FOUR

Narrating and understanding

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Hannah Arendt’s distinct approach to political theorizing – what she affectionately, yet not without ironical undertones, referred to as “my old-fashioned story-telling” (Arendt quoted in Disch 1993: 666) – inspired much perplexity among commentators of her work. Indeed, her exercises in political thinking continue to manifest a stubborn resilience against all attempts at an easy categorization within established frameworks and schools of thought. This perplexity can no doubt be at least partly attributed to Arendt’s general reluctance to engage in methodological and epistemological debates. Her work instead is guided by a rare attentiveness to the living experience of ever-changing reality, to which, in her words, “thought must remain bound … as the only guideposts by which to take its bearings” (Arendt [1961] 1968: 14; see Hinchman & Hinchman 1984: 183). Yet this focus itself warrants an exploration of the ontological and epistemological premises that underlie it if we are not to miss out on its full import. Against this background, this chapter attempts to read Arendt’s narrative approach to political phenomena not as a method, strictly speaking, but in terms of her phenomenological–existentialist commitment to illuminating and making sense of the plural, unpredictable and changing worldly reality. In this way, it also aims to show that Arendt’s “testament” (Arendt [1961] 1968: 5) consists of no prescriptions on what to think, nor does it offer clear-cut procedural rules on how to think. Rather, it arguably suggests a way of being in and relating to the world, whereby we continuously come to recognize the possibilities and limitations inherent in political action and our worldly existence as such.

In the first section, I tie the problem of thinking after the modern breakdown of traditional standards and categories of thought to the challenge of understanding and point to its political significance. The second section explores how Arendt’s storytelling answers to this challenge; examining the philosophical and literary sources of her turn to narrative and situating it in relation to narrative theory, it seeks to elucidate the distinctiveness of Arendt’s storytelling approach. Finally, the third section engages some key examples of Arendt’s narrative practice to bring to light the peculiar way her writings speak to us in the present.

Thinking and the challenge of understanding

Accompanying Arendt’s preoccupation with the need to uphold the dignity of political action is her attentiveness to the political significance of thinking. Indeed – and even though explicitly addressed only in her later turn to “the life of the mind” – Arendt displays throughout her work an abiding concern with thought and its relationship to the world of human affairs. The urgency of this focus arose directly from her realization that the traditional frameworks and categories of thought have become profoundly inadequate for understanding “the incalculable evil that men are capable of bringing about” (Arendt 1994: 132). From her attempt to come to terms with modern political experience, in particular the radical evil of totalitarianism, follows an awareness that she shares with the broader tradition of Existenz philosophy: by so tragically exposing the ruin of traditional standards of thought, modern events have also posed the genuine philosophical problem of the continued relevance and meaningfulness of thought itself and confronted political theory with the urgent need to rethink its own attitude towards the public, political realm (ibid.: 430, 444). This challenge only gains a terrifying concreteness in Arendt’s later claim that the radical evil of Adolf Eichmann could be traced not to any demonic motives of the doer, but “merely” to his inability to think. In short, thinking, as Buckler (2011: 162) notes, now became directly “implicated in the fate of the world”.

Arendt’s phenomenological–existentialist sensibility, in this respect, is made manifest in her efforts to resuscitate the exercise of thinking in the service of what she calls the general human need for understanding. The link between the two arises from the distinction Arendt draws between vita activa and vita contemplativa. While thinking and acting are essentially interrelated, Arendt holds, they are also different “existential’ positions” grounded in distinct kinds of “genuine” experience
[T]he word “appearance” would make no sense, if recipients of appearances did not exist — living creatures able to acknowledge, recognize, and react to — in flight or desire, approval or disapproval, blame or praise — what is not merely there but appears to them and is meant for their perception. (Arendt 1978b: 19)

The ability to recognize and come to terms with the originality, contingency and unpredictability that arises from this dynamic condition of political life becomes for Arendt the paramount task of political thought. This is also where the essential interconnectedness between thinking and acting comes to light. Arendt calls understanding “the other side of action” in so far as it is of utmost importance for humans as worldly and (potentially) acting beings to “come to terms with what irrevocably happened and be reconciled with what unavoidably exists” (Arendt 1994: 321, 308, 322).

The political significance of the challenge of understanding can be gleaned from Arendt’s inquiry into the inadequacy of traditional “tools of understanding” (ibid.: 313). Arendt directs the gist of her reproach to the tradition of political theory against what she considers to be its “basic fallacy”, the fallacy of subordinating the generally (and distinctly) human capacity of thought in the quest for meaning to the characteristically philosophical desire to reach the ultimate truth of Being (Arendt 1978b: 15). Driven by the will to truth, philosophers have thus claimed for themselves a detached, solitary, supposedly objective position altogether removed from the disorderly realm of politics to contemplate a realm of eternal concepts and ideas, “what is forever invisible ... and truly everlasting” (ibid.: 131). This fallacy Arendt finds so troubling because it gave birth to the belief that the world of political affairs too can be approached on the model of rational or philosophical truth: that is, by pretentiously assuming that results reached in solitude also possess universal validity in politics, and then applying them onto this realm, so to speak, from the outside and above. Blurring the distinguishing line between thinking and acting, political theorists envisioned a reconciliation between the two activities to occur by erecting a hierarchy, where thought, by virtue of its alleged ability to reach true knowledge of reality, is identified with rulership, and where action is reduced to mere execution of a pre-given standard or idea (Arendt 1958: 225). Yet in this way, according to Arendt, they have in fact opened “an abyss” between thought and action, philosophy and politics, which came fully to light with the modern crisis of understanding (Arendt 2005: 6).

