

## **The Banality of Narrative** **Hannah Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem***

(Published in *Textual Practice*, 2013)

*According to a thesis with supporters in a wide range of disciplines – philosophy, psychology, theology, literary studies and others – narrative is crucial to human self-understanding and self-representation. Many readers of Hannah Arendt view her as an important champion of this thesis. For Arendt, they claim, political life can only truly be represented in narrative form. When Arendt witnesses the trial of Adolf Eichmann in Jerusalem, however, she confronts an individual fatally oblivious to the demands of genuine political action who is nonetheless capable of producing stories. In fact, Eichmann is an avid storyteller, who is at work on his autobiography. Arendt is therefore forced to conclude that storytelling does not necessarily entail any realization of what it means to be a political, i.e. an acting human agent. “Eichmann in Jerusalem” contains an implicit theory of the “banality of narrative,” the ability of established storytelling templates to block the narrating subject’s recognition of the unpredictable interactions of multiple, diverse human beings. When Arendt analyzes Eichmann’s obtuse reliance on clichés, she is not speaking only of isolated phrases but of entire plots that impose a spurious order on human lives.*

According to a thesis with supporters in a wide range of disciplines – philosophy, psychology, theology, literary studies and others – narrative is crucial to human self-understanding and self-representation. The psychologist Jerome Bruner claims that the self is best understood as a perpetually rewritten story: “we seem to have no other way of describing ‘lived time’ save in the form of a narrative,” and “autobiography (formal and informal) should be viewed as a set of procedures for ‘life making.’”<sup>1</sup> In an article entitled, “The Self as a Center of Narrative Gravity,” the philosopher Daniel Dennett asserts that we are all novelists who try to “make all of our material cohere into a single good story.”<sup>2</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, a political philosopher, offers a similar vision of the centrality of storytelling to human life and argues that narrative history is the fundamental genre for the characterization of actions,<sup>3</sup> but for him, narrative also mediates between the present and the past of entire societies, because

as individuals seeking to narrate our own lives, we must always rely on the available “stock of stories” that constitutes our common tradition.<sup>4</sup>

Judging by the work of some of her most prominent interpreters, Hannah Arendt also champions narrative as the indispensable tool for portraying and understanding human beings endowed with the capacity to act. In an essay on Arendt’s belief in the redemptive power of narrative, Seyla Benhabib explains that, for Arendt, human actions – and men and women are acting beings – “only live in the narratives of those who perform them and the narratives of those who understand, interpret, and recall them.”<sup>5</sup> Arendt thus believed, Benhabib continues, that the theorist of human action, the political philosopher, must become a storyteller.

Yet Arendt differs from the thinkers quoted above. Contrary to Dennett and Bruner, she does not pay much attention to the stories we tell about ourselves, our autobiographies. We are not, she claims in *The Human Condition*, the sovereign authors of our own stories, for life narratives are constituted in encounters among multiple, diverse individuals, none of whom ever could or should control and fully shape the process of interaction. In fact, we must leave it to others to see, judge, and remember us, that is, embed us in stories. And contrary to MacIntyre, Arendt did not believe that narrative activity ties us to traditions because we must rely on the “stock of stories” of the world we inherit. Instead, Arendt argued that modern men are irredeemably disinherited. Totalitarianism, she claimed, could only emerge outside of the bounds of political traditions, and also cannot be grasped by means of any long-established and venerable repertoire of concepts and categories. As one commentator writes, “totalitarianism does not want its story to be told”.<sup>6</sup> In its desire to eradicate whole groups and peoples, this most extreme form of rule condemns its victims to complete oblivion and thus in part erases the memory of its doings. Yet Arendt’s vocation as a storyteller only took on urgency with the decline of tradition and its established narrative templates. Lisa Jane Disch writes that, for Arendt, storytelling is precisely “a way to chart a course of action at a

time when the thread of tradition is irreparably broken.”<sup>7</sup>

Arendt’s perhaps unorthodox views on who writes the stories of human selves, or where we can find patterns for such stories, do not make her less of an advocate for narrative.<sup>8</sup> And my aim in this paper is not to contest this claim about Arendt’s philosophical positions – the secondary literature can draw on a wide variety of statements in her corpus. The objective is instead to show how Arendt could not effortlessly and persuasively reconcile her emphasis on storytelling with her observations of the National Socialist official Adolf Eichmann, on trial in Jerusalem. Arendt portrays Eichmann as a person who is not a political agent, or who fails to meet the “specifically political demands of the *vita activa*”.<sup>9</sup> Eichmann clearly knows how to implement genocidal policies conscientiously and efficiently, but in Arendt’s judgment, he is unable to question the legitimacy of the principles according to which he acts, unable to realize and assume his responsibility for the actions he performs, and unable to register the humanity of his victims. He lacks any sense of moral autonomy as well as an ethical responsiveness to others. In other words, he fails to see himself as a distinct person among other equally distinct persons. Eichmann does not, however, fail to tell a story about his life. In fact, he is an avid storyteller, and by the time he is captured in Argentina, he is at work on his autobiography. This means that an individual fatally oblivious to the conditions of human agency in Arendt’s sense is still quite capable of producing stories.

When in Jerusalem, Arendt, a believer in stories as the only way to capture the life of acting human beings, faces a storyteller and an autobiographer who, according to Arendt herself, never acted. Insofar as Eichmann tells a story, he is at least on a practical level aware of what it means to be a protagonist at the center of some adventure or life, how one thing leads to another, and how a course of events begins and comes to an end. In that sense, Eichmann clearly grasps the self as a center of narrative gravity and is able to make material cohere into a single story. Yet none of this narrative activity leads him to any realization of

what it means to be a human agent in a sense that would satisfy Arendt's requirements. On the contrary, by stubbornly and obtusely maintaining his own narratives, Eichmann refuses to engage with other perspectives on events, and in this way blocks out any intruding recognition of other people. As a theorist of what constitutes political action, Arendt may need stories, or may claim that political action always issues in stories, but the practice of storytelling itself evidently does not put anyone on the track towards understanding and appreciating politics. It can even be a way to insulate oneself from politics. This widening gap between narrative and politics troubles Arendt, even though she was never a champion of autobiography.

