventional narrative tropes (“Going to the hospital”) and the logic of efficiency/outcome. What loomed in the middle silence was the unspoken because unquestioned authority of medical science” (7). The traditional narrative tropes involve, symptomatically, a beginning and an end, consequentiality and a form of means-ends understanding which does not put into question the authority – and rationality – of medical science.

The unconventional, or inconsequential stories narrated by Pollock ( as a re-narration of stories she listened to) offer a totally different perspective. “Given the opportunity, women made what is typically left to the margins of birth discourse – the mother’s body, prenatal deaths, sex, conception, genetical counseling – the primary subjects of their birth stories. In so doing they achieved alternative, if ragged and fleeting, forms of subjectivity.[...] As subjects of their own stories, they became who they were in narrative performance. They became themselves *becoming*. . . subjects, narrators, actors, given, possible, impossible, and intolerable selves. They subjected themselves, and me, and you, to often unnerving, transforming articulations of memory, discourse and desire.”

Stories, in this context, subvert traditional and accepted forms of female subjectivity: “They undermine the presumed neutrality of medical procedures” (8), they are precious sources of marginal knowledge otherwise silenced and subsumed under more general and normative standards of acceptable femininity and female body. They are performances which undermine, let us say in Butlerian terms, the functioning of ruling and controlling discourses and narratives. The richness of these performances, though, resides exactly in the fact that they are, as enacted stories, “unique constructions of bodies in space-time. They disappear into subsequent, often discontinuous reckonings and performances, challenging preferences for more linear abstract modes of knowledge formation with their immediacy, contingency, and particularity” (9).

Stories challenge models insofar as they can articulate, give voice to that which abstract arguments exclude: “the birth stories [...] operate in and against the silences produced by medicalization – they claim the discourses deferred along chains of prenatal testing, cut off by anesthesia, made to conform to textbook models, or suppressed within matrices of normative masculinity and heterosexuality” (11). Stories, in other words, are useful in creating hidden, alternative and oppositional body discourses.

Stories of birth have an interesting Arendtian sound: they are very similar to the augmenting and amending “whos” who should populate a political scene of performativity. In other words, as for Arendt, politics and storytelling go together insofar as they can express a uniqueness philosophy and science

cannot tell, marginal stories of female experience can help in re-shaping, or un-shaping, the political space in which women have been included and represented according to “textbook models” or violent practices of neutralization.

The task Pollock sets for herself is, therefore, to reveal, through stories “struggles for identity and agency against the micro-,biopolitics of conventional maternities, and to create hidden, alternative, and oppositional body discourses” (19). It is a form of the amendment of political space which becomes enlarged, mobilized and criticized by marginal experiences told in the form of stories. In my mind, this experiment is a prime example of how performative politics can be better articulated and expressed in the form of dissonant stories. It is also an example of how narrative forms of representation do not necessarily involve closed endings, completion, consequential and linear time perception, politically conservative and ideological ends.

Stories disrupt the homogeneity and hegemony of both time and space, the act of telling them constantly opens new spaces of appearance and symbolic significance. “With each retelling they [women interviewed by Pollock] echoed and sapped medical, media, and commodity discourses, in each case making the meanings and effects of the birth process a point of public dialogue, refusing to keep birthing, mothering, and family private, closed off, foreclosed. They opened those meanings to collaborative reinterpretation even as they vigorously directed the dialogue. In general they struggled to assert symbolic dominion over birth, often in bits and pieces of conversation that looked, for all intents and purposes, like talk about the weather.”

Yet the most important thing at stake, in this personal re-appropriation of the birth narrative and its symbolic significance - the political move these women performed, as different as their experiences might have been - was the enlargement, the augmentation of a space considered institutional and masculine, with their acts of telling: “In scraps torn from others’ stories (mothers’, doctors’, neighbors’, tabloid celebrities’, TV characters’) appropriated to their own, they forged unforeseen connections between tellers and listeners and possible listeners, anticipating other performances elsewhere, in other spaces between and behind everyday performances of femininity and mothering” (22).