The main problem for Arendt is that this mode of proceeding pays little heed to the phenomenal nature of the world and threatens the
existence of the public realm. The sense of the common world and the very reality of the public realm as a space of appearance, as Arendt (1958: 55–7) persistently points out, only emerges in relationships between a plurality of distinct individuals engaging the world in word and deed, speaking and acting with, and appearing to, each other. The “rational” attitude in politics, as manifested most clearly in traditional “two-world” metaphysical fallacies, on the contrary, attempts to explain and construe the realm of “mere” appearances in terms of supposedly deeper and truer realities, thought to lie above or beneath them, grounding or causing them (see Arendt 1978b: 10–12, 216). But the practice of subsuming whatever happens within preconceived frameworks of thought allows for nothing new – in the sense of both originality and irrevocability – to happen “under the sun” (Arendt 1994: 309). Rationalism is thus bound to grow less and less informed by and increasingly distant from particular occurrences and facts in the realm of human affairs and ensue in an atrophied sense of worldly reality. It is precisely this concern that could also be seen as grounding Arendt’s general scepticism about methodological debates. For the very concept of method, as Vollrath (1977: 162–3) points out, presupposes an attitude preoccupied with developing “appropriate” frameworks and tools through which to approach, control and master the object of observation, all from a position that is essentially foreign to it.

The prevalence of the rational attitude in political theory represents for Arendt a paramount political problem because humans depend on a shared sense of the world for the very sense of their own selves as autonomous agents, able to engage with and respond to ever-changing political reality. For what thought’s prolonged severance from experience puts into question is what Arendt calls the “preliminary understanding”, the very basic sense of one’s self as a worldly being which grounds the possibility of all thought and action (Arendt 1994: 310; [1951] 2004: 614). This danger came particularly clearly to light in the modern age. The crucial shift occurred when, unhinged from the realm of eternal absolutes, yet without abandoning the traditional quest for certainty, the activity of thinking came increasingly to resemble mere instrumental reasoning or logality, whose main characteristic is that it carries within itself a claim of compulsory validity regardless of others and the world, that is, regardless of our situated existence (Arendt 1994: 318). The disturbing result was that modern thought, most notably in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century philosophies of history, thus ended up subordinating reality itself to the supposedly self-evident and necessary, yet essentially arbitrary, logic of process (see Arendt 1978b: 26–7, 53–5; 1958: 296–7, 304; [1961] 1968: 57). In this way it in effect reduced humans to mere objects of inhuman forces and processes, and also finally destroyed the sense of the common world as a frame of reference within which human words and deeds could appear. Indeed, Arendt counts the radical worldlessness of modern thought among one of the main conditions that made individuals so susceptible to the lure of totalitarian movements and their ideological interpretations (and recreations) of reality.

Rational truth, in so far as it paints an unambiguous picture of reality and also provides a blueprint for political action, may easily appear to be a more effective and powerful political attitude. Yet it risks distorting or even destroying the fundamental existential basis of plurality, which represents the very condition of the possibility of politics and also its ultimate meaning. It was also on those terms that Arendt was deeply critical of attempts within the social sciences and historiography of her day to reach “actual knowledge” of totalitarianism as some force arising from outside politics itself, and on this basis construct appropriate tools to defeat it once and for all. For what was thus missed was not only the disturbing fact that “totalitarian governments have not been imported from the moon” but arose from the very midst of modern societies, but also the understanding of political experience that would bestow meaning on the fight against it (Arendt 1994: 310; see also Buckler 2011: 12).