The question is how Arendt endeavors to save narrativity from Eichmann's all too easy use of stories. What is wrong with Eichmann's way of telling stories? And what kind of story can Arendt herself tell about Eichmann as a person who never acted in her sense of the word? What genre or style could adequately capture Eichmann's remoteness from politics? In this paper, I will explore the complex relationship between storytelling and political action by looking at (1) Arendt's theoretical arguments for narrative as a form of representation appropriate to political action, (2) her examination of Eichmann as an eager but obtuse, inhumane storyteller, and finally, (3) her struggle to demonstrate, by means of irony and sarcasm, what kind of insufficient story Eichmann is in fact telling.

### **Arendt's Argument for Narrative**

Arendt believes that men and women become political agents insofar as they disclose their distinctness and uniqueness to others, something that they can only do within the realm of the human community. It is only if a community of others exists that disclosure makes sense, and it is only in the plurality of a community that a person's distinctness and

uniqueness can crystallize. No one is distinct in abstraction from the presence of others.

Arendt moreover asserts that the principal means of portraying a political agent, an individual who discloses himself or herself to others through speech and action, is to put him or her in a story. Why this insistence on narrative?

To be sure, Arendt produced a number of different arguments for the necessity of storytelling in the context of politics. Stories, she asserted in a series of essays published in the 1960s, bind otherwise disconnected and contingent facts into comprehensible wholes, bestow meaning upon overwhelming events, teach acceptance of reality, and, in doing all this, allow people to make proper judgments of the past.<sup>10</sup> In this context, however, we must focus on storytelling as a way of adequately portraying the negotiations of political agents, a thesis that Arendt articulates in *The Human Condition* from 1958. Stories, Arendt claims in this book, allow us to focus on one person – the protagonist – while simultaneously embedding him or her in a “web of human relationships”.<sup>11</sup> This particular virtue of stories comes through in the contrast with static descriptions of character, which possess the quality of a list, however vividly and eloquently one presents it. In contrast, stories do not capture personalities in a series of propositions about character traits, but in sequences of actions that involve encounters and negotiations with others. A life narrative can record the disclosure of a person in a way that shows how this disclosure takes place, and could indeed only take place, in the medium of “innumerable, conflicting wills and intentions” (*HC*, 184). To Arendt, storytelling is the practice that does justice to the necessarily decentralizing drift of the public realm in which action occurs, for even as it revolves around one single protagonist, this central character is constantly presented in confrontations and interactions with others rather than in isolation. There is no plot without the indication of human plurality.

Viewing someone as a political individual, and that means an individual whose uniqueness and distinctness has become apparent, entails producing a story, for “the living

essence of the person [. . .] shows itself in the flux of action and speech” (*HC*, 181). In the idiom of *The Human Condition*, the political agent is a hero, if hero designates less the exalted status of a demigod than the willingness to suffer exposure to other people’s judgment: “The hero the story discloses needs no heroic qualities; the word ‘hero’ originally, that is, in Homer, was no more than a name given each free man who participated in the Trojan enterprise, and about whom a story could be told” (*HC*, 186). Someone who prefers to remain anonymous consequently falls outside of the category “hero,” whether this person happens to be a secret service agent, a philanthropist, or a burglar, for he or she is slyly, modestly or cowardly withdrawing from the realm in which people openly articulate their distinct personalities in relation to each other. The retreat from the public realm is also the retreat from narrative.

Any determination of a person in terms of a set of qualities fails to do justice to the appearance of an individual in the unpredictable and always changing field of human togetherness. As Arendt writes in *Men in Dark Times*, stories reveal without “committing the error of defining”.<sup>12</sup> In particular, stories approach people not as isolated, self-enclosed figures but as beings who are continually affecting and affected by a “web of human relationships” (*HC*, 184). Given his or her place in a complex of “innumerable, conflicting wills and intentions” the subject of the story, the hero, is also never its author or producer. He or she displays himself not by his or her capacity to begin and fully control a stable course of action to its end, but in the aspect of a doer *and* a sufferer. Statements provoke responses, actions incite counteractions, projects are initiated by one person but completed by the many, and individuals in pursuit of glory or gain are thwarted, disturbed, supported or celebrated. Telling a story always means including representations of clashes and alliances among human beings and storytelling is therefore a means to render tangible the inherent plurality and inescapable volatility of human togetherness.

These reflections from *The Human Condition*, inspired by the Greek experience of life in the *polis*, may seem far removed from the concerns that should preoccupy a reporter at a criminal trial, but elements of her political philosophy reappear in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. In the first chapter of the report, Arendt explicitly declares her intention to represent the accused as a political being, which means to speak of him as a “hero”, a project she signals by introducing an analogy between the trial format and traditional drama: “A trial resembles a play in that both begin and end with the doer, not with the victim. [. . .] In the center of the trial can only be the one who did – in this respect he is like the hero in the play – and if he suffers, he must suffer for what he has done.”<sup>13</sup> Echoing her words in *The Human Condition*, Arendt enlists the trial procedure in an endeavor to place Eichmann in a political context. She argues that the trick of the legal trial is to determine retrospectively the actions of the accused and convert him into the “hero” or public “doer” he refused to be by reconstructing, publicizing, and judging his deeds. If the supposed criminal previously had wanted to “remain outside the pale of human intercourse”, a trial could represent the community’s attempt to draw him back into it by making his actions available for assessment (*HC*, 180).<sup>14</sup> This attempt to reinsert a person into a public realm and hence to superimpose a political paradigm onto a past depends on forging a narrative, or a “limited and well-defined outline of what was done and how it was done”, as Arendt remarks in *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (*EJ*, 9).

