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The Miracle of Life: Hannah Arendt and the “Story-Form” of Human Being

Introduction

"Men," writes Hannah Arendt, "are 'the mortals'" (Arendt 2006a, 42). We are mortal because we are individuals, each with our own life story apart from the natural history of the species. A single human being is not a "what," but a "who," and this "who" is told by their life story. To be human, then, is to have a biography: a life takes human form when it is told as a story. Such stories recount what we have done, what we have said, and what we have suffered. In short, stories are composed of action. Action, however, is not only the stuff of stories--it is also the very stuff of politics. In *The Human Condition*, Arendt identifies the human capacity to act--to set something new and unpredictable in motion--as the precondition for politics (Arendt 1998). Thus, biography and politics share a common root in Arendt's thought. This reveals the importance of politics for a fully human life, to be sure, but also the importance of biography for the preservation and enhancement of political life. For though every act is succeeded by a train of consequences, acts themselves have no duration beyond their doing, so were it not for their preservation in biographic works, what we have done--and therefore who we are--would swiftly vanish. Furthermore, if the health of our political life is premised on the plurality of actors, then the preservation of action through biographic practice serves to sustain and enliven our political life.

If so, then biographic storytelling is not only the basic form through which we communicate "who" someone is, but also one of the most significant forms of political communication. Biographies put the very stuff of politics--action--into words, relating actors to readers and listeners and thereby spreading the influence of their speeches and deeds. This

allows action to travel across space, since all action is local until "word travels," so to speak. But more profoundly and in closer keeping with its task, biography allows action to travel across time, to preserve the memory of actors and actions long after they have ceased to be. Thus biography extends the range and duration of an action's influence beyond its local and ephemeral event.

Yet Arendt decisively restricts biographic communication when she writes, "nobody is the author or producer of his own life story" (Arendt 1998, 184). For her, autobiography amounts to a mistake. One cannot serve as a witness to one's own actions, and one cannot outlive one's own death. Biographies must be told by those who witnessed what happened and have lived to tell it. But while these storytellers undoubtedly "make" the story, even here Arendt distinguishes this from authorship in the strong sense: "The distinction between a real and a fictional story is precisely that the latter was "made up" and the former was not made at all" (ibid., 186). Biographies are not spun from whole cloth but pieced together from witnessed and recorded events. These restrictions on autobiography and authorship may seem to be side notes or technicalities, but when one considers that autobiographers with a strong authorial presence have had an extensive influence on modern political thought--for example, Rousseau, Nietzsche, Emerson, Thoreau, and Sartre--these restrictions prove to be polemical. They amount to a rejection of the politics of "self-making" in favor of a politics of plurality, in which there are no "self-made men" and "who" we are is revealed through our interaction with others. According to Arendt, we are not the "authors" of our lives and life is not a "work" we produce: it is an activity we perform. So if biography is a key form of political communication, it is not because biography turns life into a work of art, but rather because it sustains the fragile heart of politics: action.

While this emphasis on "action" may seem to come with a further set of restrictions for deciding what stories are suitable to be told and indeed whose lives are worthy of biographic treatment, Arendt's understanding of "action" is far more expansive and inclusive than it first appears. First of all, though every action has a "hero," Arendt insists that "[t]he hero the story discloses needs no heroic qualities" (ibid., 186). Anyone who lifts a finger to do something or opens their mouth to say something--whether boldly, knowingly, or otherwise--is a "hero." This means that action is not something reserved for the great men of history, but open to all. Second, because action is an interactive process involving a plurality of actors, it entails both doing and suffering. In this sense, a life of great suffering is just as much a life of "action"--is just as much a story to be told--as a life of great achievements. Third, finally, and most essentially, Arendt's particular conception of action is "ontologically rooted" in what she calls "natality," the "miraculous" birth of new and unique human beings into the world (ibid., 247). Because every human being is irreducibly unique, each birth adds to the plurality that is the basis for action and for politics. Thus, being born--though it is the very height of our passivity--is also our first great "act." If so, then there is something decidedly democratic about Arendt's conception of biography: it is the possibility of preserving each and every human life in its uniqueness that sustains our political life and prevents who we are and the world we have built from passing into ruin.

In this essay, I intend to develop this preliminary portrait of Arendt's political theory of biography, elaborating on her convictions that (1) "action" is the basis for the "life story"; (2) autobiography misunderstands life and politics; and that (3) "action," despite first impressions, is a democratic notion. To do so requires not only the assembly of Arendt's scattered theoretical comments on biography in *The Human Condition*, "The Concept of History: Ancient and

Modern" (Arendt 2006a, 41-90), and elsewhere, but also close consideration of and fidelity to Arendt's biographical works: *Men in Dark Times* (Arendt 1968a) and *Rahel Varnhagen: The Life of a Jewess* (Arendt 1997). While these works initially seem to pose a challenge to Arendt's emphasis on "action"--given that almost none of the figures Arendt profiles were "men of action," so to speak--they ultimately give us a much firmer sense of the second and third points. Arendt profiles great sufferers alongside great actors, marginal figures alongside celebrities, and the folly of those who tried to make their life into a work of art alongside the wisdom of those who lived in active engagement with the world. Thus, these profiles ultimately enrich the notion that biography is a democratic medium for preserving what we have done and thus "who" we are.