The modern challenge of understanding, then, does not refer simply to the fact that traditional standards of thought have suddenly become obsolete as if all that was needed was to erect a new set of yardsticks, more adequate to the present realities (see Arendt 1966). Rather, the breakdown of traditional standards of thought brings fully to light as “a tangible reality” and “a fact of political relevance” the challenge of understanding as it arises out of the perplexity inherent in the experience of thinking itself (Arendt [1961] 1968: 13). This perplexity results from the fact that the privilege of a withdrawal from the world is exercised by a living being that is itself part of the world of appearances, who seeks to grasp the meaning of everything that is but can never leave or transcend it altogether (Arendt 1978b: 45). Rather than trying to escape it, this perplexity must be assumed in what Arendt calls “thinking without a bannister”, of confronting experience without prefabricated concepts and frameworks of thought (Arendt 1979: 336). Following in the footsteps of her philosophical mentors, Heidegger and Jaspers, she accordingly embraces the notion of truth as disclosure or revelation. This notion is crucial to Arendt’s vision of understanding proper because it is based on the recognition of thought’s subjective, situated character, and consequently affirms also the independent existence and
value of outside factual reality, in its “stubborn thereness” and contingency, its particularity and plurality (Arendt [1961] 1968: 253). The political significance of this attitude emerges in that its proper concern is with what Arendt calls factual truth in contrast to rational truth. On the one hand, rational truth refers to abstract and relatively permanent axioms and theories pertinent to mathematics, science and speculative philosophy. On the other hand, factual truth refers to “common and factual reality itself”, that is, to actions, events and situations that happen when many people interact together, constituting the contingent fabric of the political realm (ibid.: 232, 227).

Arendt’s concern therefore is not to deny knowledge a necessary part in the process of understanding. Instead, she remains wary of the various ways in which the “rational” quest for completeness and finality might stir the focus away from its proper aim: to confront the multiplicity of actions and events in their originality and particularity and weave them into the fabric of the common world, that is, to gauge what they mean for us and thus constantly engage in reinvigoration of our sense of the common world and our own selves in it. Yet, as an activity of ceaselessly confronting and transcending the world in the quest for meaning, “thinking without bannisters” can never definitively establish meaning and is in this sense even “entirely without results” (Arendt 1978b: 171, 191, 197). The “wind of thought”, Arendt suggests as she draws on the example of Socrates, corresponds to “the technique of dismantling”; it has “a destructive, undermining effect” on all established standards, values and rules by which we understand the world and conduct our lives, including its own previously reached conclusions (ibid.: 212, 174–5). How, then, can thinking also help to endow the plurality and contingency of experience with sufficient coherence and comprehensibility needed to affirm the value of human freedom and enable human action in the world? To this Arendt replies by weaving the caught meanings into stories in order to share the meaning of what appears with others. If thinking removes us from the world in the quest for meaning of what has happened, storytelling answers to the challenge of understanding because it returns us to the plurality of the world of appearances and thereby moves us to the future.

**Storytelling and the retrieval of the “lost treasure” of political freedom**

Arendt’s attempt to retrieve storytelling as a distinct approach to political phenomena draws inspiration from the ancient, “pre-philosophical” concern, as manifested in Greek poetry and historiography, with endowing with meaning and thus immortalizing the fleeting and perishable affairs of men (Arendt 1978b: 131). Before the philosophical turn to the “truly everlasting”, it was the distinctively “political function” of the storyteller, poet or historian to watch over and praise the words and deeds of mortals, tell stories about them and so keep them alive in the memory of history (Arendt 1958: 197). For Arendt, storytelling thus embodies the recognition that humans as worldly beings unhinged from the realm of eternal absolutes can only search for meaning to their lives in their temporal and intersubjective existence itself. Stories answer to this horizon because they correspond to the temporal structure of human action in the world: the fact that humans exist in the gap between past and future and that the way of thinking, acting and living, and the very way of human freedom, consist of a constant negotiation between the need to retrieve and assign meaning to what once was, and the aspiration to project oneself towards uncertain futures, all without a stable bridge of traditional verities. In this Arendt intimates the recent bent within political theory to find in the narrative proximity to the particularity and plurality of human existence a valuable prism and voice through which to illuminate and confront problems plaguing the contemporary mind.¹

What distinguishes Arendt’s approach, however, is its focus on the specifically political import of narrative. Her storytelling, indeed, is tied intimately into her efforts to bring to life again, after the twentieth-century horrors, the meaning of human freedom and reinvigorate, in the midst of the desert-like conditions of modern life, a public realm able to house properly human action and speech. Ontologically, Arendt’s argument for storytelling echoes what Paul Ricoeur, one of the prominent contemporary theorists on narrativity, calls “the pre-narrative capacity of life” (Ricoeur 1991: 28–9). In this notion is contained a two-way acknowledgement that human life is always-already storied, implicitly caught in temporal dramas of the appearing world as well as “an activity and a passion in search of a narrative” that would organize the flux of events into a meaningful life-story and offer points of orientation for the future (ibid.). Or, in Arendt’s words, while our condition as worldly beings engaging the world in action and speech grounds the very possibility of stories and constitutes “the prepolitical and prehistorical condition of history”, it is stories that are able to humanize our lives by revealing the distinctively human character of action (Arendt 1958: 184; 1978b: 131–5). Arendt’s embrace of storytelling then rests on the claim that because stories by their very form imitate the structure of human acting and suffering, they are able to affirm the human
character of the world, history and politics, and kindle the sense of our own selves as political agents, capable of responsible action in the world (see Kristeva 2001: 7-8).