Within the legal framework, the reconstruction of a narrative is a precondition for assigning responsibility to the accused and hence an integral part of the procedure. Narrative, then, is a form of describing the world that is both politically and legally necessary.<sup>15</sup> It is the only way to represent human beings as agents in a world of human plurality, and the only way to determine their responsibility for what has transpired. From the perspective of *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, politics and law are interconnected, since trials produce narratives about alleged criminals even in the cases when they want to escape the public realm, which is the space of

political action. Trials bring men and women into the public realm, and therefore make their existence political, by forming narratives about their deeds. As we shall see, however, the Eichmann case put Arendt's case for narrative to a severe test. Eichmann, it turned out, came to Jerusalem equipped with a particular kind of narrative, one that shielded him from the presence of others, which complicated enormously the enterprise of telling his story.

### **Eichmann's Narrative**

To treat Adolf Eichmann as a "hero" means to construct a verifiable narrative about his criminal actions. Politically, this would allow an assembled public to witness how Eichmann disclosed himself as a distinct and unique person through his interactions with multiple speech agents, or, negatively, how he implemented policies designed to eradicate human plurality. The legal apparatus in Israel certainly did not lack means to capture the chronology of criminal acts as well as the personality profile of the accused; Eichmann was subjected to a police examination running for approximately eight months, interviewed by "half a dozen psychiatrists" (*EJ*, 25), and finally cross-examined at length by the defense, prosecution, and the judges during the actual trial. With access to this material, Arendt, who attended the trial in Jerusalem as a reporter, felt that she could sketch Eichmann's initial social milieu, recapitulate his Nazi career, and describe his role in the bureaucratic machinery of genocide. She ended up producing an account of Eichmann's life, along with a story about the proceedings in which that life was being publicly scrutinized. As a commentator has put it, Arendt became a "storyteller of the Eichmann trial".<sup>16</sup>

Who does Arendt think that Eichmann is? Eichmann is, to bring together various statements in the first chapters of *Eichmann in Jerusalem* and list character traits, a "déclassé son of a solid middle-class family" (*EJ*, 31), a careerist driven by a distorted sense of idealism



(*EJ*, 42), a man who is ignorant (*EJ*, 41), full of himself (*EJ*, 46), easily bored (*EJ*, 35), and prone to self-pity (*EJ*, 50) but who does possess a gift for negotiations and administrative organization (*EJ*, 45). In short, Arendt presents Eichmann as a man with some “common vice[s]”, and character flaws (*EJ*, 47). Yet the character flaw that Arendt deems most “decisive” is what she describes as Eichmann’s inability to conceive of other viewpoints (*EJ*, 47). This character flaw, if it can be categorized as one, entails nothing less than Eichmann’s cancellation of the personhood of others and of his own. Basing her comments mainly on the transcripts from the police examination, Arendt asserts that Eichmann’s utterances consist almost exclusively of clichés of the Nazi organizations he worked for, and that he empties every newly constructed sentence of any significance through subsequent repetitions. This perfectly standardized vocabulary cuts Eichmann off from any manifestation of difference, or erodes it by reiteration; the “striking consistency” of his speech makes it impossible to communicate with Eichman in the sense of articulating together a range of differing but interconnected points of view (*EJ*, 49). He therefore fails to relate to others as members of a network of plural beings, each with an individual standpoint on a shared world, and also to constitute himself as a unique being among them. His complete submission to a narrow linguistic code of stock phrases makes him unable both to express or to perceive “human distinctness” insofar as such distinctness becomes manifest in human discourse (*HC*, 176). The question of who Eichmann is should be rendered in the following form: who speaks when Eichmann speaks? And in Arendt’s view, Eichmann is not capable of speech. He utters sentences that reveal only a “perfect harmony” with a system of clichés and thus does not disclose the distinctness of a ‘who’ (*EJ*, 52). Eichmann is, one could say, only a conduit for a jargon and hence never a distinct individual who speaks with others.

Arendt presents the trial forum as a device with which to bring back a criminal who has been outside the pale of human intercourse into the field of others by constructing a story

of his actions and then also linking his deeds with legally decided consequences. Legal procedure is, in her view, enlisted to make up for the absence of genuinely political action, or action performed for a public. The trial is supposed to turn the criminal into the hero he never was by treating him as a doer-sufferer. Yet unlike the standard criminal who purposely evades the public realm or “who must hide himself from it” (*HC*, 180), Eichmann never had a notion of the presence of others who could recognize and judge him. The trial makes Eichmann available to the public realm, but what is then revealed is that, on a fundamental level, he as a person never moved among and in relation to other acting beings; he never participated in the field of human interconnectedness. As a key officer in the genocidal machine of the National Socialist state, Eichmann was able to embrace an ideology insofar as it was embodied in an arsenal of phrases, but he was not capable of articulating opinions or judgments while deliberating with others. He may have shown great facility at executing orders or cooperating with apparently like-minded partners, but he could not gauge the resistance that inevitably occurs among humans insofar as they possess innumerable, conflicting wills and intentions. In the chilling description of his absolute blindness to the existence of different viewpoints, Arendt mentions that Eichmann can only remember the Jews who were completely in his power and who, in this state of complete subjugation, could not voice any resistance.