The "Story-Form" of Human Being

The "chief characteristic" of a "specifically human" life, according to Arendt, is that it is "full of events which ultimately can be told as a story, establish a biography" (Arendt 1998, 97). This "biographability" (Sitze 2002, 112) distinguishes human life from other forms of life as well as life as such. Arendt articulates this distinction with the terms *zōē* and *bios*. *Zōē* is biological life, which pertains to all living things. It is metabolic, an endless cycle of production and consumption that reproduces itself. But *bios*--human life--is linear and finite because it is made up of a unique series of events that produces the outlines of a "plot" distinct from this metabolic cycle.¹ From this "plot," it is possible to tell the story of a single human life (Arendt 1998, 96-97).

¹ This distinction is later taken up by Giorgio Agamben in his ongoing *Homo Sacer* project (see Agamben 1998), where it has attracted a number of skeptics and critics (Dubreuil 2006; Finlayson 2010). They question the etymology upon which the distinction rests, noting that *zōē* and *bios*, in the original Greek, do not so neatly divide "human" life from any other kind of life as Arendt and Agamben insist. Nonetheless, for Arendt the distinction does not ultimately rest

These two kinds of life, in turn, correspond to two kinds of activity, "labor" and "action."² Labor is the ceaseless process through which we reproduce the material conditions of life. This means eating, sleeping, procreating--the whole range of activities concerned with life's basic needs. Though human beings cannot afford to neglect these activities, nonetheless they do not differentiate human beings from animals or any other form of life--whether plant, fungi, or bacteria. Action, on the other hand, is uniquely human because it rests on the condition of plurality. If all laboring activity is essentially "species" behavior that does not vary significantly from one member of the species to another, action is the result of the unpredictable social interactions of human beings. These interactions are unpredictable because they extend far beyond the realm of necessity--in which "labor" is mired--into the undetermined space of freedom. Here, human beings distinguish themselves from each other through their free actions, which give their life a meaning beyond their "species-being" and which are told in the form of a story.

Thus, while "*the possibility of narrating*" may distinguish human beings from other forms of life (Kristeva 2001, 8), the basis for this distinction is the human capacity to "act"--to be free. But freedom, of course, is also what makes politics--an irreducible plurality of actors--

upon her borrowing from the Greeks so much as her very idiosyncratic phenomenology of human activity and specifically her distinction between "labor" and "action," which is discussed in the next paragraph.

² Arendt's personification of these activities in *The Human Condition* is revealing: "labor" becomes *animal laborans* whereas "action" becomes the "man of action." It is important to note, however, that these two characters, alongside *homo faber* (who corresponds to the activity of "work"), are personifications of the three *activities* of which the human condition is composed. They do not correspond to three types of "human being" since all three make up the human condition. For example, even if *animal laborans* suggests that "labor" is an animal activity, this does not mean that laborers are animals. Nonetheless it is certainly Arendt's intention to point out that "labor" is an activity that humans share with other animals and so does not define what is unique about being human. Humans are above all beings who produce works and perform actions.

possible. Then action does not simply lend itself to narration, but in a more profound sense "links the destinies of *life*, *narrative*, and *politics*," as Julia Kristeva suggests (*ibid.*). This means that biography and political association grow from the same root: just as action reveals "who" one is, such individuation amplifies the "plurality" of political association, and vice versa. In this way, life stories and politics draw strength from each other even as they draw from the same root.

Over time, this entanglement results in "the web of human relationships" (Arendt 1998, 184). Actions, of course, have consequences, and so subsequent actions are in part a reaction to the acts that preceded them. This is true even if the actor and their act have long since vanished, and no one remembers what was done or who did it. But this is doubly true if the act has been preserved in a life story, because this keeps the act itself--and not merely its consequences--alive in the present. In this way, past lives may "act" on the present and give us an enriched sense of "who" we are. Without stories of these lives, all that remains are the ever-fainter, anonymous echoes of past actions that vanished as soon as they arrived, thus impoverishing our sense of history. This is why Arendt calls biography "the prepolitical and prehistorical condition of history" (*ibid.*, 185): through revealing the human being as a "who," it sets the stage for politics, and through telling the stories of single human beings, it sets in motion the story of the human race.

This way of understanding history is the reverse of the "modern concept of history," according to Arendt (Arendt 2006a, 41-90). The modern concept of history is that history is an encompassing whole, a process that follows its own logic in which individual lives are engulfed. Narratives of "development," "modernization," and "progress" all ultimately portray history this way. But for Arendt, there is no overarching logic to history: it is simply a "storybook" made up

of life stories (Arendt 1998, 185). It is composed out of interconnected stories of action, added up. Thus the "logic" of history is ultimately no more than the logic of its component parts: biographies. In this way, one may see how biographic practice is crucial to the idea that history is a scene of "action," and thus a free, political phenomenon rather than an inhuman, unstoppable force.

Not only that, it reveals the way in which history is itself political. Every history involves the selection of some stories over and against others, most commonly that of the victors over the losers and the great over the obscure. But Arendt despises Hegel's idea that *die Weltgeschichte ist das Weltgericht* ["the history of the world is the court of the world"], preferring Cato's saying, "*Victrix causa deis placuit, sed victa Catoni*" ["The victorious cause pleased the gods, but the defeated one pleases Cato"] (Arendt 1982, 5). Thus, her biographic approach to history is very much an attempt to save life stories cast aside by the "train" of events. It is a "fragmented" way of doing history (Benhabib 1990, 181-182; Canovan 1994, 4, 205; Herzog 2000), in which the past figures as a vast expanse of ruins where one must "pick up the pieces" to understand what happened. And these "pieces" are the life stories of individual human beings. For instance, in *Men in Dark Times*, Arendt is inspired by the life story of Rosa Luxemburg to ask, "Can it be that the failure of all her efforts as far as official recognition is concerned is somehow connected with the dismal failure of revolution in our century? Will history look different if seen through the prism of her life and work?" (Arendt 1968a, 34). Here, Arendt reveals her faith that even a "marginal figure" such as Rosa Luxemburg, if only her life story were properly told, may have an impact on how we understand our history and our present (ibid.).