It is these “unforeseen connections” that stories trace, as paths to be followed and re-followed, traced and re-traced, every time in a new political performance.<sup>15</sup>

The political order, within an open-ended perspective in which boundaries are mobile and amendable, can be seen not as an architectonic order but rather as a musical one. María Zambrano, the Spanish philosopher, expresses this idea as follows:

“La confusión del orden con la quietud hunde sus raíces en un terror primario. Y es uno de los aspectos más peligrosos de ese estatismo que aún subsiste en la mente occidental. Pues no hay una razón para que la imagen sea la de un

edificio más que la de una sinfonía. El motivo de que para la mayoría de las gentes sea así puede ser quizá que el edificio está ahí de una vez por todas... mientras dure. Y la sinfonía hemos de escucharla, actualizarla cada vez; hemos de rehacerla en cierto modo, o sostener su hacerse: es una unidad, un orden que se hace ante nosotros y en nosotros. Nos exige participación. Hemos de entrar en él para recibirlo.

El orden de una sociedad democrática está más cerca del orden musical que del orden arquitectónico.” (María Zambrano 1996 (1958):206).

(“The confusion between order and quietude is rooted in a primordial terror. And it is one of the most dangerous features to still inhabit the Western mind. There is no reason, in fact, why the image of order should not be that of a symphony rather than of a building. The reason why most people think this way is because the building remains forever, for as long as it lasts. The symphony, on the other hand, must be listened to, performed every time; in some ways we must re-do it, contribute to its realization [...] The order of a democratic society is more similar to musical order than architectonic order” [my trans.])

In my reading of Arendt, the terms of a recognition should not be reified as concepts but, rather, enlarged as stories. The web of human relationships must be constantly augmented and amended, in order to grant recognition – that is, for Arendt, public visibility – to those who have been excluded by a politics of abjection. In order to do so without “another conceptual order of lifelessness and rigid exclusion,” we should begin thinking of stories not as more necessary and plausible than concepts, but simply as more political. We should start thinking of identity as the incoherent path of a story traced at the crossroads of infinite other paths, and because it becomes tangible at that very crossroads, it is bound to be re-performed disloyally. A story can be seen as a disloyally cited concept, or perhaps as an always disloyal way of faithfully preserving the memory of those who do not have a name in the realm of theory. Can we think of narrative identities as an infinite number of un-abstracted particulars, which move freely on the horizontal surface of this world?

## NOTES

- 1 “Adding Woman to Man, however, means duplicating the representation of the universal without freeing oneself whatsoever from its abstract valence, without abandoning whatsoever the ancient error of metaphysics” (Cavarero 2000:51).
- 2 Butler takes the notion of performativity from the speech act theory of J.L. Austin, (Austin 1983). Austin distinguishes between performative and constative utterances. “A performative is that discursive practice that enacts or produces that which it names’ (Butler 1993: 13). A constative utterance, on the other hand, can be defined as descriptive of an already existing reality. In the critical reading of Derrida, then, the performative becomes a derivative function of language. In other words, the performative utterance is not the result of a free will that utters a new reality, but is inherent in the citational nature of language: “Could a performative utterance succeed if its formulation did not repeat a ‘coded’ or iterable utterance, or, in other words, if the formula I pronounce in order to open a meeting, launch a ship or a marriage were not identifiable as conforming with an iterable model, if it were not identifiable in some way as a ‘citation’”? (J.Derrida 1988:18, quoted by Butler 1993: 13).
- 3 In a sense, this is already the case with all legal theories that reject the idea of a ‘natural law,’ as, for example Kelsenian positivism. (I would like to thank Kari Palonen who suggested this parallel to me). Butler’ appeal to this perspective is interesting insofar as it appropriates it critically. In fact, it is exactly because of this repeatability of the law that norms, as such, contain within themselves their violation.
- 4 In the previous chapters (see *Supra*, Chapter One, n.21 and 28 and Chapter Two, n. 1 and 4) I have referred to Havelock (Havelock 1963) and his interesting insights into the linguistic transformations operated by Plato in the usage of the Greek language. His analyses are important in this context insofar as he ascribes the origin of the conceptual, abstract way of thinking to a linguistic transformation, and precisely the use of the verb “to be” in the present form, as the eternal present typical of mathematics. “The mind must be taught to enter a new syntactical condition, that of the mathematical equation, in preference to the syntax of the story” (230). Or, again: “The entire purpose is to accelerate the intellectual awakening which ‘converts’ the *psyche* from the many to the one, and from ‘becomingness’ to ‘beingness’; this, [...] is equivalent to a conversion from the image world of the epic to the abstract world of scientific description, and from the vocabulary and syntax of narrativised events in time towards the equations, laws and formulas and topics which are outside time” (258-259). This is to say that Havelock’s analyses help in focusing on the ‘contingent’ nature of conceptual knowledge.
- 5 One of the crucial points in Arendt’s view of the public is that it is strongly distinguished from and opposed to the private (following the Greek distinction