Crucial to understanding the distinctiveness of Arendt’s storytelling is her rejection of the traditional narratives of historical continuity and logical succession, where each event gains its meaning only as part of an encompassing whole or process, and is, in fact, portrayed as mere necessary instantiation of some inevitable “higher law”. In particular, she abhorred the historicist notion of salvation in history, most notable in the idea of the “Progress” of “Mankind”, whereby any occurrence could be explained and also justified in terms of the next stage in the overall development and where, consequently, the position of the ultimate judge of human affairs was yielded to the criterion of “Success” (Arendt 1978b: 216). Against this tendency, Arendt’s storytelling is indebted to Walter Benjamin’s historiography of a fragmented past, as epitomized in his metaphor of “the angel of history” (Arendt 1968: 165). Like Benjamin’s angel of history, Arendt’s storyteller affirms the reality of the gap in the linear succession of time, and thus also his or her freedom to look upon the past with eyes unburdened by the spectre of teleology and thereby “redeem” those fragments of past experience that the “storm of progress” has destined for oblivion (ibid.: 197, 165). Liberated from the quest for deeper causes and realities, purposes and ends, and distanced from immediate interests in the world, the angel is able to consider each particular deed in its particularity and endow it with a general meaning.

The notion of “the redemptive power of narrative” (Benhabib 1990) that Arendt draws from Benjamin is of an immediate political import because it encapsulates the ability of stories to “reclaim our human dignity” (Arendt 1978b: 216). For by endowing with significance particular, single events and gestures, stories are able to affirm human freedom as a source of worldly events. Indeed, the peculiar political significance of stories, according to Arendt, can be traced to their unique capacity of revealing the “who” rather than the “what” of the protagonists’ identity (Arendt 1958: 186). Stories, in other words, affirm “the revelatory character” of action and speech, the fact that they, apart from being “about some worldly objective reality”, involve a disclosure of the acting and speaking agent (ibid.: 182). In this way, stories foster the view of human beings as actors and sufferers, not passive victims or objects of deeper and truer realities, metaphysical or historical causes or ends. Thus, they are able to uphold the potentialities of human freedom and establish the distinctively human significance of politics also in the present and for the future. This emphasis is crucial because human freedom and the status of an acting being, for Arendt, is not a matter of a self-evident or natural fact, but exists only “as a political and as a human reality” (Arendt 1994: 320). In other words, it is predicated upon our recognizing each other as equal members of the public realm and can, by implication, be denied or even completely obliterated if such intersubjective, political recognition is refused.

It is this awareness and concern that grounds the meaning of Arendt’s claim that the aim of storytelling is not to reach objective knowledge of the past by, for instance, seeking to unearth a previously concealed essence or origin of a phenomenon or explaining it (away) in terms of its supposed “causes” (ibid.: 319, 403-5, 407). For this would not only deny the reality of the new and the unprecedented in history, but also mean that the future, too, can be foretold. At work in Benjamin’s notion of redemptive historiography, rather, is a “method of ‘drilling’”, akin to the “digging quality” of Heidegger’s “passionate thinking” which Arendt conveys with the metaphor of a “pearl diver” (Arendt 1968: 202, 206; 1971: 50-52). The pearl diver reaches into the depths of the past, but not “to resuscitate it the way it was and to contribute to the renewal of extinct ages” (Arendt 1968: 205). The aim is to bring to life again those “corals” and “pearls” of past experience long buried or concealed under the segmented layers of traditional categories and listen to their “rich” and “strange” echoes in the present (ibid.: 205-6). It is to make them a living reality in the storyteller’s own world, and thereby to make them speak with new vigour and unexpected significance to the concerns and intricacies of the present and the future. The concern with immortalizing past words and deeds thus becomes intimately tied with, indeed indistinguishable from, the affirmation of a new beginning in the present. It is in this sense that Arendt (1994: 320) says that “history is a story which has many beginnings but no end”.

Yet if this bond between the past and the future is to be upheld, a fundamental distinction needs to be kept. While stories make action and life meaningful, as Arendt emphasizes in her reflections on Isak Dinesen, it is a highly dangerous error to try to live life as if it were a story, that is, to try to make a preconceived script come true in politics (Arendt 1968: 105, 109). The danger of this aestheticist reversal, to be sure, is present in the method of drilling itself. This is because its desire to liberate past experiences from their predetermined place within some larger whole easily lapses into an embrace of what is supposedly purely original or authentic, too genuine, in short, to reveal any broader meaning that would be communicable to others and able to speak in the present (ibid.: 198-9). As Arendt elaborates in her
reflection on the troubling political implications of Heidegger’s philosophy, however, this reversal occurs only when thinking, based as it is on a withdrawal from the world of appearances, forgets to return to the common phenomenal reality and turns inward towards itself (see Arendt 1971). In this way it also fails to affirm the independent existence of outside reality and mistakenly assumes that the plural character of the world can be resolved into, and in fact reduced to a mere function of, the essentially subjective thought process. Far removed from common intersubjective reality, this form of thought can only lead to action by an “absolutizing of individual categories of being” – thereby furthering the view of the world and others as mere material to be moulded at will and representing the ultimate manifestation of the traditional philosophical prejudice against the political realm (see Arendt 1994: 185, 176–82).