That Eichmann’s mind is completely occupied by jargon turns out to be an effective cognitive blockage of any differing viewpoint and hence of the outside world. This blindness to others also has effects on the way in which he recalls past events and groups those events into coherent stories. The interrogated Eichmann certainly does not resist talk of the past. To the contrary, he delights in discussing the course of his own life, and Arendt even reports that writing his memoirs was his “favorite pastime” (*EJ*, 27).

But the question is what type of story Eichmann produces when telling his own life. Predictably, the memoirs or his musings about his life story during the interrogations are not

veridical. Arendt repeatedly complains about Eichmann's "unreliable [memory]" (*EJ*, 53), "extraordinarily faulty memory" (*EJ*, 54), "faulty memory" (*EJ*, 63 and 80), or "defective memory" (*EJ*, 106). Yet his memory is faulty not because he suffers from amnesia and is somehow physically unable to record occurrences, or even because he seeks to edit out incriminating episodes, but because he subordinates all the events of his life under the elements of a restricted jargon. Eichmann cannot remember any event unless it is encapsulated in a formula. This form of remembrance ends up dissolving the sequence in which the events and meetings occurred so that they can be reorganized as isolated moments around stock phrases.

Eichmann does display an ability to narrate his life, despite his flawed recollection, but only by making this life conform to a convention, by subsuming it, in its entirety, under a cliché. Arendt relates how Eichmann talks of his life being ruined again and again by bad luck, a complaint that reveals the horrible self-pity of a man who helped implement the destruction of a people: "everything he tried on his own invariably went wrong – the final blow came when he had 'to abandon' his private fortress in Berlin before he could try it out against Russian tanks. Nothing but frustration; a hard luck story if there ever was one" (*EJ*, 72). The recurring pattern of obstacles of which Eichmann speaks, a pattern under which any number of experiences can conveniently be gathered as examples, does not necessarily suggest that he encountered a reality that did not agree with the dominant linguistic code. To begin with, the hard luck story indicates that his memory functioned only in respect to events "which had a direct bearing upon his career", whether he perceived them as obstacles or as triumphs (*EJ* 62). More importantly, the resistance remains curiously faceless and hence signals more than an excessive preoccupation with the steps of a conventional career. Eichmann may indeed have failed at getting things done, but the obdurate reality he struggles with never indicates to him that his life is populated with other human beings. His constant

talk of frustration does not point to any confrontation with another person, but rather reveals the submission of all his experiences to a clichéd scheme, namely to the pathetic script of the “hard luck story”. The possible encounter with someone whose will and intention is at cross-purposes with Eichmann’s is quickly dissolved into the cheap folk wisdom of inescapable futility.<sup>17</sup> His ability to narrate his own life does not in any way help him to realize his own situatedness in a diverse human community. On the contrary, his storytelling is just another way that he refuses the recognition of those around him, or remains oblivious to them.

For Eichmann, the self is indeed the “center of narrative gravity,” and he makes all his recollections cohere into a single story – the hard luck story of endless frustrations – but this in no way brings him closer to becoming a person in Arendt’s sense of disclosing a distinct personality in the unpredictable flow of human togetherness. Since life stories can be so banal as to reveal nothing of the distinctness of a person, the ability to craft an autobiographical story does not constitute evidence of personhood.<sup>18</sup> The problem with Eichmann is not that he is unable to tell his life story and, for this reason, is not a full human person. The problem is rather that he already lives his life within quotation marks and can tell his own trite and vapid story far too conveniently. Everything that occurs around or with him is always assimilated to an already established code, which leaves no space for the unexpected event or the encounter that disturbs the calm of obliviousness to others. Listening to and reading Eichmann, Arendt comes to realize that Eichmann’s life is already fully narrativized, and that the neatness of this narrative is closely related to his blindness to others. For Arendt, then, autobiographical competence may be a necessary condition of personhood, but it is far from sufficient.

### **Telling Eichmann’s Story**

How does Arendt proceed to tell Eichmann's story, the story of his life, career and crimes, given that his own storytelling skills did nothing but cut him off from the plurality of other people, compounding his inhumanity? Numerous scholars and critics have analyzed Arendt's peculiar style or abrasive tone in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*.<sup>19</sup> Her sarcastic comments on Eichmann, critique of Jewish functionaries for their alleged submissiveness, irritated comments on the Israeli court proceedings, and harsh dismissals of the often emotional testimonies even constitute major points of contention in commentary on her work. The philosopher Gershom Scholem, to name only the most famous example, balked at her apparent heartlessness, and accused her of a lack of concern with Jewish suffering.<sup>20</sup> In more recent years, scholars such as Shoshana Felman have scrutinized how Arendt's austere focus on the requirements of legal prosecution made her disregard the acts of witnessing at the trial,<sup>21</sup> whereas other commentators have sought to explain her "deliberate irreverence"<sup>22</sup> as a means to repudiate what she perceived as Ben Gurion's project to put suffering on display in an attempt to fortify Israeli national consciousness.<sup>23</sup> In what follows, however, I will discuss the stylistic and narrative composition of Arendt's report, and especially her ironic attitude vis-à-vis Eichmann and his phraseology, as her response to the problem of how to portray a non-person or non-agent with the means of representation she herself deemed suitable for people engaged in genuine speech action, namely narrative.

