(De/con)structing Political Narratives: Hannah Arendt and Jacques Derrida on Crafting a Positive Politics

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In 1961 the notorious organizer and facilitator of Nazi death camps, Adolf Eichmann, was tried in Jerusalem for war crimes and crimes against humanity perpetrated during the Second World War. He was found guilty after weeks of often gruesome testimony and in 1962 he was hanged. Hannah Arendt—a Jew who had escaped the Holocaust by fleeing to America—attended his trial. Although the detail and accuracy of her reporting on the trial was widely applauded, the analysis she included throughout her book Eichmann in Jerusalem *outraged many who previously had praised her. That Eichmann organized the day-to-day logistics of the Holocaust Arendt never disputed. That he was responsible for the Holocaust or that his death was somehow retributively just she found not only implausible but counterproductive. Arendt forced her readers to think: are legal and illegal the same as right and wrong? Should they be the same? Can we make them the same? In this article I weave Arendt's questions and answers about law and politics in with those of Jacques Derrida—a thinker who also cared a great deal about political meaning and responsibility. Derrida's theory of deconstruction revealed political meaning in stories and poetry, in songs and speeches, in language itself. Taking an interdisciplinary approach I argue that together, Arendt and Derrida shed new light on the significance of political narratives, the importance of remembrance—linguistic, historical, political—and the tragic yet hopeful nature of responsibility.*

Keywords: Narrativity, Deconstruction, Plurality, Responsibility, Positive Politics

'…yes I said yes I will Yes.'
~closing line of James Joyce's *Ulysses*

Introduction

Embracing the affirmation and the hope in the word 'yes,' and maintaining the backward glance of 'said,' the forward-looking, promise-making of 'will,' and the present urgency of 'Yes,' I seek a revitalization

of a positive conception of politics. Positive politics, as opposed to negative politics, sees in plurality community, not relativism; sees in judgment thought, not power; and sees in responsibility hope, not blame. And revitalization is key: re (again), vita (life), -ization (noun formed from a verb, suffix for the condition, act, or process (Warriner 1982, 25)). Just as a verb may generate a noun, action generates responsibility. Thus with a rebirth (re-*conception*) of a positive politics comes a re-affirmation of political responsibility. In this article, I will initiate a dialog between Hannah Arendt and Jacques Derrida that will begin such a revitalization of politics. Essential to a positive politics, though, are what Derrida called 'specters'—the unpredictable, the irreversible, the incomprehensible, the impossible, the undecidable, the unforgivable, the dead.

Arendt and Derrida generated a wealth of critical literature in the fields of political theory, philosophy, comparative literature, epistemology, metaphysics, intellectual history, and international relations. This article primarily focuses on Arendt's narrative method and Derrida's deconstruction, although I will touch upon many other concepts found in their work. Arendt was one of the first political theorists to use stories as a means of understanding events; a methodology now termed 'the narrative approach.' Though she rarely spoke of her methodology, Arendt's use of narratives was an attempt to gain understanding from experience. Since humans never have lost the capacity for storytelling, Arendt's approach becomes especially useful when all other categories of understanding—objectivity, positivist social science, rational explanations, cause and effect discourse, etc.—have failed. Paying equal attention to stories, but with a finer attention to detail, Derrida articulated a process of deconstruction that allows a reader to discover internal contradictions, conflicts, and complexities in words and language which undermine the stability of a text. Derrida intended to illuminate the internal contradictions within words and texts—within language itself—but his goal was loftier than the demonstration of absurdity. Derrida placed the burden of decision-making and responsibility on the shoulders of political actors by denying them recourse to linguistic ambiguity. If political texts contain irreconcilable internal complexities and contradictions, then political actors, for the sake of practical existence in our world, must decide which meanings to favor. And of course, they must also bear the responsibility for their decision. Together, Arendt and Derrida shed new light on the significance of political narratives, the importance of remembrance—linguistic, historical, political—and the tragic yet hopeful nature of responsibility.

The theoretical and interpretive

approaches I will take in this article are interrelated. I will use the theories of narrativity and deconstruction and the interpretive methods of dialog and interdisciplinarity to investigate Arendt, Derrida, and their contributions to political theory. I chose a dialogical interpretive approach in order to generate new understandings of narrativity and deconstruction that are much harder to see when each approach is considered alone. Finally, when putting two theoretical methods in dialog with each other, unsurprisingly, interdisciplinarity results. Establishing an interdisciplinary interpretive approach allows me to escape the confines of what predominantly is considered 'political' in order to show the ways in which language, literature, and history are political.

