

Telling Stories. Story and History in Arendt's Thought

Abstract: Arendt devoted most of her political writings to the relationship between life writing and constructing citizenship. In all her biographies we meet the same idea: Human Beings have a narrative identity and only when this identity can be constructed and shown in the public realm, human beings can tell their stories and act upon their history.

Key Words: Arendt, Narrativity, Stories, History, Life.

“One can't say how life is, how chance or fate deals with people, except by telling the tale.”¹

Arendt's extensive works are strewn with reflections on narrativity, biography and the role of tales and stories. But there is absolutely no definite or structured theory on these subjects². Therefore, they have sometimes gone unnoticed or been considered as elements of minor importance within her thinking. More global reading has been needed to underline the relevance of life and its narration in Arendt's production. Pioneering work in this area has been carried out by Julia Kristeva and Sheila Benhabib.

Following the path marked by these authors, and by Dana Villa, Lisa Jane Disch and Jacques Taminiaux, in this paper I intend to deal with the general framework of these issues, which in Arendt are quite dispersed. A thorough reading of her notes on ideas on life, biography and narrative reveals two important aspects. The first is the early appearance of this subject-matter, which can already be found in her second book: *Rahel Varnhagen. The Life of a Jewess*, begun in Germany in 1929, and finished in the US in 1958. The other outstanding element is that Arendt carries out her approach from two different angles: methodology and ontology.

The methodological question is strongly linked to the difference between story and history, and also to criticism of the methodology of the social sciences in 1950s. Facing a perspective of history taken as a lineal, progressive or regressive development, which can be explained by means of general concepts and causal connections, Arendt chooses

¹ Arendt, H.; McCarthy, M., *Between Friends. The Correspondence of Hannah Arendt and Mary McCarthy. 1949-1975*, Harcourt Brace & Company, New York, 1995, May 31, p. 295.

² Julia Kristeva shows the relationship between Arendt and Aristotle, which does not make her a Neo-Aristotelian, as the German writer does not pay heed to the technical details of the narrative, but rather concentrates on the political dimension and narration of the action: “Thus, having noted the discordance between lived history and narrated history, Arendt does not think that what is essential in narration is to be found in the construction of a cohesion, internal to the story, in narrative art. She is fully aware of this ‘formal’ or ‘formalist’ aspect of Aristotelian theory: the beautiful requires the union of various parts (*taxis*) as much as it does greatness (*megethos*). But she spends little time on the technical aspects of narrative and sticks more closely to the *Nicomachean Ethics*. According to that text, what is especially important for eyewitness narrative is firstly to recognize the ‘moment of ending or closure’, and secondly to ‘identify the agent’ of the story. The art of narrative resides in the ability to condense the action into an exemplary moment, to extract it from the continuous flow of time, and reveal a *who*”, Kristeva, J., *Hannah Arendt. Life Is a Narrative*, University of Toronto Press, Toronto, 2001, p. 17.

comprehension and the view of history as crystallizations of elements³. These topics appear predominantly, but not only, in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* and in *Between Past and Future*. In both these texts there is a crucial question: How is history told? How does history become story?

The ontological angle deals with the other side of the question, “What is history?” or more broadly speaking, “What is the human life that makes history?” In this case Arendt’s reflections refer to Aristotle’s philosophy and begin with a very clear distinction between *Zoé* (biological life) and *Bios* (human life). This is the core of her first great work *The Human Condition*. And obviously, this human life which is such because it is shared with others, because it grants the human being a narrative identity, is linked to the no less relevant question, “What role does the story of one’s own life, autobiography and biography, play in the knowledge of oneself and the understanding of reality?” These are the issues that are covered in two key works in Arendt’s thought: the *Philosophical Diary* and her other collection of biographical essays, *Men in Dark Times*.

Life is, as Kristeva points out, a fundamental topic in all Arendt’s work. However, the German author is not a vitalist thinker nor does she ever write an autobiography (her *Philosophical Diary* is not a personal diary, but a set of notebooks in which she wrote reflections on varied topics in a chronological order), nor is she a writer of novels or stories. She wrote only one long biography and a series of short biographical essays, in which she portrays the characters, but does not give intimate or private details of their lives. The thinker who gives a key role to narrated life is not a prolific writer on this subject. In her work, the telling of stories has a fundamentally cognitive and human purpose: by narrating what has happened to us, or rather, what has happened to others, we comprehend reality. Likewise, it has an ontological purpose and a political one, as it permits the establishment of the narrative identity and preserves the remembrance of the creation of the community.