The basic rule of storytelling instead is “to be loyal to life” (Arendt 1968: 97). Affirming the intersubjective, plural character of human existence, Arendt is clear that “nobody is the author or producer of his own life story” (1958: 184). This means that nobody can really “make” their story, but only let it emerge out of repeating in imagination whatever “life is giving you” (Arendt 1968: 97). What underlies this rule is that recognition that the temporal, plural and unpredictable character of the appearing world can never be made completely transparent to thought (Arendt 1994: 183–4). Following from this understanding is the insight that Arendt admires in the thought of Karl Jaspers: that meaning, as opposed to truth, and thought itself only come into existence between human beings, that is, “in communication”, and can only assume the form of “a perpetual appeal” to the freedom of others (Arendt 1968: 85; 1994: 182–3). This shift Arendt develops further in her notion of “representative thinking” (Arendt [1961] 1968: 237). This is thinking that remains always in close contact with the world and other people, representing them and considering their standpoints in the solitary dialogue of thought. Hence emerges the perspective of worldly impartiality, which Arendt praises in the great ancient historiographers and which further establishes the distinctly political relevance of her storytelling approach (ibid.: 51). For by travelling freely about the world and imagining what it looks like from a plurality of different perspectives, it brings into existence a space of appearance, where the “redeemed” contents of the past can be brought into a “playful” communication with each other and “illuminated” – in Jaspers’s phrase – in their worldly, intersubjective existence (Arendt 1968: 79–80, 85; 1994: 186). This emphasis is crucial because it grounds the capacity of stories to humanize the world. For the recognition of humans as acting and speaking beings can only follow from an understanding of the way they appear on the temporal and spatial plane of the world, in the web of human relationships constituting the public realm.

Here is also where Arendt’s storytelling both echoes and at the same time distances itself from the main concern guiding the recent proponents of the ethical and political value of the narrative voice. The main emphasis in the writings of, for instance, Martha Nussbaum (1995) and Richard Rorty (1993), lies on the narrative ability to inspire empathetic identification with others’ experience of suffering and injustice, and thereby cultivate in the reader appropriate emotional responses and moral sentiments. From Arendt’s perspective, however, this focus risks reducing the meaning of a particular event or experience to a moral lesson or idea, while missing out on its distinctive appearance in the common, political world. For the same reason, Arendt refused to write history simply from the standpoint of the victims or the oppressed. Any such attempt, unmediated by the perspective of worldly plurality, for Arendt, is bound to abstract the experience of suffering or oppression away from its phenomenal manifestation, and reduce it to an essential, seemingly eternal trait of the victims’ identity. As such, it in fact risks justifying their victimhood and obscuring the possibilities for the oppressed to affirm their freedom in the future (see Arendt 1994: 402). Arendt’s emphasis on the importance of “reconciliation with reality”, then, does not suggest mere acceptance or complacency in the face of what happened (Arendt [1961] 1968: 257). The value of the storyteller’s impartiality, on the contrary, is that, in stark contrast to the modern notion of objectivity, it resists closure to be able to instead retain the “impact of reality and the shock of experience” and preserve a space for critical reflection on what particular occurrences and events mean for our common world (Arendt [1951] 2004: xxvi; Buckler 2011: 12, 45–6, 57–8, 107). Its perspective of worldly plurality lets the meaning (or value judgement) of actions surface tentatively, and never unambiguously, out of a consideration of how they emerged within the web of human relationships, “in the midst of human society” (Arendt [1961] 1968: 404). And conversely, it reveals the significance of events by examining how they echo in the common world, how they bear upon the human, political status of a plurality of individuals constituting it (see Arendt 1994: 404). As such, stories further critical understanding and always-already contain an appeal to the freedom of others. For by showing how any particular situation came about through a plurality of human (in)actions in the world, stories also disclose previously unrecognized or concealed potentials of human freedom in the present.
Illuminating dark times

To illustrate the human and humanizing capacity of stories, this section engages two examples of Arendt’s narrative practice: her essay on Isak Dinesen – for her an exemplary storyteller – in Men in Dark Times, and her seminal attempt at understanding the reality of her time in The Origins of Totalitarianism. These examples were chosen because they both engage stories as a response to “dark times”, those times when the potentials of human freedom are dormant or extinguished. As such, they bring out particularly clearly the resisting aspect involved in narrative understanding – what Arendt called “the unpremeditated, attentive facing up to, and resisting of, reality” (Arendt [1951] 2004: xxvi).