between *agora* and *oikos*). Many feminists have considered this aspect as limiting and hindering a feminist re-appropriation of Arendt's thought. As Honig points out, though, the distinction is not a normative one, in the sense that the distinction is not fixed, its margins are left open. What is private can gain public relevance inasmuch as it can become politicized. The distinction between private and public is necessary in order to "protect politics from a variety of mentality and attitudes" (Honig 1993: 82). See HC, the paragraph *The Labor Movement*, 212-219.

- 6 Interestingly enough, Cavarero shows through different examples (both 'real' and literary) that women have always been more at ease with stories. From Sheherazade to contemporary consciousness-raising groups in the 1970s, women have 'handled' stories with familiarity. Can this familiarity testify to the rigid boundaries of a theoretical knowledge that has excluded women? Women found the realm of narrative practice, of fictional and real storytelling to be a less 'exclusive' locus for the production of meaning.
- 7 "Mimesis," says Havelock, "in pre-platonic sense, does not mean 'relationship between original and copy' but a re-enactment of somebody's behaviour." In the oral culture of both tragedy and epic, mimesis was a skilled *techné* employed in *mousike*, and which consisted of a sort of "sympathetic behaviour" which in many cases "is physical, a matter of speech, gesture, gait, pose, dress and the like" (Havelock 1963: 57-58).
- 8 As Hayden White has pointed out, it was 19th century historiography that attributed a sort of 'naturalness' to the narrative account of events. Historians, he argues, "made narrativity into a value" (White 1987: 23). What he correctly notes is that narrative is a rhetorical device, with no more 'naturalness' than any other devices. He investigates the plot character of narrative discourse and affirms that it has a performative character: "[A]ny given set of real events can be emplotted in a number of ways, can bear the weight of being told as any number of different kinds of stories" (43). The emplotment can be different every time and can therefore yield a different meaning of events. Nevertheless, White notes that "the narrative code is drawn from the performative domain of *poiesis* rather than that of *noesis*" (42-43). This is what I am trying to argue: In spite of the fact that narrative is a code, it is precious insofar as it distances itself from the realm of *noesis* or theory.
- 9 Kia Lindroos (Lindroos 1998) carries out a very fascinating analysis of Benjamin's idea of photography, which can be considered a means of "representing" reality that refrains from "abstracting" and neutralizing but, rather, enhances the "openness not only of the future but also of the present." According to Lindroos, by focusing on the temporal dimension of photography, Benjamin explores new experiential models - namely new temporal dimensions, which, politically speaking, both refuse and displace the empty temporality of history. Photography interrupts the temporal continuum and the photo "is also the birth of a moment in other times, which includes the emergence of the new and the unknown,

