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For a Semantics of Dark Times

Narrating, Understanding and Judging the Insurmountable Past

Chiara Agnello

After the abyss of the death camps, History for Arendt can only seek new ways, challenges different from the attempt to understand what happened of historical knowledge that deludes itself into thinking it can master the indecipherability of the dark times by fitting events into the chain of cause and effect. The consequent call to amend and integrate History with *stories* is not an exhortation to replace history itself with literature but to find residues of meaning by assembling all the fragments that can contribute to an understanding of reality that for Arendt can only be political, and narrative is one of the forms of political understanding.

The Arendtian "notion" of narrativity, first formulated in *The Human Condition*,¹ is in fact inseparable from the conception of history as a fracture and suspension of the unbroken temporal *continuum*, as marked always by "new beginnings" and irruptions of singularity. The context in which the theme of *narrativity* matures is that of the rethinking of temporality and the critique of the unilinear image of historical time at the center of the discourse of various twentieth-century philosophies that, critical of any teleological temptation of history, contract a theoretical debt variously declined with the Nietzschean *Second Inactual*. The questioning of the meaning of events revolves around possible ways of thinking about the connection between event and meaning once all possible faith in the rationality of history has disappeared. Such questioning moves from the conviction that the singularity and unrepeatability of events and the specificity of historical actors cannot be understood by yielding to universalizing temptations, and that the particular cannot be deduced from universal laws of history.² With frequent reference to a Kafkaesque parable entitled *He*, in which He is the personification of the present as a *gap* between past and future, Arendt expresses the idea that inhabiting the present means engaging in the understanding of one's own time aware

1. ARENDT 1998: 181-198.

2. ARENDT 1998: 188-189.

of the risks that lurk in the arbitrary and sometimes violent reductions of the complexity of the world typical of *clichés* or the hexed categories of the philosophical tradition. In the Kafkaesque parable *He* stands between two adversaries, and his dream is to get out of the *battle line* between past and future. The struggle, begun when the action has run its course becomes history encompassing the course of actions making concrete the possibility (the "dream") of reconciliation with the events that happened.³

Arendt asks the narrative to preserve memory of the events that occurred becoming a condition of permanence in a common world, and in this sense we fully understand the choice of Jaspers' words as an epigraph to the first preface of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*: "To be possessed neither by the past nor by the future. It is necessary to be totally present." The account of what happened for Arendt "must not attenuate the hiatus between present and future".⁴ The claim to an objectivity of history drawn through deductive-causal explanations is rescaled by the attempt to make sense of the events that have happened by consciously assuming the inevitable gap between narrative and objectivity: such an attempt does not mean arbitrariness and radical skepticism about the possibility of recounting how things happened, but instead trying to find a balance between the historicity and subjectivity of the narrator and the events narrated.

The question of *narrative* does not simply pertain to the literary genre best suited for historical inquiry: it is the form that substantiates the *understanding* of facts and at the same time the possibility of *judging them*, the only possible way according to Arendt to *reconcile* with them. In this view, the task of storytelling is indicated in its ability to draw human action out of the dissolving power of time and to transform the list of facts into a plot that weaves its history: the latter is seen by Arendt as the only possibility of restoring meaning to action. There is thus a trait that we might call political in the activity of storytelling insofar as reconstructing the plot of events also means being able to judge them. This happens for Arendt in the context of a conception of history linked to the character of the unexpected and unpredictable

3. ARENDT 2006: 58.

4. STRONG 2006: 232.

of every event, a character that entails the fact that understanding cannot mean taking refuge in abstract contemplations of the past with a potential predictive character, but taking responsibility for the political judgment of the past in the awareness of the unrepeatability and uniqueness of each event. In this regard, Ricoeur credits Arendt with confronting the theme of the "political paradox" by investigating the embodiment of the political evil par excellence represented by totalitarianism, while at the same time seeking in the natality and occurrence of the unexpected the potential inherent in acting as a possibility of inserting oneself and operating in the present thanks to a *rationality of politics* that can only derive from understanding and judging the past.