Isak Dinesen (1885–1963)

Not only could Isak Dinesen (the pseudonym of Karen Blixen) tell stories – what made her “unique”, Arendt says, was that she “also ... knew what she was doing” while telling them (Arendt [1961] 1968: 257). “All sorrows can be borne if you put them into a story or tell a story about them.” It is with these words attributed to the Danish Scheherazade that Arendt underlines the political function of the storyteller in her chapter on action in The Human Condition and in her essay “Truth and Politics”. For behind these words stands not the desire to “be a writer”, but a conscious resort to storytelling as a way of bearing the passions and sorrows of life, of remaining “fully alive” (Arendt 1968: 96–7). Arendt’s story about Dinesen, accordingly, is neither a conventional biography nor a literary essay in honour of a great writer. Critically responding to just such an attempt made on the part of Parmenia Miguel in her biography, Titania: The Biography of Isak Dinesen, Arendt proceeds by freely assembling the facts and occurrences of Dinesen’s life along with quotes from her writings in order to bring out and salvage for the future the practice and wisdom of storytelling.

What Arendt discerns in Dinesen’s life-story is the conviction that even in the darkest of times stories are able to kindle meaning and make life bearable. This is just as well, as Dinesen’s life, for Arendt, contains a warning that with the “slightest misunderstanding” this humanizing relevance of stories will inevitably be betrayed (ibid.: 105). Dinesen’s youthful folly, for example, was her attempt to make a preconceived story she had construed about herself – the idea of a life of passion among the natives bequeathed to her by her father – come true in life. It was this “misunderstanding” of the relationship between storytelling and life, Arendt suggests, that made her marry the twin brother of her true love and embark with him on the adventure to East Africa. So, too, it regained its grip on her life while there. Not without irony, Arendt recalls how Dinesen appropriated the image of Scheherazade, using her storytelling ability to keep alive “the flame of passion” for her lover, the restless adventurer Denys Finch-Hatton, as much as for the not yet tamed wilderness of Africa (ibid.: 101). Stories helped her cope with reality; through them, she revelled in her liberation from the suffocating norms of respectability and usefulness ruling nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century European societies, and affirmed her freedom in “that direct contact with God which we shared with the hippo and the flamingo” (Dinesen quoted in ibid.: 102).

But the problem was that her stories made her lover, her African adventure and the whole of her life appear “magical”, even when it was anything but (ibid.: 103). For Arendt, and as suggested in Dinesen’s tale “The Poet”, Dinesen’s youthful temptation embodies the “vices of Bildung”, the nineteenth-century romanticist tendency to use culture as a refuge from society and politics, to seek to escape the threat of reality and recreate the Paradise lost by virtue of the cultivation of one’s own self. Indeed, Dinesen’s tendency to project upon reality her own ideas about “what she wanted to be, how she wanted to live”, Arendt suggests, in fact made her ill-prepared to recognize and confront the disaster that was to follow (ibid.: 103). Dinesen herself lucidly exposed in her writings the trap represented by the preoccupation with one’s own identity; it means, as she writes in her short-story “The Dreamers”, to be one’s own “slave and ... prisoner” (ibid.: 96; see also Arendt 1958: 211). For underlying the concern with the self is actually the fear of one’s worldly “fate” (Arendt 1968: 105). And this fear – as she, no stranger to the lures of vanity and social prestige, well knew – far from affirming human freedom, the ability to respond to whatever may be, leads back “inescapably” into the embrace of the philistine society, fostering the willingness to “accept as success what others warrant to be so ... at the quotation of the day” (ibid.: 96, 105).

Her awareness of the dangers of aestheticism and her loyalty to the original impulse of storytelling came only after she had lost “what had constituted her life”, both her farm in Africa and her lover, when she had nothing left “except grief and sorrow and memories” (ibid.: 98). For, tragically echoing Arendt’s insight into the break in the thread of tradition, it was only then that all venues for a magical escape were finally destroyed and that all that Dinesen had left to resort to was the world in its inherently fragmentary nature. Then, her concern shifted from endowing the world with her own “magic” to repeating in imagination the fragments of experience and assembling them into stories in
order to reveal both the pattern of a life, and herself as she existed in
the world, what she called a “destiny” or, in Arendt’s terms, a worldly
“who” (ibid.: 97, 104). In this way stories made her sorrow “bearable
and meaningful”, they “saved her love, and ... her life” (Arendt [1961]
1968: 257; 1968: 104). This is because they liberated her from a fixed
identity as something seemingly beyond her control. For by reveal­
ing one’s destiny, one’s joys and sufferings in their human, worldly
character, stories also affirm the fact that the meaning of a human life
necessarily transcends whatever a person has done or suffered. In this
way they thus return back within the realm of human powers the privi­
lege of reflecting upon whatever may be, understanding and judging it,
answering to it and resisting it (Arendt 1968: 97).
Through the stories she wrote, the older Dinesen was able to review
her life, judge it and thus also “let go” and act anew (ibid.: 97). Arendt
recounts three of her stories that all directly address and expose as a
fundamental error Dinesen’s early attempt to try to make life con­
form to art, in particular to use others for the realization of a precon­
ceived idea. Her stories, then, are not narratives of emotional or moral
growth, of loss and eventual (personal) redemption, characteristic of the
nineteenth-century Bildungsroman. They are stories of the discrepancy
between individuals’ ideals and the resistance of the world, ever explor­
ing the boundaries of reality, and thereby disclosing a space for human
action – not in the sense of acting out a predetermined goal, but in the
sense of opening oneself and responding to “the infinite possibilities
of life” (ibid.: 96). It is in those terms that we may understand the political
significance of Dinesen’s example, and Arendt’s remark that storytelling
was “what in the end made her wise” (ibid.: 109).