This line of investigation may have several important implications for the politics of futurity. First, it advocates a shift away from quantitative, theoretically uncritical approaches to political problem solving. Second, it highlights the necessity of interdisciplinary study to political thinking, especially the inclusion of history and literature. Third, this paper emphasizes the often overlooked role of language and narrative in preservation and disremembering, production and destruction, inclusion and exclusion. And fourth, it uses binaries, dualities, multiplicities, heterogeneities, paradoxes, and pluralities to grow our understanding of political meaning and responsibility.

Arendt's narrativity

Arendt loved to attribute the following quote to Isak Dinesen and she cited it often: 'All sorrows can be borne if you put them into a story or tell a story about them' (Arendt 1998, 175). Although she never described her methodology in a single word, Arendt's use of stories in political theory came to be known as 'narrativity' or 'the narrative approach.' In her own words, 'whenever an event occurs that is great enough to illuminate its own past, history comes into being. Only then does the chaotic maze of past happenings emerge as a story which can be told, because it has a beginning and an end' (Arendt 1954, 319). Listening to, telling, and retelling these stories formed the basis of Arendt's approach to politics.

Simply put, Arendt's narrative approach seeks understanding through experience. In *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1969), Arendt began her inquiry wondering, 'how is this possible?' and 'how do we move on?' rather than 'what caused or what explains totalitarianism?' The Third Reich gave birth to the political concept of totalitarianism—before then it was an impossibility. Arendt recognized this, and spent the majority of her book trying to understand totalitarianism and learn from it. But, as she described it in her essay 'Understanding & Politics' (1954), 'understanding, as distinguished from having correct information and scientific knowledge, is

a complicated process which never produces unequivocal results. It is an unending activity by which, in constant change and variation, we come to terms with and reconcile ourselves to reality, that is, try to be at home in the world' (Arendt 1954, 307-8). Arendt found that by increasing the number of stories to which she exposed herself—by listening to and telling stories of Nazis, Holocaust survivors, soldiers, diplomats, pacifists—she deepened her understanding of the event under consideration.

The example that best illustrates her narrative approach—the short work, *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (2006)—also generated the greatest controversy. Arendt attended Adolf Eichmann's 1961 trial in Jerusalem and her 'report on the *banality of evil*,' shocked many of her fellow Jews. In addition to faulting many Jewish authorities for collaborating with the Nazis—she argued they had the choice of nonparticipation, even if outright resistance was impossible—Arendt chastised the prosecution for their handling of the trial. The parade of witnesses who came to testify about their experiences in concentration camps offended Arendt not because she objected to the Jewish survivors having a chance to tell their stories but because only certain Jews were allowed to testify. 'In this respect,' she wrote, 'perhaps even more significantly than in others, the deliberate attempt at the trial to tell only the Jewish side of the story distorted the truth, even the Jewish truth' (Arendt 2006, 12). Arendt's controversial but incisive point—that victims cannot tell the whole story on their own—reinforces her call for plurality and understanding. As she kept reminding her readers, this was no ordinary trial, and conventional wisdom and standard procedure no longer sufficed.[1] In a more sympathetic passage about the prosecution, she commented that they faced an unprecedented dilemma in prosecuting Eichmann because they '[were] unable to understand a mass murderer who had never killed' (Arendt 2006, 215). Eichmann's role in the Holocaust presented an enormous challenge to international law, to psychological understanding, and to moral judgment, not because he was the first to commit or even condone genocide but because the totalitarian system shattered 'our categories of thought and standards of judgment' (Arendt 1954, 318). How does one try a man for murder who has never killed? How does one legitimately punish a man who obediently followed the laws of his country? How does one classify as evil a man who radiates mediocrity? These questions cannot be answered until one has an understanding of totalitarianism, an understanding gained by the pursuit of as many perspectives as possible. Then and only then can we begin to judge those involved.

To engage in politics is to experi-

ence, to *think*, to understand, and to judge. What disgusted Arendt most about Eichmann was his inability to do any of these. 'The longer one listened to him,' she observed, 'the more obvious it became that his inability to speak was closely connected with an inability to think, namely, to think from the standpoint of somebody else' (Arendt 2006, 12). Telling his story allowed Arendt to understand him and to hold him responsible.