The resignification of experience through narrative represents the most concretely given possibility of *understanding* events in *dark times*. Men who understand take action are defined by contrast to "men engaged in contemplating a progressive or catastrophic course of history",⁵ and historical understanding intersects with the ever anew of action by contrasting the unique and unrepeatable character of events with the palingenetic character of any philosophy of history. The *endless* activity of understanding includes taking on the burden of a real with which it is possible to reconcile only if one takes on the burden of political judgment. To etiological explanations Arendt contrasts a hermeneutic perspective in which historical understanding must beware of "attempting to deduce the unprecedented from precedent"⁶ seeking instead to grasp the peculiarities and specificities of each phenomenon. *Storytelling* stimulates critical exercise – as opposed to the abstractness of logical-causal arguments by inviting one to examine even the most theoretically relevant issue by always considering its concrete and contingent aspects "without banisters",⁷ without faith in the predictive character of science. The narrativistic approach is thus openly opposed to historical explanation, which yields to the temptation to understand

5. ARENDT 2005b: 321.

6. ARENDT 2005c: 404

7. See DISCH 1994: 110. Disch points out that narrative induces a different critical exercise than that which inspires abstract logical argumentation. Narrative presents a problem in its concreteness and contingency giving rise to "critical and situational" thinking.

events as the deterministic product of causes that precede them and as the object of comparison with past events. The reasons for this juxtaposition are due not only to the ability of *storytelling* to try to restore an original complexity of phenomena that cannot be reduced to simplifying mechanisms, but above all what holds this distinction firm is the fact that in the form of storytelling we exhibit that trait of understanding that "is the other side of action".⁸ Indeed, the theme of historical understanding over the years will become more and more firmly intertwined with that of acting and *judging* in relation to the delicate question of political responsibility. Arendt progressively insists more and more on the ambiguity of 'the recurring expression "insurmountable past" in postwar Germany, and addresses the crucial issue of the distinction between *personal responsibility under dictatorship* and political responsibility: responsibility that "every government assumes for the deeds and misdeeds of its predecessors, and every nation assumes for the deeds and misdeeds of the past".⁹

In *Humanity in Dark Times*, a speech delivered in 1959 in Hamburg on the occasion of the awarding of the Lessing Prize, Arendt alluded to the difficulty of postwar Germany in "mastering the past," thus writes in the text read on that occasion:

But even non-tragic plots become genuine events only when they are experienced a second time in the form of suffering by memory operating retrospectively and perceptively. Such memory can speak only when indignation and just anger, which impel us to action, have been silenced—and that needs time. We can no more master the past than we can undo it. But we can reconcile ourselves to it.¹⁰

The form of reconciliation for Arendt is the *understanding of* actions whose meaning is revealed only when the actions are performed "and become a story amenable to narrative".¹¹

"Necessity of understanding" is one of the recurring expressions in Arendt's writings concerning the concentrationist universe, an expression that reveals a distinctive feature of her intellectual story: the

8. ARENDT 2005b: 321.

9. ARENDT 2003: 27.

10. ARENDT 2011: 49.

11. ARENDT 2011: 51.

stubborn will to make our understanding of the real more adequate to our firsthand experience of it, a will conjoined with an aversion to convenient conciliations and any sort of abstract *reductio ad unum*. This kind of looking at the facts of the world naturally also concerns the way of looking at the past, of understanding the time of history. In a very well-known television interview with Günter Gauss in 1964, Arendt describes her own inexhaustible need for understanding as a need to grasp the deep meaning of human events in order to feel at home in the world, but above all to *be reconciled* with reality. In the 'Gauss interview, a knot she herself calls the *difficulty of understanding* emerges, an issue that runs through her entire critical reflection from 1943 onward and settles around the question of how the need for understanding and reconciliation can be fulfilled when the reality with which one is confronted transcends in its horror every rational category, when historical events are so brutal and tragic that they seem to escape the very grasp of human judgment. In the interview, the effect caused by the first information arriving in 1942 about the death camps and the final solution is described as an emotional and cognitive trauma capable of placing hitherto unprecedented limits on any attempt at understanding. What the public first learned is described as "something it was impossible to come to terms with".¹² The initial bewilderment of thought in regard to *that which cannot be come to terms with* is followed for Arendt by an arduous task of reconstructing the phenomenon of totalitarianism as a response to the pressing personal need to understand a phenomenon about whose uniqueness and novelty she will sustain at length in her later reflections. But every trauma needs a time to be processed, and, still in the first preface to the work *Origins of Totalitarianism*, completed in 1949, the *need to understand* that substantiates and guides the research becomes evident:

[This book] was written out of the conviction that it should be possible to discover the hidden mechanics by which all traditional elements of our political and spiritual world were dissolved into a conglomeration where everything seems to have lost specific value, and has become unrecognizable for human comprehension, unusable for human purpose.¹³

12. ARENDT 2005d: 14.

13. ARENDT 1976: VIII.

In 1966 with a retrospective look, writing the preface to the third edition of the same work the author recalls the preparation phase of the book as the first period of relative calm after decades of turmoil, confusion and horror," and as

the first appropriate moment to look upon contemporary events with the backward-directed glance of the historian and the analytical zeal of the political scientist, the first chance to try to tell and to understand what had happened, not yet *sine ira et studio*, still in grief and sorrow and, hence, with a tendency to lament, but no longer in speechless outrage and impotent horror.¹⁴

An initial astonished and mute reaction is followed by the compulsion of a need to understand, and of historical *understanding* he gives a definition that reveals its necessary character for any assumption of responsibility by future generations, understanding in fact:

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 which our century has placed on us-neither denying its existence nor submitting meekly to its weight.¹⁵

"To "understand" means for Arendt to *be totally present* and not to attempt to "escape from the sinister atmosphere of the present in nostalgia for a still intact past or in the anticipated oblivion of a better future",¹⁶ in short, to *understand* how to openly scrutinize the present by being able to look back to the past to find the reasons for the future, not turning our backs on the future as the heap of ruins rises to the sky before the angel of history so evocatively described by her friend Walter Benjamin, who famously delivered to her and her husband Heinrich Blücher in Marseille a manuscript edition of the *Theses on the Philosophy of History* shortly before she took her own life at the Franco-Spanish border while waiting for that visa for

14. ARENDT 1976: XXIII.

15. ARENDT 1976: VIII.

16. ARENDT 1976: IX.

the United States that would arrive the day after her death. Arendt rejects views inspired by "supposedly superhuman laws of history",¹⁷ which make criticism of the past a means of dominating the present and controlling the future, and sharing with Benjamin a critique of the ideologically illusory character of progress she focuses her interest around a rejection of the proponents of an unbroken continuity of historical flow but also of all theories that by making use of the notion of cause and end are incapable of seeing history for what it really is: an affair of unrepeatable and singular events and not of forces or ideas with a predictable course. Common to both is to privilege an important element, political openness as the possibility of a "beginning" that breaks through the inevitability of history. The present engages in finding fragments of meaning in past phenomena, and the suspension of history as a *continuum* means ethical and political engagement and incitement to action.¹⁸

Thus, one can understand from this point of view how Arendt has a very particular way of relating to the past. There is a phrase by William Faulkner, which Arendt makes her own not only to disagree with the idea of a history whose *necessary* character shields us from future risks, but also to emphasize the need to subject events to a judgment that must be a political judgment on recent history: "I think, if anything, that the past is never dead, nor is it ever really past. ".¹⁹ There is nothing more sterile and rhetorical than an abstract invocation of the "so-called lessons of history," the Arendtian view of the past is decidedly more complex and perhaps less optimistic than that of those who think that ignorance of the past condemns one to repeat it but, certainly, it includes the idea that history makes us more alert to the fact *that the past that is never dead* and is an element of understanding the present insofar as it is a constituent part of it:

and this for the simple reason that the world we live in at any moment is the world of the past; it consists of the monuments and the relics of what has been done by men for better or worse; its facts are always what has *become* (as the Latin origin of the word: *feri-factum est*

17. ARENDT 1976: 143.

18. See HERZOG 2000: 1-27. Annabel Herzog points out how Arendt inherits the discredit in regard to causal explanations typical of historicism from Walter Benjamin.