This brings us to the third and final aspect of the political significance of the life story. We have already seen (1) how the life story preserves actions that would otherwise vanish, thus allowing them to "act" upon the present; and (2) how life stories give an identity to individuals and, when assembled, a history to peoples. Now (3) it becomes apparent that biography is a vital mode of political thinking. To continue with the above example, Arendt uses the life story of Rosa Luxemburg to understand the failure of revolutions in the twentieth century. And this is not because her story "illustrates" a theory of revolution, but rather because the story itself tells a kind of truth. As Arendt confesses in the preface to *Men in Dark Times*, "illumination may well come less from theories and concepts than from the uncertain, flickering, and often weak light that some men and women, in their lives and works, will kindle under almost all circumstances and shed over the time span that was given them on earth" (ibid., ix). Thus, to comprehend the "political catastrophes" and "moral disasters" of the first half of the twentieth century, Arendt relies less on "theory" than on a form of storytelling, a history that starts with the life story (ibid., vii). There is much literature on Arendt's "storytelling" (Benhabib 1990; Curthoys 2002; Disch 1993; Herzog 2000; Kateb 2002; Luban 1983; Melaney 2006; Speight 2011; Wilkinson 2004; Young-Bruehl 1977), which often focuses on Arendt's account of totalitarianism (Arendt 1968a). There are even articles that point out Arendt's attempt to understand a historical phenomenon through the life story of an individual (Herzog 2002; Leibovici 2007), as in her books on Rahel Varnhagen and the Eichmann trial (Arendt 2006b). But none of these commentators dwell on the fact that the life story *as such* is the essential form of this mode of political thinking. This is because the life story is the form that captures "action" and reveals its significance. History is only meaningful for Arendt if it is a story of actions, and so historical understanding must begin with the life story. As Julia Kristeva puts it, "*It is through narrative... that essentially political*

thought is realized. Through this narrated action that story represents, man corresponds to life or belongs to life to the extent that human life is unavoidably a political life" (Kristeva 2001, 26-27). Political thought arises from biography because it is the link between action, life, and politics.

The Autobiographic Mistake

The previous section began by opposing the human life of "action" to the "labor" of life itself. This simple opposition between two kinds of life with two corresponding activities is complicated, however, when the third activity of human beings is considered: "work." Work is "fabrication," the production of artificial, durable objects of use or adornment (Arendt 1998, 139). Everything that human beings build to last, from roads and buildings to books and furniture, is a product of "work." If so, then it seems strange that Arendt thinks of biographies in terms of "action," not "work." For instance, Plutarch's *Lives* is considered a cultural treasure, a work that has endured the passage of millennia and is still commonly read and referenced to this very day (Plutarch 2001). How is Plutarch's *Lives* closer to the phenomenon of "action" than "work"? Arendt's explanation, simply put, is that "real stories" are not made (ibid., 186). Fictional stories are "works" precisely because they are fabricated; they are pure inventions. Whereas biographies, in a way, are composed by the very course of life--that is to say, by one's acts. So while biographies are certainly made to last, whether through oral or written tradition, they are in a sense merely the "impressions" or "traces" of real actions, preserved for posterity. Thus, even if "work" is more essential than "labor" in defining what it means to be human, the "story-form" of human being in Arendt's thought is nonetheless the result of "action," not "work."

Therefore, to live a human life is not a matter of "work" or "perfection." Biographies are not "works" that shape life into a human form. Rather, for Arendt, "action" gives form to life, and biographic stories merely preserve this form in words. This is because "action," like Arendt's other phenomenological categories, is not a mere figure of speech but a basic phenomenon that structures the experience of human beings. So biographic structure is not simply a genre convention: it corresponds to the fundamental structure of human being-in-the-world. If so, then to stray from the genre conventions of biography is not merely to take creative license, but to ignore the basic form of human being. It is to treat the human form as a fictional object.

This is why autobiography amounts to a mistake in Arendt's thought. Autobiography is introspection, and thus is spun from the thread of the author's reflections. This thread does not necessarily correspond to the author's true course of action, and so does not rest on the same basis as biography. For Arendt, this deviation from the real course of life results in a deformed understanding of the human being and politics. In her book on Rahel Varnhagen, Arendt takes Rousseau--writer of both *Confessions* and *The Social Contract*--as the "greatest example" of this. "By sentimentalizing memory," she writes, "he obliterated the contours of the remembered event" (Arendt 1997, 91). "What remained were the feelings experienced in the course of those events--in other words, once more nothing but reflections within the psyche," she concludes (ibid.). Thus, in his *Confessions*, Rousseau "related neither his life story nor his experiences," but merely "what he had felt, desired, wished, sensed in the course of his life" (ibid., 98). This means that his life story cannot be otherwise than a work of fiction, the pure product of his imagination. Rousseau treats his life story as a *creatio ex nihilo*, a "work" that he himself "made."

