Arendt on Narrative, Then and Now

Response to Dorosz

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Hannah Arendt offers educational thinkers a collection of fascinating paradoxes: an established place in educational thought despite a tiny record on educational matters, a devoted following among the left despite a sustained criticism of liberal views, and a largely successful critique of a sanctified moment in American history that mostly goes unquestioned.

One of the successes of Dorosz's synthesis of Arendt's views on the didactic power of storytelling for social continuity is that he encourages us to look away, for a moment, from "Reflections on Little Rock" and consider the broad terrain of Arendt's political thought in its educational aspect.[1] In doing so, Dorosz allows us to partially resolve two of the paradoxes mentioned above, leaving intact our progressive fascination with a conservative nostalgist. This last paradox grounds one of the most poignant tensions in Arendt's work, namely the self-conscious place we occupy between past and future, expressed in Arendt's title from which Dorosz draws much of his material. In reading Arendt, we are regularly reminded of how her theory uneasily, if authoritatively, occupies this hinge in history: a democratic moment that has already suffered the horrors of popular rule under the fantasy of fascist power.

Arendt's warnings about the crisis of authority in democracy, the invasion of the intimate into private life and the collapsing distinction between public and private remain significant cautions for contemporary readers. From this perspective, we can recognize

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that Dorosz's synthesis of Arendt's views provides us with a strong, well-integrated picture of how Arendt sees storytelling as a primary function of education and social maintenance throughout the greater part of human history. At the same time, we must recognize Arendt's belief that we live in a time that does not resemble the greater part of human history. The main question Dorosz's paper inspires is: if Arendt's social theory relies on the historical analysis of social structures from the past, how does a synthesis of these historical critiques help us "think what we are doing" today?

Dorosz, for instance, represents Arendt's understanding of the function of narrative clearly in claiming that "stories of the past provide common ground for those of us who share such stories in the present," and that connections to a common story "are the essence of what it means to live in a common, public world." Following from this position on the place of the narrative, Dorosz argues that "If students are sufficiently exposed to stories of the past, they will stand a chance of inheriting some kind of common world when they enter public life."

But in one of the source texts for Dorosz's work, Arendt seems to argue that the notion of a common world with common meanings is a thing of the past. Arendt's critique begins as a critique of contemporary political language, recognizing a silent agreement in most discussions among political and social scientists that we can ignore distinctions and proceed on the assumption that everything can eventually be called anything else, and that distinctions are meaningful only to the extent that each of us has the right "to define his terms."[2]

Exploring this supposed right, she questions whether such terms as "tyranny" and "authority" and "totalitarianism" have simply lost their common meaning, or that we have ceased to live in a com-

mon world with the words we have in common possess an unquestionable meaningfulness, so that, short of being condemned to live verbally in an altogether meaningless world, we grant each other the right to retreat into our own worlds of meaning, and demand only that each of us remain consistent within his own private terminology?[3]

And concludes that if, in these circumstances, we assure ourselves that we still understand each other, we do not mean that together we understand a world common to us all, but that we understand the consistency of arguing and reasoning, of the process of argumentation in its sheer formality.[4]

Arendt's testimony on the subject of creating a common world through narrative discourse underscores the interpretive value of Dorosz's work, insofar as it identifies the common world once established through discourse as a genuine loss: there was something there, in narrative forms, that not only disclosed a world but brought one into being. At the same time, knowing that there was something there should fill us with something like the grief that Arendt expresses, insofar as it suggests that Dorosz provides us the key to a beautiful door that leads to a ruin. In the current age, in the absence of shared meanings, the common world falls apart, and the tools by which the common world was once built no longer do the work they once did.

Arendt's regular use of the term "crisis" in naming the current moment points equally to the sense of loss indicated in the quotations above and our opportunity to define something new—an opportunity that remains unrealized over half a century later. But if an answer hasn't emerged in how we live out the future, and if society cannot help but continually turn back to a past that is irrevocably lost, perhaps we can consider one way that storytelling has coped in the meantime, fighting between the forces before us and behind us like the protago-

nist in Kafka's parable by which Arendt personifies the current age.[5]

For Kafka's protagonist, his place in history has become an unbearable repetition of fighting the influence of the past and the uncertainty of the future. He dreams of transcendence, of stepping out of the daily battle, but the only stories of transcendence he knows are those that have been delivered to him through the influence of the past. The battle that he—and we—take up with the received truths of history is the challenge of hermeneutically extracting a sign of the transcendent from the habitually repeated stories of his childhood: a root of the Adamic language from the ruins of Babel.

In the absence of an answer to how we live after authority (because an answer would require an authorized voice) we might turn instead to an example of a coping strategy, the practice of turning ironically toward the past, in narrative retellings such as *Grendel*, *John Dollar*, and *The Wide Sargasso Sea*. The popularity of retellings as a genre of narrative among adults and children alike attests to Arendt's self-consciousness about our relationship to the past and to the belief that our agency is never entirely separable from the past that makes us. The act of retelling tells us that we inhabit a horizon largely defined by precedent, but that while the pieces of this history are already made, this does not mean that we cannot move them around and by moving them understand that their significance is not in their being but in their relation to one another.

This limited agency provides a sense of narrative that is distinct from that which relies on authority to produce a common world with shared meanings: its reach is always limited; our meanings are never our own. Instead, it establishes a relation to the past analogous to the contemporary sense of political action that J.M. Bernstein claims as central to Arendt's political doctrine:

If action is essentially beginning, and beginning is best exemplified by revolutionary founding, and founding is best realized in the refounding that is civil disobedience, then civil disobedience is the fulfillment of Arendt's political doctrine. Civil disobedience as refounding is renewing; renewing is the uprising of the new in its double conditionality . . . always dependent on the very past it exceeds, always failing (ready to be lost again).[6]

Bernstein reads Arendt as claiming that action in the contemporary world does not create a common world as much as it draws upon the memory of a shared world in taking a stand on the future. We can disobey, and thereby, perhaps, change things for the moment, but creation *ex nihilo* is beyond us. Thinking of our narrations as renarrations, of our foundings as refoundings, puts us in that paradoxical relation to the past not so different from Arendt's herself: always nostalgic for an authorized narrative that has receded into the past but has never finally departed; always keeping an eye out for a moment in the future when the repositioning of established categories might allow transcendence to be born anew.

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1 Hannah Arendt, "Reflections on Little Rock," *Dissent* (Winter 1959), 45-56.

2 Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future* (New York: Penguin Books, 1954), 95.

3 Arendt, *Between Past and Future,* 95.

4 Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 95.

5 Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future* (New York: Penguin Books, 1954), 7.

6 J.M. Bernstein, "Political Modernism: The New, Revolution, and Civil Disobedience in Arendt and Adorno" in *Arendt and Adorno: Political and Philosophical Investigations,* eds. Lars Rensmann & Samir Gandesha (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2012,) 59.