19. ARENDT 2006: 64.

suggests). In other words, it is quite true that the past *haunts* us; it is the past's function to haunt us who are present and wish to live in the world as it really is, that is, has *become* what it is now.²⁰

The call to concreteness on Arendt's part thus emerges not only because of her militancy and the personal risks for it faced, but because of the figure of her thought constantly inspired by the centrality of action in its plural dimension, and attentive at the same time to the theme of the individual's personal responsibility. And in this sense the centrality that the need to defatalize history by restoring value to contingency and the role of individual decisions also becomes clear. And this our as pointed out so far is closely linked to a way of understanding history itself as a set of unexpected events that cannot be deduced or predicted on the basis of what has happened before.

Precisely because Arendt considers the task of history to be that of *judging* events in their singularity and unrepeatability, she does not believe in the predictive character of the human sciences, thus not even that of history, and it is in this sense that an anti-Weberian position of the social sciences must be understood: to believe that methodologically one can trace causes that do not take into account the dynamic and unrepeatability character of events is to take refuge in the contemplative abstractness of a historical inquiry that looking back does not engage in reflection on the central role of *action* in the present. For this reason Arendt finds "quite apt" Tocqueville's idea that in times of crisis or genuine turning point "the past ceases to shed light on the future and the mind of man wanders in darkness".²¹ One cannot place this reassuring trust in history if looking to the past is like losing oneself in the endless regress of an etiological mythology whose presumption of *objectivity* has already been questioned even for the natural sciences by the natural scientists themselves, to which end in *Between Past and Future* Arendt mentions Heisenberg's quantum physics in this regard, recalling how with today's developments in physics this is to be considered an " 'inquiry into what is' no less anthropocentric than historical inquiry".²² Nor then, as noted above,

20. ARENDT 2003: 270.

21. ARENDT 2006: 57.

22. ARENDT 2006: 143.

does it seem to her an admissible solution to take refuge in philosophies of history that deny the character of unpredictability and singularity of events within a rational development of an unbroken historical path in which causes and ends are intelligible. The point for Arendt is not *to expunge tout court* the causes or origins of a phenomenon, just think of how she speaks of totalitarianism as the crystallization of a set of phenomena such as anti-Semitism, imperialism and racism. His polemic concerns the belief in the idea that there are causes with an almost transcendental character that transform history as it manifests itself "to the professional eye of the historian"²³ in a philosophy of history indifferent to the uniqueness of the event that instead "in its terrible originality cannot be attenuated by any hasty historical parallel"²⁴: what is rejected is the character of recursiveness that is associated with a certain kind of investigation by causes. Causes like other categories of inquiry also serve working hypotheses to shape the material of the past, and serve the historian to analyze what emerges after the event has taken place but for Arendt it is "political science that is the real keeper of the keys that open the doors to the problems and uncertainties of the philosophy of history".²⁵

Dwelling again on the reference to the epistemological turning point represented by Heisenberg, it is against the backdrop of the realization that the "ancient dispute between the 'subjectivity' of historiography and the 'objectivity' of physics"²⁶ has been overcome, that the identification of the narrative mode as the expressive mode capable of semantizing historical time in the most appropriate way takes place. If "the naturalist scientists' presumption of absolute objectivity and exactitude is now a thing of the past,"²⁷ it is equally evident to Arendt that history far from being understood as a process is made up of discontinuous events, of individual episodes to which narrative gives meaning, and that it deals with particular facts and circumstances

"which interrupt the circular and repetitive motion of everyday life, in the same sense that everyone's rectilinear *bios* breaks the circular