especially in the moment in which it confronts the future times and future audiences” (180). In this case, the photograph is the interruption (as a standstill) of a continuity and, as such, is a caesura “which is the crossing point that opens up infinite possibilities to escape from linearity”. Benjamin, therefore, “re-spatialises time from the homogeneous path towards the future, and he signifies the caireologic space of opportunities and disruptions, characterized by individual experience. As history becomes temporalized through the turn towards politics, some of the material that causes this process is images, photographs and films, in which the interruption of the temporal course becomes materialized for the analysis” (180).

- 10 Havelock notes that the Homeric “encyclopedia,” that is, the oral transmission of a set of beliefs and norms, was characterized by a “repetition” of the typical and the familiar that allowed “variation within the same”. The poet’s artistry “consists of an endless distribution of variables where, however, variation is held within strict limits and the verbal possibilities, while extensive, are in the last resort, finite” (92-93). In other words, the modern notion we have of poetic creativity was absent from the activity of the epic bard, for whom “the element of improvisation is wholly secondary” (93).
- 11 Nevertheless, as Havelock shows, the political importance of narrative epics and tragic mimesis relied totally on their oral communicative techniques. The introduction of literacy caused a revolution in terms of the common way of feeling and thinking. (“[...]the oral state of mind which constituted the chief obstacle to scientific rationalism[...]” 47). Inasmuch as they relied on an oral means of memorization, epic narratives had to be constantly repeated and reiterated in order to be fixed in the minds of both bards and listeners (115-128). One could speculate on the different nature of such a reiteration; stories, in order not to be forgotten must be constantly re-told, at full length. Concepts, in order to be recalled to mind, do not need to be retraced at full length. Concepts can be quickly recalled through a symbol. The importance of a narrative repetition lies in the fact that in the constant re-telling of reality in the form of a narrative, different possible paths manifest themselves. It is simply because stories cannot be abstracted that they always offer the temptation of telling them differently. A constant re-telling of stories, even if loyal and based on rhythm, as in the Homeric formulaic, can never be as fixed and loyal as a reiteration of abstract terms.
- 12 As Hans Blumenberg (Blumenberg 1979) has argued, the “Arbeit am Mythos” (“work on myth”), that is, an already active selection of stories from the past is already active in what we normally consider the archaic period in Greece. Blumenberg’s point is that there can be no ‘original’ myth that can be searched archeologically, but simply an already active ‘work on myth’ that elaborates, transforms and differently re-tells an unknown original. For Blumenberg, the very process of the reception of myths is already at work in very ancient myths. In other words, the very process of reception is one of the modes through

which myths work: “Auch wenn ich für literarisch faßbare Zusammenhänge zwischen dem Mythos und seiner Rezeption unterscheide, will ich doch nicht der Annahme Raum lassen, es sei ‘Mythos’ die primäre archaische Formation, im Verhältnis zu der alles Spätere ‘Rezeption’ heißen darf. Auch die frühesten uns erreichbaren Mythologeme sind schon Produkte der Arbeit am Mythos. Teilweise ist diese vorliterarische Arbeitsphase in den Mythenverbund eingegangen, der Rezeptionsvorgang also zur Darstellung der Funktionsweise selbst geworden” (133). Blumenberg ‘works’ with myths and opposes them to what he calls “dogmatism”. The two different ways of proceeding could be roughly assimilated to our opposition between storytelling and concepts. The myth works with inessential particulars, includes many versions of the same story, does not rely on completeness or exhaustiveness, whereas dogmatism (identified by Blumenberg with Christianity and its alliance with metaphysics) presupposes a definition of truth and, therefore, a metaphysical doctrine that not only defines religious dogmatism but also the scientific-theoretical attitude towards reality that has now become the universal habitus of intellectuals : “Das Christentum ist durch seine Verbindung mit der antiken Metaphysik zur einzigen Dogmatik avanciert [...] so hat es doch die Trennung vom Mythos und die Bestimmung seines rigorosen Wahrheitsanspruchs mittels präziser Formeln nur durch eine Metaphysik erlangt, die noch durch ihre Negation zur Voraussetzung derjenigen Wissenschaftsidee und theoretischen Exaktheit werden konnte, die aus der europäischen Einstellung zur Wirklichkeit praktisch und trotz aller autochthonen Widerstände die Weltuniform der Intelligenz gemacht hat”(111). Furthermore, for Blumenberg the myth is characterized by a constitutive re-narratability (*Umbesetzung*), a sort of original de-structurability, the capacity of being modified, augmented and contaminated.