Eichmann is a self if by self we mean someone who can tell his life story, who can bind events together in novel-like autobiography and in this way maintain a sense of coherence and continuity. But he is not a self in Arendt's sense of a person living in a community, in which individuals disclose themselves to each other in action and in speech. The absolute dominance of Eichmann's banal hard luck story in fact screens out any interaction he might have had with someone in his surroundings. His relentless narrativization of his life does not make Eichmann human but keeps him out of the human community. Since

Arendt never paid much attention to autobiography, however, and saw narrative as a means to portray *others*, this does not necessarily subvert her own case for narrative as a politically relevant art. The fact that Eichmann's memoir writings and trial stories are horrifyingly banal should not stop Arendt from believing that stories are the only way to capture adequately and appropriately the life of acting human beings. Yet Eichmann nonetheless puts Arendt's embrace of narrative to a test, for she must ponder the question what a narrative of a non-acting and non-speaking person should look like. If narrative is needed for the representation of political beings, how does one narrate, or perhaps abstain from narrating, the life of an utterly and fatally un-political man?

Arendt recognized the incongruity between dangerously un-political figures on the one hand and the "political function of storytelling" on the other as a general problem in the age of totalitarianism.<sup>24</sup> Writing about the "definitive biography" as a one of the most "admirable genres of historiography" in *Men in Dark Times*, her own collection of personal portraits, she called Hitler and Stalin "non-persons" who should in fact not be treated to the "undeserved honor" of a biography.<sup>25</sup> When composing the Jerusalem trial report, however, this conflict between the figure of the (non-)person and genre forced itself upon her in her writing. Eichmann's failure to speak a language other than the one decreed from within the organizations he had joined meant that he never disclosed himself as a distinct person among other acting human beings. The ensuing lack of contact with human plurality also had to affect the narrative effort of someone observing and portraying him, at least if narrative was to live up to its promise of providing a form of representation appropriate to political beings.

Arendt establishes that Eichmann's life cannot be told as a sequence of encounters within a complex "web of human relationships" which must also mean that he can never quite become a person "about whom a story could be told." Yet how does Arendt articulate this problem in a report with the features of a story, a narrative chain of events involving a central

protagonist? If we give credence to Arendt's attempt to mobilize the trial form as a means to portray Eichmann as a hero in the sense of constructing a narrative about him, then his complete isolation from others as well as his concomitant lack of individuality must show up on the level of the narrative constitution of the report. In writing, Arendt must work out the problem of telling the story of a person whose deficiencies distance him from the kind of narrative practice that she herself envisaged, a linguistic and cultural practice through which the plurality inherent in genuine human togetherness can be rendered tangible. Unlike in the case of criminals who merely seek to remain hidden from view but can presumably be brought into the orbit of public human interaction, the narrative sequence that results from the reconstruction of events at the Jerusalem trial cannot show "his [Eichmann's] real personality against his will" for the reason that he never moved among men and never acquired a personality.<sup>26</sup>

If Eichmann cannot recount the events of his life beyond offering the "winged words" that for him always captured these events (*EJ*, 48), it is uncertain if Arendt can or is willing to step in as the storyteller and narrate the life of someone who, in never entering the realm of unpredictable human interaction, also never constituted himself as a distinct person. The structure of *Eichmann in Jerusalem* as a whole is dictated by the course of the trial. It begins with a presentation of the initial proceedings and ends with the judgment and execution of the accused. This means that the report tracks Eichmann's life in a largely chronological fashion, and the first chapters are devoted to his background, entry into the Nazi party and initial career as an expert on the "Jewish question". The trial thus provides Arendt with a framework within which she can reconstruct Eichmann's biography.

But even if the resulting sequence of chapters follows the outline of Eichmann's life, Arendt does not produce a story of it in any direct manner, at least not in the sense of trying to compensate for his defective memory and suspicious narrative ease by crafting a text that

relates an array of events with the voice of an outside observer. The point of the account is not to tell the story Eichmann refused to provide and thus succeed where Eichmann failed, but rather to disrupt his overly smooth narrative and thus in some sense fail where he succeeded. But how is this done?

In *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, Arendt often lifts Eichmann's agglomeration of clichés into her report, and limits her writing to lengthy comments inserted between the chunks of his phraseology. It is as if someone who cannot speak without falling back on chains of pre-articulated sentences also cannot and should not be fully translated into the voice of an outside narrator; such an operation would only run the risk of covering over the dead linguistic banalities and hence conceal Eichmann's "fight with the German language" (*EJ*, 48). As Arendt stated in a reply to Gershom Scholem's critical review of her book, she had indeed consistently opted for "reporting Eichmann's own words."<sup>27</sup> But one must add that she had done this not despite but precisely because of his "inability to speak" (*EJ*, 49). It is because Eichmann cannot speak or has no words of his "own" that he also cannot be spoken for, since that would pull him too far into the realm of articulate subjects. The resulting technique of narration is exhibited early on in the book, in the account of Eichmann's birth, which must here be quoted in full:

He [Eichmann] was born on March 19, 1906, in Solingen, a German town in the Rhineland famous for its knives, scissors, and surgical instruments. Fifty-four years later, indulging in his favorite pastime of writing his memoirs, he described this memorable event as follows: 'Today, fifteen years and a day after May 8, 1945, I begin to lead my thoughts back to that nineteenth of March of the year 1906, when at five o'clock in the morning I entered life on earth in the aspect of a human being.'  
(The manuscript has not been released by the Israeli authorities. Harry Mulisch