In order to throw light on this apparent contradiction, we must, firstly, remember the strict difference established by Arendt between private and public life, her severe criticism of introspection and the almost indecent display of oneself to others, as seen in Rousseau, together with her rejection of psychoanalysis. Narrating life is not the same as putting one’s private life in public view. And, secondly, what Arendt means by “life” must be understood: “the expression designates the ‘moment between birth and death’, as long as it can be represented by a *narrative*, and shared with *other men*”⁴. That is to say, for her, life is specifically human, and, as such, plural: an entrance and exit from a public space by means of action and word. An entrance that shows an individual who carries out actions that can be narrated⁵.

By means of a public appearance, by words and actions⁶, the subject creates himself as such and reaches an identity, which is narrative. And thus he needs the presence of others

³ “What is evident for Arendt is that traditional historical narrative was not appropriate for such purposes, as it – following a Greek concept of history - is characterised by imposing the idea of *historical process*, in which particular facts are subsumed into a chronological sequence with an internal logic”, Sánchez Muñoz, C., *Arendt. El espacio de la política*, Centro de Estudios Políticos y Constitucionales, Madrid, 2003, p. 58.

⁴ Kristeva, J., *Arendt*, pp. 7-8.

⁵ That explains that, “the theater is the political art par excellence; only there is the political sphere of human life transposed into art. By the same token, it is the only art whose sole subject is man in his relationship to others”, Arendt, H., *The Human Condition* (HC), University of Chicago Press, Chicago & London, 1958, p. 188.

⁶ In Arendt’s thought there are two types of subject: agonal and deliberative. This had led to much argument on which of the two models is relevant, as they are very different and give rise to very disparate conceptions of the public space. A detailed account of this debate may be found in Dana Villa and in Cristina Sánchez. Whatever

and, a posteriori, the memory of such actions and words. The space of appearance is, therefore, the condition demanded to reach identity, as this is not a given, but reached in a plural context. In contrast with those philosophical doctrines that insist on the autonomy of the self, on its sovereignty over action, Arendt sees freedom as a birth, as a capacity to initiate something new, something that no longer depends on the agent, but which earns its own reality and demands the participation of the spectator in order to grasp its significance.

In fact, it is the spectator and not the actor who will tell the tale, who will immortalise the actions of the hero by means of the story. Thus, the active role in the story corresponds to the spectator, who becomes the historian or story-teller, and does not correspond to the actor: “It is not the actors, but the spectators, if they are capable of thought and memory, who turn the *polis* into an organization that is creative of memory and/or history/histories”⁷. This also becomes clear now because a true biography focuses on the action through which one reaches one’s identity and not on the private details nor on the information which does not underline individuality, but rather what is generic: “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”⁸.

It is the historian who must narrate the history and change it into stories: “Action reveals itself fully only to the storyteller, that is, to the backward glance of the historian, who indeed always knows better what it was all about than the participants [...] Even though stories are the inevitable results of action, it is not the actor but the storyteller who perceives and ‘makes’ the story”⁹. The historian allows human fragility to be overcome by keeping in mind the actions carried out by human beings and confers special glory on great feats: “The hero, the ‘doer of great deeds and speaker of great words,’ as Achilles was called, needed the poet - not the prophet, but the seer- whose divine gift sees in the past what is worth telling in the present and the future”¹⁰.

To do so, Arendt presents some conditions in her different works, but they can be summarised in objectivity as impartiality, imagination¹¹, the enlarged mentality of Kant and the understanding heart of King Solomon. These characteristics of the historian are necessary to understand horror and pain, in particular. In contrast with Adorno, Arendt believes that horror can be narrated and understood¹². Not only can it be done, but it must be done,

the case, we must not forget that for Arendt the hero does not carry out heroic actions, as the term “hero”, in Homer, simply refers to each free man who takes part in the Trojan war, each man “about whom a story could be told”, Arendt, H., HC, p. 186.

⁷ Kristeva, J., *Arendt*, p. 16.

⁸ Arendt, H., HC, p. 181.

⁹ Arendt, H., HC, p. 192.

¹⁰ Arendt, H., *The Promise of Politics*, Schocken Books, New York, 2005, p. 45. Glory is what is reached in this way. Cfr. Arendt, H., *The Promise of Politics*, p. 46.

¹¹ “Without repeating life in imagination you never be fully alive, ‘lack of imagination’ prevents people from ‘existing’”, Arendt, H., *Men in Dark Times*, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, San Diego, New York, London, 1982, p. 97.