To get a sense of this, it is instructive to compare Rousseau's two main autobiographical works, the *Confessions* and *Reveries of the Solitary Walker*. The *Confessions* is a fraught text, torn between the duty to present the facts of his life and the desire to tell the "history of [his] soul" (Rousseau 1953, 262). Concerning the facts--or the "the petty details," as he calls them--he recognizes that if the reader "finds the slightest gap in my story, the smallest hiatus, he may wonder what I was doing at that moment and accuse me of refusing to tell the whole truth" (ibid., 65). But Rousseau notes that his memory is unreliable and that he "may omit or transpose facts, or make mistakes in dates" (ibid., 262). So in the end, the "truth" of his *Confessions* has less to do with facts than with his conviction that he "cannot go wrong about what [he has] felt, or about what my feelings have led me to do," which are in fact "the chief objects of [his] story": "The true object of my confessions is to reveal my inner thoughts exactly in all the situations of my life" (ibid.). The problem then is that Rousseau has difficulty expressing these feelings within the confines of a story. "But how can I tell what was neither said, nor done, nor even thought, but only relished and felt?" he asks (ibid., 215). Consider how he describes the best days of his life:

I rose with the sun, and I was happy; I went for walks, and I was happy; I saw Mamma, and I was happy; I left her, and I was happy; I strolled through the woods and over the hills, I wandered in the valleys, I read, I lazed, I worked in the garden, I picked the fruit, I helped in the household, and happiness followed me everywhere (ibid.).

Indeed, "true happiness is quite indescribable" (ibid., 224). "It can only be felt," and the only way Rousseau can convey to his reader that he was happy is to repeat endlessly, "I was happy" (ibid., 224-225). Thus, Rousseau's intention--to communicate his feelings--is foiled by the very form of the life story as a series of events. Rousseau wishes to chronicle his sentiments, not his actions.

If so, then *Reveries of the Solitary Walker* is a much more successful enterprise than the *Confessions*. This is because it dispenses with plot entirely. It is a set of ten "walks," in which Rousseau meanders through the countryside, following the whims of his reflections. Because the "reverie" lacks structure, shape, and narrative, and makes no claim to factual truth, Rousseau is released from his obligations and is free to think and feel and remember as he pleases. Of these reveries, the fourth--in which he muses over his *Confessions*--is especially interesting. What surprises him when he thinks about his own life in comparison with that text are "the number of things of my own invention which I remembered presenting as true;" and what surprises him even more is that "when [he] recalled these fabrications [he] felt no real repentance" (Rousseau 2004, 64). This discovery spurs him on to a broader pondering over the nature of truth. In the end, just as in the *Confessions*, he declares that it is only the moral truth, "the voice of conscience" that really matters, and the inaccuracies in his *Confessions* are "not falsehood but fiction" (ibid., 68-69). If so, then *Reveries of the Solitary Walker* is much less fraught than the *Confessions* in communicating what Rousseau believes matters most, but only because it is precisely *not* an attempt to tell Rousseau's life story, unlike the *Confessions*. The reverie allows Rousseau to express his "inner self" without any need to "fabricate" or "fictionalize" his life story.

Significantly, this inward turn is not limited to Rousseau's autobiographical writings, but permeates his political thought. And though illuminating, it is not necessary to construe the *Confessions* as political theory--whether as a "moral fable" (Kelly 1987) or an "affirmation of intimate life," "authenticity," and "self-creation" (Ogrodnick 1999)--in order to shed light on this, because it lies at the very core of Rousseau's most abstractly political concept: the general will. "[I]f the general will is to be clearly expressed, it is imperative that there should be no sectional

association in the state, and that every citizen should make up his own mind for himself," Rousseau writes in *The Social Contract* (Rousseau 1968, 73). For the community to speak with one voice rather than a cacophony of particular demands, each citizen must retreat into themselves rather than among their associates in order to discover what the general will must be. Thus, Rousseau removes the problem of particularity--or plurality--by moving from the pure conscience of individual selves to a community that speaks with one voice. Thus Rousseau's social contract is the "self-creation" and "self-determination" of a political body united in a single will that expresses the natural moral sentiments of humanity. Arendt vilifies this kind of "sentimental" political thinking in *On Revolution* when she criticizes Rousseau alongside Robespierre for introducing "compassion" as a political principle, since it is not a guide for how one should act so much as how one ought to feel (Arendt 2006c, 66-72). Rousseau's sentimental turn, then, in both biography and politics, elevates feelings above actions, and thus obfuscates both the "story-form" of human being and the actual, plural basis of politics. The result is life and politics as the products of self-creation, the expressions of an unbounded, single, authorial will.

Thus, with the extended example of Rousseau it becomes apparent why, for Arendt, autobiography amounts to a mistake, a deformation of not only biographic life but also political life. Rousseau's "sentimental" approach to life and politics treats them both as creative works to be made according to an authorial will. The irony is that this ultimately results in their dissipation: the "life story" vanishes into the vagaries of reverie; the political body becomes an incorporeal "will." What is lost in both cases is the sense of "action" as a public and communicable phenomenon. "Life" becomes an intimate and mysterious secret of the self, while

the pluralistic association of political actors is smothered by the unanimous sentiments of the people.