succeeded in studying this autobiography 'for half an hour,' and the German-Jewish weekly, *Der Aufbau* was able to publish short excerpts from it.) According to his religious beliefs, which had not changed since the Nazi period (in Jerusalem Eichmann declared himself to be a *Gottgläubiger*, the Nazi term for those who had broken with Christianity, and he refused to take his oath on the Bible) this event was to be ascribed to 'a higher Bearer of Meaning,' an entity somehow identical with the 'movement of the universe,' to which human life itself, in itself devoid of 'higher meaning,' is subject. (The terminology is quite suggestive. To call God a *Höheren Sinnträger* meant linguistically to give him some place in the military hierarchy, since the Nazis had changed the military 'recipient of orders,' the *Befehlsempfänger*, into a 'bearer of orders,' a *Befehlsträger*, indicating, as in the ancient 'bearer of ill tidings,' the burden of responsibility and of importance that weighed supposedly upon those who had to execute orders. Moreover, Eichmann, like everyone connected with the Final Solution, was officially a 'bearer of secrets,' a *Geheimnisträger*, as well, which as far as self-importance went certainly was nothing to sneeze at.) But Eichmann, not very interested in metaphysics, remained singularly silent on any more intimate relationship between the Bearer of Meaning and the bearer of orders, and proceeded to a consideration of the other possible cause of his existence, his parents: 'They would hardly have been so overjoyed at the arrival of their first-born had they been able to watch how in the hour of my birth the Norn of misfortune, to spite the Norn of good fortune, was already spinning threads of grief and sorrow into my life. But a kind, impenetrable veil kept my parents from seeing into the future.'

The misfortune started soon enough; it started in school. Eichmann's father, first an accountant for the Tramways and Electricity Company in Solingen and after 1913 an official of the same corporation in Austria, in Linz, had five children, four sons and a

daughter, of whom only Adolf, the eldest, it seems, was unable to finish high school, or even to graduate from the vocational school for engineering into which he was then put. Throughout his life, Eichmann deceived people about his early 'misfortunes' by hiding behind the more honorable financial misfortunes of his father (*EJ*, 27-28).

By citing Eichmann's account of his birth, the passage clearly gestures towards the notion of the beginning point of a life as the proper beginning point of a story; the memoir rhetoric comes with a conventional epic arrangement and tone. In the quotations, Eichmann appears as the generic autobiographical narrator retrieving his own past by retrospection, from a position where he can survey and summarize his life. Arendt relates Eichmann's account of his own birth, overloaded as it is with formulaic phrases and figures, in the mode of irony: his birth is a "memorable event," his position "was nothing to sneeze at," and he is "not very much interested in metaphysics." She does let Eichmann speak but then continually comments, corrects, and renders ironic what he says. She inserts numerous parenthetical remarks not only to account for sources, but also to make place for asides on the Nazi vocabulary, which of course is one of the main sources of Eichmann's idiom. She picks up words he uses (such as "misfortune") and by writing with and in his vocabulary, proceeds to reveal how his story is the hollow account of a vain character. By beginning with Eichmann's birth, Arendt does not deviate from the conventions of storytelling, but rather takes the opportunity to expose them sarcastically *as* conventions. She ends up telling his life, but in telling it she also reveals – at every step – his complete reliance on the pompous scripts with which he is familiar. Arendt cannot tell another story than the one Eichmann tells, but limits herself to interrupting it and exposing its insufficiencies.

Arendt places importance on narrative because it can portray agents in the "web of human relationships". Stories can illuminate the formation and appearance of subjects in fluid

relational contexts that disallow the reduction of any one person to a set of traits existing prior to and in abstraction from human encounters. The problem worked out in the pages of the Jerusalem report is not that Eichmann's isolation from others makes his life unsusceptible to any narrativization, but that this isolation emerges precisely in the easy submission of this life to the templates of simplified narratives, such as the trite gestures of memoir writing, the "hard luck story" of an honest man who keeps stumbling into obstacles, or the institutionally supported narrative of a swift ascent up the career ladder. Again, Eichmann already lives his life within quotation marks. In this situation, Arendt's intervention is to display explicitly the quotation marks in between which his life played out. Eichmann's remoteness from the political context of ongoing deliberation and dispute does and must show up on the level of the narrative constitution of the report, in the form of a collage of the clichés he regurgitates. It is because the accused cannot speak that his words must speak for themselves, intermittently accompanied but never erased by the words of the observer and narrator. Arendt does not translate what Eichmann says into some other idiom, she does not interpret it, give it another form, and thereby cover over its irredeemable banality. Instead, she puts his inability to speak into circulation, so that it begins to speak its own inability. Her effort as a reporter consists in the re-contextualization and re-exposure of the phrases that she does not break up, modify, translate, or replace. By beginning with Eichmann's birth she does not deviate from the conventions of storytelling, but rather sarcastically exposes them *as* conventions. The passage quoted above emerges as a paradigm of Arendt's method throughout the text. Her story of Eichmann's life comes in the form of an elaborate commentary on his uncanny ability to tell a cheap and hackneyed story.

The specific composition of Arendt's Jerusalem report, the continual interweaving of quotation, ventriloquism, and acerbic commentary that caused so much controversy, is a necessary strategy in telling the life of a figure who does not enter the field of human

togetherness and thus does not become a 'who', that is, someone who through the disclosure peculiar to actions and speech becomes the subject or hero of a future story. A story in Arendt's sense only becomes possible with an encounter (of which there are none in Eichmann's life), and not through the conformity of a series of events to the already established project of a single will. Neither Eichmann nor Arendt can tell a real story of his life as constantly crossed by others, and, as a consequence, she tells it or it is told through a recurrent exposure of his banal statements in police interviews, cross-examinations, and memoirs.