- 13 For Arendt, politics is the realm of freedom, namely the freedom of giving birth to new and unexpected stories. While our private dimension is characterized by necessity, inasmuch as our survival as a species is at stake, the public dimension of politics is characterized by freedom. By abandoning the private and instituting a space in which freedom can appear, human beings fully actualize what they are given at birth: the capacity for novelty. In the private realm only survival of the species is at stake.
- 14 “It is this *uniqueness*, this one-ness, which philosophy fails to express. [...] ‘Who’ someone is, therefore, remains unexpressable within the language of philosophy; but ‘who’ someone is does not, as a result, remain utterly ineffable. Rather, ‘who’ someone is can be “known” (although this is not an epistemological knowledge) through the narration of the life-story of which that person is the protagonist” (see Kottman 2000:vii).
- 15 A very interesting position in this respect is that of Levinas, who expresses the difference between a static, or ‘ontological’ dimension of being and a mobile, relational and therefore ‘ethical’ one by opposing le “dit”(Said) to the “dire”



(Saying), or, as Adam Zachary Newton describes it, the difference “between moral propositionality, or the realm of the ‘Said’, and ethical performance, the domain of ‘Saying’” (Newton 1995: 5). Levinas’ positions are, in my opinion, very close to the idea I am trying to extrapolate from Arendt, namely of a narrative, i.e. exposed, relational, non-conceptual dimension of subjectivity and politics. Nevertheless, the theme of a confrontation between the two authors or simply to consider the question of subjectivity from a Levinassian perspective, would require another dissertation (Levinas 1971 and 1978). For an interesting analysis of Levinas’ thought as conceived of from the perspective of a “narrative ethics”, see Newton (Newton 1995). Newton asserts that every literary work establishes an ethical relationship with the reader. The literary text, the narrative literary text, stages a performance, “a proposing and exposing of the self” which does not come in the form of an answer, a definition, a ‘Said’ but in the form of a story, a “gesture, a performance, a relation”(3). Newton’s work engages in the task of showing how different literary narratives (Melville, Conrad, James, Dickens among others) establish different relations with both reader(s) and other texts. His main thesis is that the text is not only a text, but that it performs ethical claims which force, transform and move those who participate in it: “narrative as relationship and human connectivity, as Saying over and above Said, or as Said called to account in Saying; narrative as claim, as risk, as responsibility, as gift, as price” (7).

# CONCLUSION

In this work I have attempted to oppose the vertical gaze (glance, *régard*) which discovers and produces boundaries to a horizontal one, which does not seek boundaries but simply follows the unfolding of many different paths, which meet and depart from each other. These paths are boundless, insofar as they are not limited by a vertical perspective, which, like Archimedes' point, casts a boundary-tracing projection that distinguishes between light and shadow. If we try to imagine a hypothetical vertical vision, a vision from above, from a detached and distant point in space, we would represent it as a cone of light which illuminates a portion of land, and if our cone is a regular one, the portion can be represented in the form of a circle. The image of verticality, seen from below, would then be a circle of light, a sharply delimited territory, a land within confines. The vertical vision of reality, the Archimedean metaphor of a distant point, which, incidentally, is also the typically modern view of the earth as it became represented in geographical maps, implies a radically inclusive notion of spatialization.