Biography as Democracy

From the previous two sections of this essay it would be quite possible to conclude that Arendt is not a democrat. First of all, her insistence that a properly human life is a life of action may be construed as dehumanizing to anyone who merely "labors" or for whatever reason either does not or is not able to participate in politics. Jacques Rancière has repeatedly made this argument when attacking Arendt's criticism of human rights, for instance (Rancière 2010, 63-64, 206-207). Additionally, as Margaret O'Grady argues, it could be claimed that Arendt's harsh criticism of Rousseau's "sentimentalism" pits her against the democratic ideals of fellow-feeling and self-determination, not to mention the authenticity and intimacy of the modern self (O'Grady 1999, 175-182). Nonetheless, I would argue that Arendt's political theory of biography is intrinsically democratic, and for three reasons: first, anyone at all may begin an action; second, action means "doing" as well as "suffering" because it always involves a plurality; and third, "natality" is the "ontological root" of action, which means that what ultimately makes action possible is the fact that every human being is born both equal and unique.

Arendt is often seen as bearing "nostalgia for the *polis*," yearning for the days when men performed great deeds and spoke eloquent words.³ But this is belied by what she actually says about the heroes of ancient Greece. She remarks that in Homeric times, there were no "qualities" that distinguished heroes. A hero was simply someone with a story. Even "[t]he connotation of

³ For an exhaustive dismantling of this viewpoint, see Tsao 2002.

courage, which we now feel to be an indispensable quality of the hero, is in fact already present in a willingness to act and speak at all, to insert one's self into the world and begin a story of one's own," she writes (Arendt 1998, 186). This means that anyone who speaks or acts at all is a potential hero, regardless of their "quality." All that is needed is someone to remember their story.

A great example of this--and one that refutes the notion that those who "labor" cannot "act"--is the story of the modern labor movement. "[W]hen the labor movement appeared on the public scene," Arendt writes, "it was the only organization in which men acted and spoke *qua* men--and not *qua* members of society" (ibid., 219). In their words and deeds, laborers showed "who" they were, while the established members of society clung to "what" they were--their title, profession, etc. In fact, Arendt writes that "[t]he very pathos of the labor movement in its early stages... stemmed from its fight against society as a whole" (ibid., 218). Thus, without any social "standing" whatsoever, these laborers began a political movement out of their own words and deeds.

A more dire example--and one that shows that a "public" is constituted wherever there is action, regardless of its official recognition--is Arendt's account of the French Resistance. When France fell to Germany in 1940, a few private individuals, "who as a matter of course had never participated in the official business of the Third Republic," suddenly constituted "willy-nilly a public realm where--without the paraphernalia of officialdom and hidden from the eyes of friend and foe--all relevant business in the affairs of the country was transacted in deed and word" (Arendt 2006a, 3). Arendt suggests that these fighters won freedom not so much because they struggled against tyranny "but because they had become "challengers," had taken the initiative upon themselves and therefore, without knowing or even noticing it, had begun to create that

public space between themselves where freedom could appear" (ibid., 4). However, this space vanished as soon as the war was over, and the members of the French Resistance returned to the "weightless irrelevance of their personal affairs, once more separated from 'the world of reality' by an *épaisseur triste*, the 'sad opaqueness' of a private life centered about nothing but itself" (ibid., 3).

For our purposes, there are at least three things worth noting about the above account. First of all, the members of the French Resistance engaged in political action without being "qualified." They simply decided to act, which makes them "heroes" in precisely Arendt's sense of the term. Second, the "public realm" which the Resistance constituted was a direct counter to the "official" politics of the state and also a fragile creation that existed only as long as its members were active. This means that the "space" for politics is not simply the state or a recognized political community, for the Resistance was a secret society that certainly did not do its work in the open. One does not have to be "famous" or "recognized" in order to take political action. However, third, the short life and the anonymity of the Resistance movement has led its memory to become enigmatic, making true stories--biographies--of its members difficult. This loss makes it clear that heroes only attain immortality through the stories that are told about them.

This is why Arendt's "fragmentary" approach to understanding history is so significant: it endeavors to uncover the lives and deeds of history's neglected "heroes." This promises a true "understanding" of history because history is composed of the interactions of individual human beings, and so it is not enough to remember simply the stories of the "great men" of history. Such accounts tend to see figures like Napoleon Bonaparte as the ones who "make" history, but Arendt's point is that no one makes history just as no one makes their own life story. Action

requires a plurality, which means that it involves both "doing" and "suffering." So while it may be that Arendt denies "self-determination," as Margaret Ogradnick argues (Ogradnick 1999), nonetheless action is *mutually* determining. No one actor determines themselves or others; the outcome, rather, is the combined doings and sufferings of everyone who has been involved in an action. Regardless of their intentions, every individual is part of the action of which history is made.

Arendt explains this in terms of the "web of relationships" in *The Human Condition*. The life story of any individual is both determined by the "existing web" of relations and at the same time capable of "affecting uniquely the life stories of all those with whom he comes into contact" (Arendt 1998, 184). The outcome of this mutual determination, "with its innumerable, conflicting wills and intentions," may be that "action almost never achieves its purpose," but this "web of relationships" is also what makes the life story of anyone at all possible (ibid.). "[T]he reason why each human life tells its story and why history ultimately becomes the storybook of mankind, with many actors and speaks and yet without any tangible authors," she states, "is that both are the outcome of action," that is, the interaction between a plurality of individuals (ibid., 185). Thus, history is the story of all, not some, and this means that everyone has a "life story" to be told. History is not "made" by great actors; it is the story of the doings and sufferings of us all.