Eichmann obtusely narrates his life story in total reliance on cliché; Arendt reveals this dependence on cliché by recycling his formulas in her text. What separates them is irony. Arendt herself pointed to the pervasiveness of irony in *Eichmann in Jerusalem* in a conversation with Günter Gaus: "That the tone of voice is predominantly ironic is completely true."<sup>28</sup> But how does irony achieve separation between the one who speaks and the one who reports that speech? To speak ironically means to indicate that there can be multiple perspectives on a single statement. Since Eichmann cannot even begin to understand that different subjects can look at the world from different perspectives, he must be incapable of irony. When speaking ironically, Arendt thus stages in one text the diversity of viewpoints that Eichmann would never have discerned.<sup>29</sup> As Lyndsey Stonebridge writes, Arendt's decision to use irony or "speak double" in *Eichmann in Jerusalem* involves an "act of repetition which extricates the statement from its context, allowing it [. . .] to become something else on the lips of the imitator."<sup>30</sup> In her trial report, Arendt moves very close to Eichmann's words and indeed copies them into her account, and yet precisely by doing so she simultaneously inserts an unbridgeable distance between his and her way of speaking and writing. Arendt can cite another person, understand what that person is seeing and saying, and

then also indicate her disagreement with the cited words, whereas Eichmann can only repeat clichés.

## **Conclusion**

Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem* in effect disputes that the capacity to narrate one's life is a sufficient condition for personhood – Eichmann can tell his life story and write his autobiography, and even relishes the practice of narration, but he never meets the demands of human moral and political life, which involves the recognition of others. For Arendt, the encounter with Eichmann demonstrates that autobiography and genuine human “life making” (Bruner) are sundered. Yet this insight into how the easily mastered conventions of standard life narratives helped Eichmann remain outside the community of responsive human beings also puts pressure on Arendt as someone who witnesses Eichmann and wants to tell the story of his trial and his life. The banality of Eichmann's life story with its isolating and depoliticizing effect must be put on display rather than being rewritten and improved. Paradoxically, Arendt must rely on Eichmann's words in her account precisely because he did not have any words other than circulating phrases, clichés, and hackneyed stories. His limits have to be shown rather than covered over. When dealing with Eichmann, irony is, for Arendt, not a matter of a (perhaps tactless) stylistic preference, but an absolute necessity.

According to Benhabib, Disch, and other interpreters, Arendt believed that the political theorist must become a storyteller, for acting beings are only truly understood and represented when they appear in narratives. To this we must now add that Arendt portrayed Eichmann's remoteness from politics by receding as a storyteller and letting him tell his own life narrative. Faced with a non-political man, she at least temporarily vacated her role as a

storytelling political theorist and limited herself to the practice of critical citation, all in order to expose clearly the banality of narrative.

---

<sup>1</sup> Jerome Bruner, "Life as Narrative," *Social Research* 54.1, (1987), pp. 11-32; 12. The proponents of narrative have faced criticism. For a critical view of the centrality of narrative, see Galen Strawson, "Against Narrativity," *Ratio* 17 (2004), pp. 428-452. Strawson disputes that individuals always do or at least should narrate their lives. Using himself as an example, he writes: "I have absolutely no sense of my life as a narrative with a form, or indeed as a narrative without form. Absolutely none. Nor do I have any great or special interest in my past. Nor do I have a great deal of concern for my future," p, 433.

<sup>2</sup> Daniel Dennett, "The Self as a Center of Narrative Gravity," *Self and Consciousness: Multiple Perspectives*, ed. Frank S. Kessel, Pamela M. Cole, and Dale L. Johnson (Hillsdale: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1992) pp. 103-115; p. 114.

<sup>3</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame, Indiana: Notre Dame University Press, 2007), pp. 204-225. Paisley Livingston offers a skeptical overview of the myriad of divergent definitions of what constitutes narratives as well as the various arguments for the particular epistemic virtues of narratives made by MacIntyre and others. "Narrativity and Knowledge," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 67.1 (2009): 25-36.

<sup>4</sup> MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, p. 216.

<sup>5</sup> Seyla Benhabib, "Hannah Arendt and the Redemptive Power of Narrative," *Hannah Arendt: Critical Essays*, ed. Lewis P. Hinchman and Sandra K. Hinchman (Albany: SUNY University Press, 1994), pp. 111-137; p. 124.

<sup>6</sup> Tobin Siebers, "The Politics of Storytelling: Hannah Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem*," *Southern Humanities Review*, 26.3 (1992), pp. 201-11; p. 202.

<sup>7</sup> Lisa Jane Dish, *Hannah Arendt and the Limits of Philosophy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), p. 108.

<sup>8</sup> To turn again to Benhabib, Arendt is a thinker for whom human identity cannot be thought apart from the necessarily "narrative structure of action." Continual storytelling, which entails constant reassessment, reconfiguration, and reintegration of the past, is a dimension of human life. For Arendt, as for other champions of narrative, we are beings who tell stories. See Benhabib, "Hannah Arendt and the Redemptive Power of Narrative," p. 125.

<sup>9</sup> Benjamin Robinson, "The Specialist on the Eichmann Precedent: Morality, Law, and Military Sovereignty," *Critical Inquiry* 30.1 (2003), pp. 63-97; p. 72.

<sup>10</sup> Arendt makes several of these interconnected arguments in concentrated form in the essay "Truth and Politics," written in response to the acrimonious debate that arose after the publication of *Eichmann in Jerusalem*: "The political function of the storyteller – historian or novelist – is to teach acceptance of the things as they are. Out of this acceptance, which can also be called truthfulness, arises the faculty of judgment". Arendt, *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (New York: Penguin, 1968), p. 262.

<sup>11</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1958), p. 184. Hereafter abbreviated *HC* and cited parenthetically by page number.

<sup>12</sup> Hannah Arendt, *Men in Dark Times* (New York: Harcourt, 1968), p. 105.

<sup>13</sup> Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Viking, 1964), p. 9. Hereafter abbreviated *EJ* and cited parenthetically by page number.

<sup>14</sup> To clarify, Arendt does not speak about trials in *The Human Condition*, but much more broadly about the public realm. In *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, however, she does introduce the

---

particular format of the trial as a means to construct a narrative about a person, and hence to bring that person to people's attention in the public realm.