23. ARENDT 2005b: 320.

24. ARENDT 2005b: 309.

25. ARENDT 2005b: 326.

26. ARENDT 2006: 143.

27. ARENDT 2006: 142.

and repetitive motion of biological life. The stuff of history is in these interruptions, these ruptures: the extraordinary".²⁸

In this hermeneutic framework, the *Shoah* and the *disproportion of evil* represented by totalitarianism are phenomena more than ever refractory to traditional principles of humanities understanding and representative of the fact that the stuff of history is the *extraordinary*. In *Social Science Techniques and the Study of Concentration Camps*²⁹ Arendt argues that the establishment of concentration and extermination camps can be considered an event emblematic of those *unexpected phenomena* that render all the implicit assumptions and interpretive criteria of the existing categorical framework within each social science unusable. Over time, according to Arendt, the progressive revelation of what was happening in the Nazi concentrationist universe will entail for historians and sociologists the inescapable need to revise hermeneutical canons and principles hitherto employed as unquestionable assumptions. This consideration, moreover, for the scholar relates in general to *understanding*, which must be clearly distinguished from scientific knowledge, as a *complex process that never leads to unequivocal results*.

The uniqueness of the phenomenon in question, of an "unprecedented" event,³⁰ quite different from wars of aggression and massacres of enemy populations of the past, lies not simply in the "non-utilitarian character of the camps," but precisely in the absurdity of the "anti-utilitarian function"³¹ of the camps. The peculiarity of the event is what shatters the frame of reference within which commonly accepted research methods and techniques in the humanities fall. Arendt's thesis is that the creation of the factories of death and the fate befallen the Jews of Europe cannot be understood by referring exclusively to anti-Semitism: "both transcend both the anti-Semitic mentality and the political, social and economic motives that supported anti-Semitic

28. ARENDT 2006: 130.

29. ARENDT 2005: 232-247.

30. Arendt frequently refers to Judge Robert H. Jackson's opening speech at the Nuremberg trials; See: *Nazi Conspiracy and Aggression*, U.S. G.P.O., Washington 1946, vol. I, p. 140.

31. ARENDT 2005: 233.

propaganda”..³² The rejection of an 'etiological analysis of the phenomenon of the mass extermination of the Jewish populations of Europe also develops from the belief that Nazi anti-Semitism does not present any new features either as to ideological manifesto, nor as to propaganda with respect to the literary cliché steeped in hatred and contempt for Jews known up to that point, and again from observing how the promulgation of the Nuremberg Laws of 1935 and the pogroms of 1938 fall within the framework of the expectations associated with the rise of a party with an anti-Semitic vocation in Europe. It is precisely the creation of extermination camps, involving "human beings who for all practical purposes are already 'dead'",³³ that constitutes one of the events related to totalitarianism that most attests to its resistance and impermeability to traditional interpretive categories. Arendt argues the thesis of the 'hermeneutical aporia that the factories of death would represent for history, identifying a determinate moment in which we move from the monstrous - but comprehensible on the level of *meaning* – scenario of SA-run concentration camps, aimed at sowing terror and zeroing out political opposition, to that of extermination camps. The new type of concentration camp placed under the exclusive control of the SS appears in Arendt's view to be a "new phenomenon," the novelty consisting not only in the fact that few of the new internees were opponents of the regime who had escaped previous arrests nor certainly in the fact that the overwhelming majority of the individuals who formed the mass of inmates were represented by people who were completely innocent both from the regime's point of view and in general, but what in his view represented absolutely the new element of it was the process that was being set in motion with the permanent establishment of the death camps, "whose wasteful operation was associated with the continual search for "new 'material' for the manufacture of corpses".³⁴ The subject of the extermination camps is emblematic of the unserviceability of the etiological method with respect to a practice that in time revealed itself in its senseless and blind cruelty also uneconomical as a further element of difficulty for the Reich, which saw its defeat drawing ever closer:

32. ARENDT 2005: 236.

33. ARENDT 2005: 238.

34. ARENDT 2005: 238.

For the truth was that while all other anti-Jewish measures made some sense and were likely to benefit their authors in some way, the gas chambers did not benefit anybody. The deportations themselves, during a period of acute shortage of rolling stock, the establishment of costly factories, the man-power employed and badly needed for the war effort, the general demoralizing effect on the German military forces as well as on the population in the occupied territories—all this interfered disastrously with the war in the East, as the military authorities as well as Naziofficials, in protest against the SS troops, pointed out repeatedly.³⁵

In support of the inadequacy of the category of "cause" toward the disproportionate nature of the extermination camp phenomenon, Arendt recalls how Himmler from 1941 onward, aware that at a time of labor shortages a considerable number of individuals were being diverted from labor who were instead being killed without any productive exploitation, issued several orders admonishing both senior military officials and Nazi hierarchs to ensure that economic or military considerations did not interfere in any way with the extermination program. The absence of economic and labor-related purposes or other practical purposes of the establishment of the death camps also reverberates in the cruelties without why that accompanied most of the behavior enacted inside the camps. Common sense accustomed to thinking even utilitarianly *that good and evil make sense*,³⁶ as Arendt repeatedly points out, knows no worse offense than the senselessness of a world

"in which the punishment affects the innocent more than the criminal, in which the work does not and is not directed to result in any product, in which the crimes do not bring any benefit and are not even designed to bring benefit to their perpetrators".³⁷

In the face of the effort to understand something that has routed our categories of thought and put us in the position of trying to judge when the table "of those customary rules in which morality consists"³⁸ has jumped, in the face of the *twentieth-century bankruptcy of ethics, understanding* becomes the other side of action, understanding is already

35. ARENDT 2005: 236.

36. ARENDT 2005: 241.

37. ARENDT 2005: 241.

38. ARENDT 2005: 321.

closely related to action and political action in particular, [and political action reminds us Arendt is: "in the terms of political science, the very essence of human freedom"..³⁹ When the past delivers "a legacy that is preceded by no testament"⁴⁰ as René Char's aphorism goes, that is, when tradition ceases to represent the compass for orientation in the night of the present, precisely then it is necessary to hold together the three spheres that the philosophical tradition has kept distinct, *thinking, willing, judging, and* to this task Arendt dedicated herself until her death.

If the essence of action "is to give birth to a new beginning, then understanding [...] [is] that form of cognition distinct from many others, by which men who act can finally come to terms with what has happened and be reconciled with what inevitably exists."⁴¹ Here unlike the words uttered in 1942 about the impossibility of thought to come to terms with *what* happened is contemplated to the extent that understanding engages, contracts a debt with the dimension of acting and the responsibility to think which for Arendt is equivalent to judging, is a commitment that concerns each one, that invests the individual called upon to *judge in* order to moral questions that arise in the present. Men who understand act are defined by contrast to "men engaged in contemplating a progressive or catastrophic course of history."⁴²

For Arendt's understanding of the past, events are thus never the deterministic product of antecedent causes, and causal explanations are a powerful tool for simplifying historical reality. For this reason, for Arendt, narrative (*storytelling*) is more suited to understanding, than history with a capital (*History*) prone to explaining with the "scientifically trained gaze."⁴³ History exists in the plural in the form of stories, of many narratives and memories of individuals, holding firm, however, to one point, truthfulness as the condition and horizon of meaning that must support the attempt of understanding. Only that need for truth, which the ancient masters dear to her like Aristotle called *proairesis tou biou*, which in Greek means "choice of life," can make the *storyteller*

39. ARENDT 2005: 321.

40. ARENDT 2006: 49.

41. ARENDT 2006: 49.

42. ARENDT 2006: 49.

43. ARENDT 2005: 319.

achieve that "reconciliation with reality that Hegel, philosopher of history par excellence considered the ultimate goal of all philosophical thought".⁴⁴ For her, the historian, the real one, is such insofar as he is a storyteller but above all he is the defender of factual truths (*teller of factual truths*), with all the difficulties involved in defining a factual truth. Once again the idea of understanding how to reconcile emerges, where reconciliation is also painfully entrusted to the value of testimony, to the kind of narrative that is the memorial story which, as some argue, unlike the traditional story, has a direct descent from trauma. It is in the context described thus far that understanding can be understood as acceptance of reality and an essential precondition for the exercise of the faculty of judgment and the faculty of action as the capacity to initiate a *new time*. And for this reason, narratives that not only fail to defend but blatantly offend factual truth such as denialist narratives are a threat to any attempt at reconciliation and *re-foundation* on new foundations of living together.