The final, "ontological" basis of this conception of action, biography, and history is "natality." Natality is "the birth of new men and the new beginning, the action they are capable of by virtue of being born" (ibid., 247). More than that, it is "[t]he miracle that saves the world": "Only the full experience of this capacity can bestow upon human affairs faith and hope," Arendt states (ibid.). In other words, what ultimately guarantees the plurality required for politics is the

fact that new and unique human beings are born into the world every day. It is the irreducible uniqueness of each individual that makes their entry into the world an "act" in and of itself, even though being born is truly the height of passive experience in the life of anyone.⁴ It is this "miracle" of birth that spins new strands into the "web of human relationships," each strand spanning the life of an individual and each span a unique story in the endlessly woven web of history.

But "uniqueness," while fundamental, is only one side of the basic human condition of plurality. The other side is equality, and both are required in order for there to be true "plurality," which lies in between sameness and difference. "If men were not equal," Arendt states, "they could neither understand each other and those who came before them nor plan for the future and foresee the needs of those who will come after them" (Arendt 1998, 175). But "[i]f men were not distinct, each human being distinguished from any other who is, was, or will ever be, they would need neither speech nor action to make themselves understood" (ibid., 175-176). Here it is important to note that with respect to "what" we are--that is, human beings--we are equal, but with respect to "who" we are-- the "hero" of our own life story--each of us is distinct.

As such, even if Arendt privileges "action" over other human activities, and even if she denies self-creation and self-determination, the fact that we are all equal and that we all have a story to be told in Arendt's account means that her political theory of biography is democratic at heart. Politics exists due to the basic "ontological" fact of the equality and uniqueness of all

⁴ It is also an "act" that is unmistakably a fruit of "labor." The strangeness of Arendt's idea of "natality" has been noted by Roberto Esposito (Esposito 2008, 177-178) and Miguel Vatter (Vatter 2006, 152).

people. Furthermore, because everyone has a story, everyone has an identity and a role to play in history.

From Theory to Practice

The proof, however, is in the pudding. Arendt wrote two biographies in her lifetime: *Rahel Varnhagen: The Life of a Jewess*, finished by 1933 but unpublished until 1956, and *Men in Dark Times*, published in 1968. Initially, and somewhat surprisingly, these books seem to defy Arendt's political thinking on biography. For one, outside of her profiles of Pope John XXIII and Rosa Luxemburg, the individuals she writes about are hardly "men of action." They are mostly poets and philosophers--literary types. Then, despite her insistence that no one is the author of their own life story, she makes the curious claim at the beginning of *Rahel Varnhagen* that what "interested [her] solely was to narrate the story of Rahel's life as she herself might have told it" (Arendt 1997, 81). However, the dissonance between Arendt's political theory of biography and her biographic practice is only apparent, and disappears upon closer examination. This is for two reasons. First, as we have seen, Arendt's conception of "action" is larger than simply "words and deeds": it starts from the basic fact that every human being is unique, and thus each has a life story--even if it is largely a story of failure and suffering, as many of the stories in *Men in Dark Times* are. In the "dark times" in which she was writing, Arendt found such stories much more "illuminating" than the success stories of public frauds and villains. Second, while Arendt may describe *Rahel Varnhagen* as a pseudo-autobiography of sorts, what she tells is Rahel Varnhagen's journey from romantic individualism, which taught her to live her life as if it were a work of art, to her embrace of historical reality, and in particular the fact of her Jewish identity, which she had long sought to disavow. Thus, the story follows Rahel

Varnhagen's own renunciation of the autobiographic mistake for the sake of one's "real" life story.

Let us begin with her story, then, moving afterwards to the broader themes of *Men in Dark Times*. When Arendt states her intention to narrate the life of Rahel Varnhagen as she herself might have done, it is in accordance with Varnhagen's private judgment that she was an "extraordinary" individual (ibid.). Her reasons for thinking so had nothing to do with the fact that she was a well-known salon hostess in Berlin during the height of the "Goethe cult," but rather because she bore to the end of her life the burden of an overwhelming sense of "Destiny" (ibid.). Far from being a "man of action," she had "the outrageous conviction of being herself the 'battlefield'; that being herself nothing but the scene of action, she in reality provided the essential connection between disparate events" (ibid., 144). In other words, she had a profound sense of the weight of history upon her life story. Thus, the story of her life is that of one who suffered.

Rahel Varnhagen suffered from her position as "a Jew and pariah" in post-Enlightenment Germany (ibid., 258). It took her "sixty-three years to come to terms with [this] problem, which had its beginnings seventeen hundred years before her birth, which underwent a crucial upheaval during her life, and which one hundred years after her death--she died on March 7, 1833--was slated to come to an end," Arendt writes (ibid., 85). Only on her deathbed was Rahel Varnhagen able to say, "The thing which all my life seemed to me the greatest shame, which was the misery and misfortune of my life--having been born a Jewess--this I should on no account now wish to have missed" (ibid.). In this way, her whole life was a struggle with "destiny," with her place in history.

The "great error" that Rahel Varnhagen made in the early years of this struggle was "[t]o live life as if it were a work of art, to believe that by "cultivation" one can make a work of art of one's own life," and thus escape Jewishness through the self-creation of a novel identity (ibid., 81-82). In a world that confronted her with obstacles due to her "infamous birth," the only place where she felt free was the realm of thought (ibid., 89). Through introspection, she discovered her "inner self" in isolation from the world. She began to conceive of her identity as a limitless entity because through introspection the self "is no longer molested by anything exterior" and "there is no longer any demand for action, the consequences of which necessarily impose limits even upon the freest spirit" (ibid., 90-91). In this way, she followed in the footsteps of Rousseau. "Facts mean nothing at all to me," she wrote in a letter signed "Confessions de J.J. Rahel" (ibid., 91).