<sup>15</sup> In a recent overview of Arendt's reflections on narration, Allen Speight foregrounds Arendt's interest in narrative as a tool for assigning responsibility: "Arendt's account of narrative action thus spends less time on formal considerations of plot structure, for example, than on the question of how one can assess responsibility and character in the identification of an agent with a particular action." Allen Speight, "Arendt on Narrative Theory and Practice," *College Literature* 38.1 (2011): pp. 115-130; p. 118.

<sup>16</sup> Leora Bilsky, "Between Justice and Politics: The Competition of Storytellers in the Eichmann Trial," *Hannah Arendt in Jerusalem*, ed. Steven E. Aschheim (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), pp. 232-252; p. 232. Bilsky does not consider Eichmann to be one of the storytellers at the trial, but focuses on Arendt and the Attorney General Gideon Hausner. Arendt, however, views Eichmann as a storyteller.

<sup>17</sup> Rei Terada writes that Eichmann kept his "consciousness of external reality to a minimum" and used "negative hallucination, moral exhortation, and forgetting to keep unpleasantness at bay." See "Thinking for Oneself: Realism and Defiance in Arendt," *Textual Practice* 22.1 (2008), pp. 85-111; p. 92. To this insight we can now add that Eichmann did not completely deny failure, but only recognized and articulated it in the form of vacuous generalities that crowded out any genuine alertness to actual occurrences and other human beings.

<sup>18</sup> Peg Birmingham notes that banal (etymologically) comes from the same root as abandon, namely *bannum*: "Something was said to be banal when it was no longer under the jurisdiction of the lord, but instead abandoned, given over to the use of the entire community." On the most basic level, a banal narrative is a narrative that can be and has been used by countless people. Peg Birmingham, "Holes of Oblivion: The Banality of Radical Evil," *Hypatia* 18.1 (2003), pp. 80-103; p. 88.

<sup>19</sup> Simon Swift, "Hannah Arendt's Tactlessness: Reading Eichmann in Jerusalem," *New Formations* 71 (2011), pp. 79-94; p. 79. Swift reads Arendt's "tactlessness" as her pointing to the disintegration of *sensus communis* in the age of totalitarianism. The performance of tact depends not on widespread adherence to explicitly articulated rules but on a shared sense of propriety in specific situations. After totalitarianism with its unprecedented use of systematic violence has dissolved human polities, no one can count on such a shared sense anymore.

<sup>20</sup> Faced with the accusation of a "lack of heart," Arendt seeks to question the premise that one could or should love one's own people, in this case the Jews. Love, she claims, is meaningful only in relation to *other persons*, that is, not in relation to a collective such as a people, and not in relation to "anything which I know is part and parcel of my own person." Hannah Arendt, *The Jewish Writings*, ed. Jerome Kohn and Ron H. Feldman (New York: Schocken, 2007), p. 467.

<sup>21</sup> Shoshana Felman, "Theaters of Justice: Arendt in Jerusalem, the Eichmann Trial, and the Redefinition of Legal Meaning in the Wake of the Holocaust," *Critical Inquiry* 27 (2001): 201-38.

<sup>22</sup> Lyndsey Stonebridge, "Hannah Arendt's Testimony: Judging in a Lawless World," *New Formations* 67 (2009), pp. 78-90; p. 78.

<sup>23</sup> By mapping the public conversation about the trial in Israel, conducted in articles, editorials, and interviews with Ben Gurion, Idith Zertal has reconstructed how the Eichmann trial was viewed as an important lesson to the Israeli youth and a show of strength by the new Jewish state, a sovereign nation able to capture and try its persecutors and defend itself against its enemies. The Eichmann trial was, she writes, Ben Gurion's "great project of national consciousness building," in which the formation of the Israeli state would emerge as the necessary response to the Holocaust. More than any other event, the Eichmann trial served

---

to establish a link between the Holocaust and the Israeli nation-state. Idith Zertal, *Israel's Holocaust and the Politics of Nationhood*, trans. Chaya Galai (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 104.

<sup>24</sup> Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, p. 262.

<sup>25</sup> Hannah Arendt, *Men in Dark Times*, p. 33-34.

<sup>26</sup> Annabel Herzog, "The Poetic Nature of Political Disclosure: Hannah Arendt's Storytelling," *CLIO: A Journal of Literature, History, and the Philosophy of History* 30.2 (2001), pp. 169-94; p. 191. Herzog writes: "Her [Arendt's] story of Eichmann was precisely the public disclosure that he refused."

<sup>27</sup> Dagmar Barnouw, "Speaking about Modernity: Arendt's Construct of the Political." *New German Critique* 50 (1990), pp. 21-39; p. 23.

<sup>28</sup> Hannah Arendt, *Essays in Understanding 1930-1954: Formation, Exile, and Totalitarianism*, ed. Jerome Kohn (New York: Schocken, 1994), p. 16.

<sup>29</sup> Deborah Nelson writes, in a discussion of Arendt's thoughts on the role of emotion in politics, that "irony can be an attempt at plurality". When she sticks closely to Eichmann's own words, Arendt is in fact preserving both his viewpoint and her own: "By taking him at his word, Arendt is able to display his [Eichmann's] self-understanding and its ludicrousness at the same time." Deborah Nelson, "Suffering and Thinking: The Scandal of Tone in Eichmann in Jerusalem," *Compassion: The Culture and Politics of an Emotion*, ed. Lauren Berlant (New York: Routledge, 2004), pp. 219-44; p. 232.

<sup>30</sup> Lyndsey Stonebridge, "Hannah Arendt's Testimony," p. 88.