The Origins of Totalitarianism
It is this wisdom of storytelling that could be said to inform Arendt’s
resolve to understand and bear “the burden of our time”. She qualifies
The Origins of Totalitarianism as a narrative exercise by emphasizing
that her aim was not to write a historical book, but a political one
(Arendt [1951] 2004: 617–18). By this she means that she was guided
by a concern with the present, that is, she sought to shed light on the
“disturbing relevance” of the emergence of totalitarianism (ibid.: xxvi).
This concern, at its most fundamental, was founded upon the insight
that, as an attempt to destroy the very humanity in human beings – what
she called the making of humans superfluous as human beings – totali­
taxism also posed the radical question of the meaning of being human
(ibid.: 620). She was accordingly critical of any attempt at explaining
totalitarianism in an “objective” fashion, by tracing it to a clearly
discernible cause or portraying it as a result of some or other underlying
essence or idea. This practice, she was convinced, would not only end
up normalizing and in fact justifying the phenomenon, but also – as
clearly manifested in prophecies of both Progress and Doom – stupefy­
ing the present human capacities of understanding and response (see
Arendt 1994: 404–5). Arendt’s aim, on the contrary, was “to destroy”,
to reveal that any narrative about the event of totalitarianism necessarily
will be inconclusive and that there can be no definitive, final story to tell
(Arendt [1951] 2004: 617). This she attempted to do by illuminating
those elements that, in hindsight, could be seen as having crystalized
into totalitarianism (ibid.: 617; 1994: 403). In doing so, Arendt draws
extensively on literature, memoirs, letters, anecdotes and biographies,
in addition to historical, political, legal and philosophical scholarship.
The following analysis briefly points to several examples of Arendt’s
“pearl-diving” in order to show how she sought thereby to reveal those
conditions “in the midst of human society” that made totalitarianism
possible, as well as recover the human potentials of resisting “totalitari­
One of the elements that eventually made possible the totalitarian
affront against humanity Arendt discerns in the way the category of
the social intervened in the development of modern anti-Semitism (Arendt
[1951] 2004: 115). Rejecting the ideas of “eternal” anti-Semitism and
“eternal” victimhood, Arendt turns to Marcel Proust’s literary (self­)
portrait to illuminate the position of Jews within European nations­
states. Proust’s world, where all worldly events and issues were reduced
to the “dazzling, fascinating reflections” of individual members of
society, she notes, paints a picture of the broader modern develop­
ment where the citizen’s concern for the public world gave way to the
bourgeois regard for private interests, inner personal traits and social
standing (ibid.: 106). Just as Remembrance of Things Past depicted
reality as a reflection of a virtually incommunicable inner life, so too
bourgeois European society regarded “Jewishness” as a kind of innate
and curiously perverse “inner experience” (ibid.). It was Benjamin Dis­
raeli – for Arendt an exemplary case of the rising parvenu mentality
among the Jews – who discovered that within this constellation the
“crime” of Judaism as a religious and political category could easily be
transformed into a potentially attractive private vice, alluding to “an
inherent, psychological quality” that is racially predetermined (ibid.: 93,
107, 110). Yet the upshot of this development was that the (non­)
acceptance of Jews within Western societies was predicated upon public
opinion about “what” they were presumed to be in their inner selves,
rather than on anything they might actually have said or done publically. As Proust was well aware, this situation also made them particularly vulnerable; for if “punishment is the right of the criminal”, it was the vice of Jewishness that, once in the hands of a political movement, could lead to a “wholesale extermination” (ibid.: 107, 115). Arendt points out that such “social factors” were invisible to historians of major political and economic events, and were “recorded only by the more penetrating and passionate force of poets or novelists” (ibid.: 115).

The way for the category of race to become an organizing principle of a political movement geared towards global rule, however, was paved by imperialism. Imperialism, for Arendt, reflects “the political emancipation” of the social mentality, with the bourgeoisie appropriating the state apparatus in order to pursue its private interests of capital accumulation (ibid.: 185–6). A glimpse into the underlying truth of the era Arendt sees revealed in Rudyard Kipling’s Kim, a portrait of an exemplary agent of imperialism, an individual in love with “the game for its own sake” (ibid.: 281). Kim is the image of purposelessness; he is severed from all social bonds, specific concerns and goals, and contemptuous of his own identity. As such, he is all too willing to forfeit his individuality to become a participant in and a mere function of the given forces of history, and treat others and even whole nations as mere “stepping-stones” on the path of endless expansion – not for the sake of his country or any other definable interest, but for the sake of the aimless process itself, as it seemed to embody the ultimately inexplicable mystery of life (ibid.: 161, 281–2). In his purposelessness, Kim points to the novel development introduced by imperialism, whereby political power became unhinged from the utilitarian motives that had originally stirred it into motion, and liberated itself from the specific political, constitutional constraints of the body politic (ibid.: 184–5, 268–9). This shift came out most clearly in the rise of regional European “pan-movements” that severed the category of race from all actual experience and any definable interests, and developed it into the mainspring of an ideology, a hidden law of process working above the positive laws of the state (ibid.: 269–98).