In the end, Arendt writes, "Rahel's struggle against the facts, above all against the fact of having been born a Jew, very rapidly became a struggle against herself" (ibid., 92). Unable to deny the bare fact of her existence, she was compelled to fabricate it, to compose her life as a fiction. But in the struggle between the "inner self" and the world, "the world always has the last word because one can introspect only into one's own self, but not out of it again" (ibid., 93). Introspection is no solution to one's struggle with the world, and no way to communicate one's story. "[H]ence," writes Arendt, "there remained nothing for her but to "tell the truth," to bear witness, to gather in "the splendid harvest of despair"" (ibid., 124-125). She had to accept that her life story was not the object of her choosing or the movement of her inner self, but the decree of fate.

The irony of Rahel Varnhagen's acceptance of fate is that it made her see herself as an actor. "[S]he had learned that destiny not only operated upon one, but one vigorously took part

in it," Arendt writes (*ibid.*, 164). "What happened to her was not only a matter of being helplessly exposed to an event, of enduring sacrilege to the purity of self, the nobility of personality," she continues (*ibid.*). Rahel Varnhagen discovered that "she herself had acted no differently from other people," and through this discovery "she was forced into solidarity with the rest of the human race, who also do little else but err" (*ibid.*). Thus, when she came to accept her fate, she may have renounced authorship over her own life, but she did not become "passive." It was precisely the opposite: by giving up her will to self-creation, she discovered herself as an actor.

This discovery, however, leads us to another irony, and furthermore one that compels us to make a stricter definition of the "autobiographic mistake." For at the same time that Rahel Varnhagen discovered that she was an actor, she also realized that she already inevitably *had* a life story, despite all her protestations and earlier attempts to "make" one for herself. Through recognizing her actions, her life became an "object" to her--not an object of her own making, but a story that simply presented itself to her as the course of action she had taken throughout her life. And "[w]ith this story, not with herself," Arendt insists, "she turned to the outer world once again" (*ibid.*). Through this newfound "object," not a product of her design but nonetheless the source of her identity, "[s]he wanted to fit herself into the world and into her own history" (*ibid.*, 167). She discovered that in order to preserve "who" she was, she had to preserve what had happened. Only then, and despite who she may have wanted to be, would she find her place in history.

In this way--and only in this way--did Rahel Varnhagen succeed in becoming her own biographer. She told her story over and over to herself and to anyone who would listen. It was not her life as she wished it to be, but simply what had happened. Events made her "who" she

was despite her romantic search for herself. Because she was "a Jew and pariah" and therefore "had no position in the world of men which guaranteed her permanence," she "had to tread the road to history, which was open to her only on the basis of her life-story, again and again" (ibid., 168, 258). But she herself could never finish or "perfect" this story, which ended only with her death. This is why Arendt had to finish it for her, one hundred years after her death, and why Arendt endeavored to tell the story of Rahel Varnhagen "as she herself might have told it" (ibid., 81).

This allows for a more precise definition of the "autobiographic mistake." The mistake is to treat one's life as "a work of art" or the product of introspection, the movement of the "inner self." One can be one's own biographer and bear witness to one's own existence, not as an object of one's own making but as a result of one's course of action through life, which tells one "who" one is. However, such an autobiography is always provisional, as it is necessarily incomplete until the time of one's death, and so can truly only be finished as a biography told by someone else.

Arendt took up this task once more in her life, towards the end of her career, with *Men in Dark Times*. But if *Rahel Varnhagen* took as its subject someone who had been dead for over a century, this later book--for the most part--tells the lives of the recently departed, often her friends. Nonetheless, these two books are very similar in their concern. First of all, like Rahel Varnhagen, most of the titular figures of *Men in Dark Times* could hardly be described as "men of action." As with Rahel, they tend to be literary figures: poets, philosophers, and academics. Arendt retains the notion that such individuals, though not "actors" in the conventional sense, may nonetheless reveal the meaning of the history of their time through the course of their life story. Additionally, these figures tend to be "failures," or at least on the "losing side" of history.

They are ones who have suffered in struggle with the world, who stand out against the "spirit of the times." Both books, then, are surely testaments to Arendt's "fragmentary" approach to history, through which life stories threatened with oblivion are salvaged from the wreckage of the past. But this is clearer in *Men in Dark Times*, as its scattered contents share nothing but a pervading mood: a pall cast by the "dark times" "visible everywhere" in the book (Arendt 1968a, viii).

These "dark times," which covered the first half of the twentieth century, were not dark because of the "horrible novelty" of the "political catastrophes" and "moral disasters" of the period, but rather because politics--the free action of a plurality--had vanished from public life (ibid., vii, ix). In such times, writes Arendt, "the sarcastic, perverse-sounding statement, *Das Licht der Öffentlichkeit verdunkelt alles* ("The light of the public obscures everything"), went to the very heart of the matter and actually was no more than the most succinct summing-up of existing conditions" (ibid., ix). Propaganda, ideology, and the notion of politics as party "movement" swept the actions of pluralities off the public stage, abandoning individuals to their private selves. Under such conditions, the search for meaning in history led Arendt to seek among these isolated figures for "the uncertain, flickering, and often weak light that some men and women, in their lives and works, will kindle under almost all circumstances and shed over the time span that was given them on earth" (ibid., ix). In other words, in "dark times," which "are not only not new" but "no rarity in history," the world is illuminated not by public spectacles but by the dim light of obscure actors (ibid.). Thus, even when cast aside by the "march" of history, private individuals do not merely become its passive victims, and their life stories show this.