A strongly territorial vision of the earth lies at the heart of the modern notion of State, at least since Hobbes. The very legitimacy of the modern State consists of its capacity to defend boundaries. It is that very legitimacy which allows the State to endow its subjects with rights and duties. Only insofar as it can protect, namely can safeguard its boundaries, can the State dispose of the life and death of its citizens and, moreover, it is allowed to act in the name of its members, to represent them (Hobbes *Leviathan*: XVI). Representation and territory are strictly linked. That is to say, representation is inclusive, submitted and dependent upon territorialization.

The horizontal perspective in which I have attempted to dimly retrace the legends of Australian Aboriginals or the Homeric narrative, instead offers a perspective on the territory not as a delimited space but as a web, an *intrigue*, in which the emphasis is not on the boundaries but on the totally spread out multitude of paths, which are connected to each other. This metaphor can inevitably be applied to the most famous web, with which we are becoming increasingly familiar: the Internet. As an infinite web of relations and virtual paths, can the Internet be seen as a potentially horizontal political space of relation, of a rejection of hegemony, hierarchy and inclusion?

The question is too complex to be answered here. The debate over the real nature of the Internet is vast and heterogeneous. Yet, if anything, one could suggest that people also use Internet in order to listen to and tell their own

stories. More than anything the Internet is a gigantic Scheherazade which entraps us with her fascinating form of storytelling. The question remains open as to whether this entrapment allows us to displace and criticize or support and reinforce a world order, nowadays referred to as globalization, the increasingly popular and powerful force of which seems to vigorously repeat the 19<sup>th</sup> century notion of historical inevitability.

I would suggest that the image of a de-territorialized notion of space, namely the image of a space not enclosed in boundaries but simply alien to the very notion of borders, center and periphery, is twofold. On the one hand it can be seen as the necessary homogenization of the world, the so-called *McDonaldization of cultures*, the inevitable outcome of an inevitable process of globalization. On the other hand, a de-territorialized notion of space, with its implicit refusal of inclusive and exclusive practices of normalization and abjection, can be seen as the ‘other-side-of-the-coin’ aspect of globalization. A space in which the terms of political representation and agency are mobilized, displaced from their *locus* of rigid inscription into categories, concepts and definitions. A space not simply delimited by boundaries but mobilized in the sense of its being constantly re-enacted, re-told, re-narrated, in which the main feature of the activity of telling stories, as a practice of self understanding, as a political action, as remembrance, as a mode of understanding history, in my view, possesses the essential virtue of un-folding, mobilizing, un-packing and dis-membering the rigidity of identity, politics and history as considered from the ‘vertical’ perspective.

It has become clear to me, over the process of writing this dissertation that there is an evident connection between the horizontal notion of politics and a correspondent vision of history. In other words, a vision of history, namely a history conceived of both as a “togetherness of stories” (Arendt) and as a “homonymy” of history and story (Rancière) must correspond to the horizontal perspective on matters of politics.

Chakrabarty’s (Chapter Four) interesting insights on history as seen from a postcolonial perspective testify to a renewed and stimulating interest in a radical recasting of the political question related to a historicist view of both the past and the present. Chakrabarty suggests that by displacing History, as such, we cannot simply celebrate the ‘return of the native’ or the ‘end of history,’ but, rather, engage in thinking about the political as a realm that must be assumed as necessarily amendable and contaminable, where the traces of both “violence and idealism” inherent in the Eurocentric model become necessary starting points of a tension within history. The positive, or better yet, provocative use we can make of this tension becomes effective only if history becomes displaced, de-centered and therefore “provincialized” by “subaltern histories” or singular stories. This tension is what can perhaps allow us to view globalization and the triumph of the Western dream as contestable, as full of

“unfulfilled promises” that ironically re-emerge from *within* that dream – in spite of its attempt to suppress those subversive instances for good – and haunt it, perhaps transforming it into a nightmare.