Mastering the past is then partly possible, Arendt again continues in *Humanity in Dark Times*

relating what has happened; but such narration, too, which shapes history, solves no problems and assuages no suffering; it does not master anything once and for all. Rather, as long as the meaning of the events remains alive – and this meaning can persist for very long periods of time – “mastering of the past” can take the form of ever-recurrent narration. The poet in a very general sense and the historian in a very special sense have the task of setting this process of narration in motion and of involving us in it. And we who for the most part are neither poets nor historians are familiar with the nature of this process from our own experience with life, for we too have the need to recall the significant events in our own lives by relating them to ourselves and others.⁴⁵

Storytelling to others, discourse understood in its plural dimension, that is, that of dialogue, of discursive space with multiple voices, is that kind of *understanding* with which one can reconcile with reality according to Arendt:

44. ARENDT 2006: 587.

45. ARENDT 2005: 51.

No matter how intensely the things of this world affect us, no matter how deeply they manage to excite and stimulate us, they do not become human to us except at the moment when we can discuss them with our fellow human beings. [...] We humanize what happens in the world and in ourselves only by talking about it, and in this talking, we learn to become human.⁴⁶

The call for the necessity of *thinking* is frequent in the last decade of Arendt's critical activity. It is a call to a thought that in its discursive dimension does not remain confined to mere contemplation, but engages in *judgment*, a historical and especially political judgment that also has a performative character: it has to do with action, a component of human life privileged in Arendtian reflection.

The historical and political understanding of objects such as the death camps precisely because it is directed toward an experience that exceeds the rational cognitive one of an etiological type goes in search of other forms of sense-making, and imagination plays an essential role with respect to *judging*. The chiaroscuro play of imagination, which is able skillfully to make absence present, makes possible the approach of an alienating and inconceivable past in the attempt to understand the present: it attempts to bridge the distance of enigmatic objects no longer present to our gaze. In the face of the *unspeakable*, understanding through 'imagination becomes for Arendt a way "with which we come to terms and reconcile with reality"..⁴⁷ Narrative imagination is a mode that confronts the collision of reality in a manner opposite to that of a type of historical insight that claims objectivity: it accepts the impossibility of reducing contingency and unpredictability to causal knowledge aimed at predictivity. It is no coincidence that Arendt is a reference for authors such as Hayden White whose idea of narrative strongly opposes "the reduction of history to an 'exact science' and the consequent application to historical knowledge of deductive and causal procedures proper to nomological knowledge".⁴⁸ In an essay titled *The Element of Totalitarianism*, White ascribes to the *Origins of Totalitarianism* a "crucial role"⁴⁹ for his own formation and about the

46. ARENDT 2005: 58.

47. ARENDT 2005: 308.

48. STRONG 2006: 231.

49. WHITE 2022: 182.

relationship between history and *art* by referring to the Arendtian theme of historical narrative thus the U.S. historian summarizes Arendt's view of the historical *event*:

Thus, in her discussions of the historical event (which she took to be the fundamental category of historical analysis), Arendt seems to view the event as similar in structure and significance to the artwork. That is to say, like the artwork, the historical event (versus the natural event) is presumed to have both a "subject matter" and a "truth content."⁵⁰