According to Arendt, imperialism thus brought to light the failings of the “social” attitude in politics. For it showed how the endless pursuit of private interests and the practice of reducing others to mere objects or means to an end, was based upon and fostered an atmosphere of rootlessness, making people increasingly distanced from, and shorn of a set place and purpose in the world and among other people. Equally well, it revealed how this process, in turn, hindered the development of a sense of self as a moral and political agent, able to recognize, and assume responsibility for, others as equal members of the common world. This situation gained additional concreteness and a terrifying impetus with the transformation of people into masses, which came about with the rise of unemployment and the collapse of the old class system. By turning to Kipling’s novel, Arendt evokes the profile of atomized, lonely and socially and economically superfluous individuals, who, after having lost the last remaining threads that had bound them to the world and other people, are ready at any moment to escape the threat of reality into and relinquish their capacity of independent judgement in front of some or other seemingly inexorable force of a movement.

From this brief illustration of Arendt’s narrative approach, it becomes evident that there follows no clear-cut conclusion as to the cause or underlying essence of totalitarianism. Arendt instead retains her focus on “the event of totalitarian domination itself”. Here her “method” meets “the general philosophical implications” of her analysis (Arendt 1994: 402). Just as there is no “essence” of totalitarianism out there to be discovered, so too no realm of eternal ideas can be of help in resisting it in the future (ibid.: 407–8; Arendt [1951] 2004: 625–32). Any resort to a given and unchangeable human nature would not only fail to acknowledge the radicalness of the totalitarian affront against humanity, but also, as Arendt’s narrative about the varied experiences of the period well shows, easily lend itself to perversion. Arendt’s account instead affirms that human nature in the sense of the “essential capabilities” of human beings can indeed be changed, that is, destroyed (Arendt 1994: 408). Further, Arendt’s pearl-diving for the conditions of possibility of this change reveals, by negative example, that “human nature” can only be upheld by a community of one’s fellows, who alone can guarantee “a place in the world which makes opinions significant and actions effective” (Arendt [1951] 2004: 376). Her narrative account thus seeks to retrieve the potentials of human freedom and of politics so that the present forms of political, economic or social superfluousness are met by a political affirmation of human solidarity. “Do thyself no harm; for we are all here” (ibid.: 632).

Conclusion

Arendt’s turn to storytelling is not to be understood as an attempt to provide a new set of substantive rules or standards with which to approach the plurality and unpredictability of political life. Arendt was generally sceptical of the idea that the thinker, either in the form of a supposedly neutral scientist or a committed intellectual, should “instruct” or
directly provide the goals to be followed in political action (Arendt 1979: 303–10). Her storytelling approach, instead, suggests a way of moving meaningfully in the gap between past and future (Arendt [1961] 1968: 14), coming to terms with whatever is past which always bears the mark of the new and the strange and thereby being better able to face up to the uncertainties of the future. This is also where storytelling becomes the other side of action, in so far as reconciliation with political reality corresponds not to the philosopher’s desire for the unity of thought and Being, theory and practice, but to the need of worldly, acting beings to come to terms with the phenomenal character of their human, political existence. Stories cannot offer a remedy for the perplexities of political action in the sense of providing it with a secure foundation and offsetting its awe-inspiring spontaneity and unpredictability, without thereby also reducing its intrinsic value. Yet by bringing into existence a space in which things of this world can appear in their plural, human character, stories reveal “the conditions of [our] freedom” and also “what [we] can and cannot do” (Arendt 1994: 186). Stories thus have a crucial revelatory and communicative function regarding freedom and action in the political realm. By bringing to light the human, political character of events, stories invite us to acknowledge the past as something which is part of our own world and for which responsibility needs to be assumed. Yet they also liberate us from its grasp by kindling the awareness that it could have been otherwise and that it is therefore possible to act and create anew and differently. At the same time, by bringing out the phenomenal reality of the political world, stories further the view that a new beginning, too, is only possible among the many. In this sense stories help us recognize and reconcile with the possibilities and limitations of political action as they inhere in the framework of the public realm in all its plurality and unpredictability.

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Note

1. Spanning the fields of political theory, literature, history and psychology, theorists have, for instance, examined how narrative sensitivity can be engaged to confront the problems of evil and trauma, address issues of identity and difference, and reinvigorate debates about judgement and public deliberation. See, for example, Nussbaum (1995), Rorty (1993), Lara (2007), LaCapra (2001) and Black (2010).