The first chapter dealt, more or less, with the contraposition between a vertical and a horizontal perspective, between the *vita contemplativa* and the *vita activa*. This distinction between philosophy and politics must not be taken as a binary and exclusive opposition. What I have attempted to do here is to explore a different direction of meaning, as well as to investigate the resulting implications. I have explored this different direction with the help of Arendt by accepting her specific political perspective.

Politics and history, seen from the perspective of the *vita activa*, have taken, in the first chapter, Homer and Thucydides as meaningful instances of what I called a horizontal view on matters political. Nevertheless, the use of ancient Greece and its popular models must not be considered a nostalgic move toward a lost pureness: Arendt used them courageously and in a philologically dubious way (maybe the two aspects must go together). I have tried to simply take further some of Arendt’s interpretations on ancient history and politics.

In Chapter Two I attempted a critical reading of the debate between narrativists and anti-narrativists – an originally literary issue that has turned out to be of vital importance also for philosophical and political questions regarding history and its truthfulness – positioning myself and my interpretation of Arendt as different from both. While criticizing both Ricoeur and Hayden White I have given an account of storytelling as a necessary, yet unfinalizable and unmasterable political dimension of both past and future time representations. Narrative is not *per se* naturally – or ontologically, as Ricoeur would say – apt to represent historical and human time experiences, but, I propose, it has a formal structure which, let us say, is more at ease with contingency than other representational means.

My deconstructive reading of some philosophical verticalizations of truth – second chapter – aimed at displacing the plausibility of the unitary, exclusive and cogent path toward ‘goodness’, showing that at the very basis of these spatializations there is a denial of temporality, ‘frozen’ as it is in the eternal dimension of cosmological metaphors. This topic connects to the themes analyzed in Chapter Three: not only philosophy has denied temporal features to both thinking and truth, but it has also transferred this perspective to history. By displacing the Hegelian notion of history I hope I have made clear that the divinization of historical time actually conceals the implicit refusal of time as such: its hypostatization as the realm governed by rationality and ‘direction’ deprives history of its inherent meaninglessness.

I tried to explicate what Arendt suggests in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, namely that politics and history belong together. There is no primacy of history over politics, or vice versa, the two aspects are interrelated and must be considered together, by

respecting the essential contingency of both. And it is only insofar as history is told and understood in terms of its essentially un-necessary aspect that becomes a politically interesting field.

The horizontal perspective in politics is indebted to the Arendtian legacy, to the natality, plurality and uniqueness of the political “who” and to her essential contingency and freedom. The horizontal perspective on history testifies to the use of this Arendtian legacy in the present and political understanding of history, and the essential aim of this work is to politically account for the catastrophe of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. History seen in terms of its reversible, unnecessary and contingent aspect does not imply historical relativism, or even worse, historical revisionism. Contrarily, it implies a responsible vision of the unprecedented, which refuses both the consequential and progressive notion of history and the opposite notion of the ineffability and incomprehensibility of history. If the former perspective is dangerous insofar as it reduces the unprecedented to ‘reasonable’ causes and analogies, depriving it of its uniqueness, the latter renounces comprehension *tout court*, by dismissing, for example, Auschwitz and Nazism, as the products of a ‘sick mind’ or as the outcome of an irrational and demonic evil. In so doing this latter perspective renounces both understanding and the responsibility involved in understanding, a responsibility which, in the intentions of Arendt and Levi, is meant to respond, to be able to answer to young generations, to bridge the gap which has occurred throughout history.

If the gap took place, if it happened, this does not mean that we must renounce understanding - it means that we must find different modes of filling that gap, of bridging the abyss. These modes must be political insofar as they must respond, react, take a stand but they must also be historical insofar as they must provide guidance in the future, to prevent the horror from returning. This is a fragile position, which is neither conciliatory nor vindicatory.