Certainly, the task entrusted to the narrative of what happened in Europe at the hands of totalitarianisms is a daunting one in the first place because ascertaining historical truth means helping to shape the scenario in which a nation is faced with the need to assume political responsibility for its closest history. As mentioned earlier, Arendt on several occasions emphasizes the difficulty of postwar Germany in *mastering the past* and, acknowledging that judging its own recent history has been a complicated and controversial affair, calls ambiguous the expression "coined ad hoc for this fragment of history of theirs, 'insurmountable past'".⁵¹ Indeed, the moral enterprise of judging calls for holding firm to an essential distinction, that between personal responsibility and political responsibility: the latter consists not only of the responsibility that each government assumes in judging what its predecessors did, but also that which each nation assumes for the events of its own past. Contributing to the ambiguity of a past defined as insurmountable is for Arendt to witness in postwar Germany the morally disorienting fact that so many perfectly innocent individuals felt compelled to continually reiterate their guilt to the world at large, contributing to an "unintentional but effective absolution of those who had actually *done* something: [...] there where everyone is guilty, no one is."⁵² There is neither guilt nor collective innocence, and for Arendt this sense of guilt if present in young people is either due to disorientation or is of those who are "playing an intellectual comedy"..⁵³

50. WHITE 2022:192.

51. ARENDT 2003: 23.

52. ARENDT 2003: 28.

53. ARENDT 2003: 28.

For a full historical understanding it remains essential to hold firm to the distinction between personal responsibility and political responsibility. Just as it happens on the legal level, on the moral level as well, reflection cannot be satisfied with attributing collective responsibility but, if it is to be of any use to the understanding of phenomena, it must stop attention on individual responsibility and individual persons even in the age of mass society in which it is almost automatic and certainly also more convenient to consider oneself

as a mere cog in some kind of machinery be it the well oiled machinery of some huge bureaucratic enterprise, social, political, or professional, or the chaotic, ill-adjusted chance pattern of circumstances under which we all somehow spend our lives .⁵⁴

In the belief then, that the *buck-passing of responsibility in modern societies*⁵⁵ finds its stopping point *at the threshold of the courtroom*, the analysis on the subject of individual responsibility , as is well known, will then fruitfully focus on the relations between morality and law. For Arendt, it is important to emphasize that she belongs to a generation that, while holding firm to a clear and sharp distinction between legality and morality, is led to believe that positive law becomes the interpreter of moral law and that in case of conflict the latter must be heeded. The commitment to which each is called is not to shirk *thinking* always understood not only as the ability to *represent the world* but to *cope with it*. We cannot know whether Arendt would have approved of today's widespread use of metaphors and analogies with the *Shoah* we can perhaps assume a negative response because of her belief in the uniqueness and unrepeatability of historical events, certainly, however, from her intense critical reflection comes an appeal namely that of keeping alive the memory of the *past that does not pass by* not, however, turning our gaze away from the present, a present that offers to our addicted gazes men and women fleeing under the snow in the heart of Europe or fleeing by sea in the Mediterranean. Arendt would probably have agreed with Richard Rorty, who describing his own utopian model of society says this about solidarity: "Solidarity is not discovered by reflection: it is created. You create it by becoming more sensitive to

54. ARENDT 2003: 57.

55. ARENDT 2003: 57.

the particular suffering and humiliation endured by other unknown people". The protagonist of this utopian society is called an ironic liberal, where *ironic* stands for capable of imagination, one whose irony makes one say:

with such heightened sensitivity it becomes more difficult to disregard individuals who are different from us by thinking that suffering 'they don't suffer the way we would' or that 'some suffering will always have to be there, so let's let *them* suffer.⁵⁶

Solidarity finds a resource in the capacity for 'imagination that is connected to the critical attitude of thought for Arendt: it is the battlefield on which the forces of the future and the past clash with each other in the Kafka parable, it is the experience of thought exercised again and again; an activity that knows no point of arrival that of Kafka's *He who* stands in the line of combat between the two forces and who, lacking any definitive security, entrusts the incessant critical quest to the form of the narrative "without ever abandoning the need and desire for reconciliation or even its openness to new unexpected contingent lacerations."⁵⁷ .

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56. RORTY 1989: XVI.

57. BERNSTEIN 1994: 319.

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