This is perhaps best exemplified by her profile of Walter Benjamin (1892-1940), who possibly influenced Arendt's fragmented approach to history in the first place (Canovan 1994, 4, 205; Herzog 2000). Benjamin, Arendt suggests, is one of the "unclassifiable ones" for whom fame can only come posthumously (Arendt 1968a, 155). This is precisely because he fit no social role during his lifetime and so no one could classify "what" he was; his uniqueness could only be captured after his death, when the story of his life finally revealed to everyone "who" he was. But this does not mean that Benjamin was a man apart from his time. To the contrary, Arendt argues, "Often an era most clearly brands with its seal those who have been least influenced by it, who have been most remote from it, and who therefore have suffered most" (ibid., 172). So Benjamin was indeed a man of his time, illuminating his era in his very distance from it. His great passion was "collecting," and this reflected "the break in tradition" that marked the times (ibid., 200). "The figure of the collector," Arendt writes, "could assume such eminently modern features in Benjamin because history itself ... had already relieved him of [the collector's] task of destruction and he only needed to bend down, as it were, to select his precious fragments from the pile of debris" (ibid.). Benjamin, though misunderstood, persecuted, and eventually dead by his own hand, understood like no one else of his time that the end of tradition had revealed history as a vast wasteland filled with the debris of past lives, sometimes warped and degraded, but sometimes crystallized into strange and illuminating "pearls" of wisdom (ibid., 206).

What is interesting about this example is that Benjamin's "action" was in effect a mode of thinking. As with Arendt, Benjamin's way of doing history "politicized" it by blasting it into pieces, or rather showing that history has always been a junkheap rather than a hymn to success. As a "collector" scrambling to "pick up the pieces" as they fell down around his ears, Benjamin

was strangely more in tune with his times than his contemporaries, who steadily marched off a cliff. Thus, despite the fact that he was no "man of action," the very uniqueness of Benjamin's thought makes it not only possible but truly vital to tell his life story. For as Arendt suggests, his "unclassifiability" means that to get a sense of his thought, we must have a sense of "who" he was. And this, in turn, means giving Benjamin--despite his "bad luck," his "clumsiness," and the extent to which his own life story was but a pile of "debris"--his own place in history (ibid., 157, 159).

This gesture, however, is not at all limited to those at the margins of history, or those crushed underneath its forward march. For one of the profiles in *Men in Dark Times* is a review of the spiritual diaries of Angelo Giuseppe Roncalli, otherwise known as Pope John XXIII. But what Roncalli's life story shares with the others is the extraordinary uniqueness of "who" he was, manifest in the unpredictable course of action his life took. For he was elected Pope as a "stopgap" and therefore only because "everyone thought of him as a figure without consequence" (ibid., 58). However, "nobody was aware of who he was," and as it turned out, he was the one to call the Second Vatican Council, which introduced sweeping changes throughout the Catholic church. Thus, if he was chosen Pope for "what" he was--nobody of importance--this choice allowed him to show the world "who" he was by placing him in the position to "act"--to begin anew.

These two stories are obviously very different, yet nevertheless they teach much the same lesson. In "dark times," action is left at the hands of "obscure" individuals, often those the most remote from public spectacle. Even Roncalli, who was to become Pope, was called into his world-historical role only because he was "obscure," because nobody knew "who" he was and so therefore seemed harmless. This shows that action may start with any individual whosoever, that

it stems from their uniqueness, that it is ultimately unpredictable, and that it is the basis of both the life story and of the individual's place in history. This is the case regardless of one's "place" in society or the "spirit of the times" in which one lives, and as such it is the perennial source of politics.

Thus, the apparent dissonance between Arendt's political theory of biography and her biographic practice disappears. First, concerning Rahel Varnhagen, Arendt writes her life story in pseudo-autobiographical style because she wants to finish the story of Varnhagen's life that Varnhagen herself started but could not finish: the story of a "Jew and pariah" who came to embrace her "destiny" after having made the "autobiographic mistake" of fabricating her own identity. Arendt's biography of Varnhagen emphasizes the difference between a true life story and the "autobiographic mistake," even as it allows for a kind of biography of one's self. Second, in *Men in Dark Times*, it becomes clear that what makes someone's--anyone's--life story possible to tell is not so much their actions in the sense of "great words and deeds," but rather their basic uniqueness: their irreplaceable quality and irreducible identity as well as their singular standing in history.

Conclusion

This essay has attempted to develop Hannah Arendt's political theory of biography with an emphasis on three of its features: (1) that "action" is the basis for biography; (2) that autobiography amounts to a mistaken understanding of life and politics; and (3) that biography is democratic, i.e., that each and every human being has a life story that may be told and preserved. Combined, these features give us the idea of biography as a genre through which the actions of individuals are preserved and each individual finds their place in history. In more abstract terms,

they show that biography is both a basic form of political communication--as it is the way we relate "actions" to one another--as well as the "building block" from which history is built, since it has no overarching "logic" of its own but is really just the interweaving of such stories. If we lose sight of this, then the plurality on which political life rests will atrophy, as individual actions are lost to time, and the political quality of history will be lost to our sense of it as an overwhelming, unstoppable force. Arendt's political theory of biography, as well as her own biographic practice, was devoted to preventing this. It was a plea to witness the "miracle" of human life: the fact that each and every one of us is unique and so every one of us has a story to tell.

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