In the fourth chapter I analyze alternative forms of understanding, namely, different ways of bridging the abyss, different modes of telling the incomprehensibility of the gap as it took place. By reading Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* and Levi’s *I sommersi e I salvati* as attempts of telling the unimaginable, of representing the undecipherable through unconciliatory and problematic linguistic means, I have experienced how literature can expose, criticize, displace the structures – both cognitive and representational - of which theory disposes almost unaware. Conrad and Levi seem to suggest that the gap can be filled - not by comprehensive and exhaustive theories but by simple and illuminating stories. Only stories seem to offer a responsible way of bridging the abyss and they do so by keeping history suspended and by preventing it from *passing* completely - that is, by enlarging the potential realm of history *ad infinitum*, by discarding the one-way street of the progressive and linear direction of time.

Finally the last chapter can be seen as the experiment of displacing the boundaries of history, of augmenting the historical temporal space by inserting new subjects into it which are not necessarily linked to the dimension of given identities, of detectable historical 'subjects' following the inevitable flow of time. If I perceive the question of feminist identity as central to the re-thinking of the theme of subjectivity, I do so because I feel that women are privileged, because of their traditional exclusion, in attempting a radical *Umschreibung* of history, not to posit a 'feminine' writing of history as opposed (and specular) to the traditional male perspective. Women are privileged insofar as they can perhaps explore time, the past, present and future, as unpredictable subjects, or, as subjects that history as such does not take into consideration. In this respect, I refer to them as the "who" of which history does not speak, and, as we know, as the realm in which they have only recently started to 'speak for themselves'. History should certainly be radically displaced, *um-geschrieben* and un-done by all those subjects which history has never included in its development, and also by those who will come, the unpredictability of whom is totally unknown.

My intention in writing this thesis has been that of illustrating some alternative modes of thinking about politics and history. I have endeavored to extend the significance of Arendt's political theory by focusing on her ideas of stories and storytelling. I have attempted to connect these terms with a correspondent notion of history by tuning Arendt's interpretation of Totalitarianism to her theoretical notions of action and political space.

A narrative approach to historical and political matters presents a radical challenge for political theory. It allows us to consider contingency without reducing or neutralizing it. It facilitates a re-thinking of the political subject and its historical destiny. It displaces the normative standards of interpretive social sciences by narrativizing their abstract features, and, by doing so, exposing both the Eurocentric, Western, totalizing features of their discourses and their concealed 'imperialist' intentions, namely their claim to universal validity. The narrative approach to politics and history also allows for the legitimization of one's own situated perspective, not as an instance or a step toward the fulfillment of that claim, but as a voice that can be heard, perhaps, for the first time.

I am not claiming that the narrative approach *alone* can offer this possibility. Nevertheless, it moves in the direction of a radical refusal of globalizing and totalizing theories. This refusal has been advocated from many different positions. My personal reference to a feminist critique of this refusal is simply due to the contingency of my being a woman. I have thus carried out this critique with a personal commitment to my own position in the world, to being situated in this partial perspective. I hope that this partiality will not be taken either as a statement of prideful belonging or as a relativistic or

polemical assumption. Situating this partiality is nothing more than an attempt to strive for objectivity, insofar as any universal perspective, as such, is far less objective than any local critique, as both Foucault and Donna Haraway would say.

In my opinion, literature and myth cooperate in the unraveling of the universal claims of philosophy and other 'regional ontologies' insofar as they offer us different and less cogent modes of training our thought. They also offer a partial perspective, which displays a precious form of "local critique." It is in this 'spirit' of contamination that I have used them here.

In a sort of disloyal attempt to be faithful to Hannah Arendt, I have also attempted a contamination of her thought with others', a philologically dubious operation of proposing an Arendtian perspective by moving away from her. Paradoxically, however, I consider this – perhaps incorrectly – the most important lesson she has taught me.

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