¹² We must not forget that understanding is not forgiving, and for Arendt it has a very exact meaning: “Comprehension, however, does not mean denying the outrageous, deducting 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 events have placed upon us –neither denying their existence nor submitting meekly to their weight as though everything that in fact happened could not have happened otherwise. Comprehension, in short, means the unpremeditated,

because, as Isak Dinesen said, we can deal with sorrow only when we can tell a story about it. And this again means that “the political function of the narrator –whether he is a novelist, poet or historian– is to show things as they are, because by means of the narrative of particular facts –even the most painful– they lose their contingent character and gain a certain humanly-comprehensible meaning. Likewise, Walter Benjamin also pointed out the need and importance of relating events: not merely because those fragments of the past that otherwise would be forgotten are recaptured, but because the memory of the facts redeems us from their unbearable reality”¹³.

In his work, the historian must, as I have stated, avoid the temptation of using general concepts and causal explanations. And he must especially steer clear of the great stumbling block that all philosophy of history has been unable to avoid: “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 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 and yet without any tangible authors, is that both are the outcome of action. For the great unknown in history, that has baffled the philosophy of history in the modern age, arises not only when one considers history as a whole and finds that its subject, mankind, is an abstraction which never can become an active agent; the same unknown has baffled political philosophy from its beginning in antiquity and contributed to the general contempt in which philosophers since Plato have held the realm of human affairs”¹⁴. This means then, a conception of history that is very different from that found in modern philosophy, a vision of the story that focuses on the fragments, on the extraordinary: “It is never a concept that gives a conclusive definition, but means that the story is included in a new type of narrative, which talks of fragmentation rather than totality, that concentrates on historical incidents, anecdotes, biographies, literary works”¹⁵.

The tale of the action, that is, of truly human life, has a political aim in Arendt: to preserve the memory of human actions. And another methodological one: “In the narration of stories Arendt finds the methodology that allows her to represent and understand the experiences that create both political concepts and historical events. In short, by story-telling we recuperate the tales of history, and these make sense of what surrounds us”¹⁶. Therefore the most aesthetic aspects become the background.

The actor, then, makes history: by means of his action he creates and preserves political bodies, thus laying down the foundations for remembrance, for history¹⁷. History is the story of the actions that must not be forgotten; the narration of what is truly human, of a time that is not natural-cyclical, nor eternal. Therefore it takes the shape of biography, the story of human life, which begins with birth and ends with death, and elapses in a lineal time-span¹⁸. But the story and its transmission require the presence of the spectator and the narrator. For this

attentive facing up to, and resisting of, reality –whatever it may be or might have been”, Arendt, H., *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Schocken Books, New York, 2004, p. 7.

¹³ Sánchez, C., *Arendt. El espacio de la política*, p. 69. As Benhabib points out, this moral dimension of narrative is particularly relevant in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. Cfr. Benhabib, S., *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt*, Sage Publication, Thousand Oaks, 1996, pp. 86-88.

¹⁴ Arendt, H., HC, pp. 184-185.

¹⁵ Sánchez, C., *Arendt. El espacio de la política*, p. 57.

¹⁶ Sánchez, C., *Arendt. El espacio de la política*, p. 57.

¹⁷ Arendt, H., HC, pp. 8-9.

¹⁸ On the contrary, for Arendt natural life time or *zoe* is cyclical. Thus the philosophies of life present life circular or cyclical.

reason Arendt writes biographies and not autobiographies: stories that relate the lives of human beings who perform actions worthy of living in our memory, which save the fragility of the action.

These considerations also explain another characteristic of the Arendtian biographies. Although humans share cyclical biological time with other animals, this is not the aspect which should be told or remembered: it belongs to the space of intimacy, of what is hidden from the public view, the space where key events for humans occur: birth, love and death¹⁹. However, what must be told is what is public, that which reflects the human condition, plural and political. Thus the tales of the lives of the men and women we find in Arendt's work always recount certain political experiences. They are stories that allow understanding of reality, and culturally mediate between the actor and the reader. This is particularly clear in the biographies of Rahel Varnhagen (the Jewish Pariah), Isak Dinesen (the author hidden behind the pseudonym), Walter Benjamin (the little hunchback who saw the break of the tradition), and Franz Kafka (the pariah among the pariahs). For Arendt, these lives share a common principle: the need to create a world through language, a world that may be inhabited by human beings. Humans have a narrative identity, as Arendt pointed out, and only when this identity can be achieved and shown in the public realm, can human beings tell their stories and act upon their history.

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¹⁹ Arendt, H., HC, p. 97.