Derrida's deconstruction

Deconstruction, like narrativity, begins with the assumption of plurality, multiplicity, and otherness. Derrida showed first with literature and then with metaphysical, philosophical, and political texts that whether it is in the form of a novel, an essay, or a declaration of independence, language never can be reduced to a singular, original, and 'true' meaning. Words on a page do not refer to (signify) a form or logos (truth) that is prior to the text; searching for what is prior to the text (context) originally led Derrida to the process (happening) of deconstruction. Precisely because Derrida calls into question the idea of a single, prior, and absolute meaning of a word, providing a definition of 'deconstruction' is both impossible and counterproductive (Derrida 1985, 4). Like all other words though, 'deconstruction' has contextual substitutes: dismantling, desedimentation, destabilization, undecidability. Deconstruction may

not be definable, but as a 'happening,' it is understandable.

Derrida, like Arendt, consistently reminds his readers that, 'in language there are only differences' (Derrida 1968, 10-11). Words only convey meaning to readers or listeners because they are distinct, they differ from other words. For example, when a reader encounters the word 'rational,' he or she only knows its meaning (significance) because of the non-presence of 'irrational,' which is presently absent but always already there. To represent this absence of presence in a text and to remind the reader of the differences that were being assumed, Derrida often would use strikethroughs, writing the word 'rational' as '(ir)rational.' This unrestrained, even playful, way of using language infuriated(s) many scholars. Critics—including many analytic philosophers, John Searle[2], for example—accuse him of contributing nothing but absurdity, of demonstrating endless difference, of making light of moral, political, and ethical problems by playing with language. But Derrida's insistence on linguistic plurality had wide-ranging implications. '[Deconstruction],' he argued, 'is not opposed to ethics and politics, but is their condition: on the one hand, it is the condition of history, of process, strategy, delay, postponement, mediation, and, on the other hand, because there is an absolute difference or an irreducible heterogeneity, there is the urge

to act and respond immediately and to face political and ethical responsibilities' (Derrida 1999, 77). This urge to act is the political side of deconstruction.

The key to understanding the political implications of deconstruction is the subtle distinction between undecidability and indeterminacy. Derrida's critics accuse him of the latter, claiming that he promotes relativity of meaning and thereby destroys the possibility of decision-making. 'But undecidability is not indeterminacy,' he responds, 'undecidability is the competition between two determined possibilities or options, two determined duties. There is no indeterminacy at all' (Derrida 1999, 79). In other words, not knowing the right answer is a necessary condition of decision-making. 'Far from opposing undecidability to decision,' he continues, 'I would argue that there would be no decision, in the strong sense of the word, in ethics, in politics, no decision, and thus no responsibility, without the experience of some undecidability' (Derrida 1999, 66).

Double gestures pervade Derrida's work—'respect and disrespect, fidelity and violation, preservation and emancipation, description and transformation,' absence and presence, undecidability and decision, playfulness and deadly seriousness (Royle 2003, 32). Perhaps it is difficult to see how someone who refused to be bound by methodology, who chose multiple words to mean the same thing, who combined multiple meanings into a single word, who emphasized the absence of presence as much as presence, who insisted on the importance of undecidability, can be credited with forcing responsibility. But more powerfully than an ethicist with moral guidelines, a politician with a bureaucratic program, or an international relations scholar with a predictive or prescriptive theory, Derrida shows us that decisions are both impossible and imperative. While acknowledging the undecidability facing our political leaders, we still must hold them responsible for the decisions they make. Words are not signifiers of truth and politics is not programmed decision-making—undecidability and deconstruction shine a critical light on those decision-makers who otherwise would hide behind linguistic, moral, and political ambiguities.

There is nothing outside the text'

'There is nothing outside the text,' Derrida famously commented (Derrida 1988, 136):

'The phrase which for some has been a sort of slogan, in general so badly understood, of deconstruction…means nothing else: there is nothing outside context. In this form, which says exactly the same thing, the formula would doubtless have been less shocking. I am not certain that it would have provided more to think about,' (Derrida 1988, 136).

Making 'text' and 'context' synonymous was Derrida's way of demonstrating that texts are more than words on a page—they are carriers of meaning, producers of history, promise makers, liars, tricksters, specters. 'There is nothing outside the text' means one need not look elsewhere for answers, that deconstruction is ever-present and ever-occurring. Arendt's phrase for a very similar process was 'pearl diving.' Although the Arendtian understanding of 'pearl diving' is more of an action than the doer-less happening of deconstruction, both terms signify a process of generating (that is, of gathering or uncovering) meaning in texts.

Pearl diving

In her introduction to Walter Benjamin's *Illuminations* (1968), Arendt quoted the following passage from Act I Scene 2 of Shakespeare's The Tempest:

Full fathom five thy father lies,
  Of his bones are coral made,
Those are pearls that were his eyes
  Nothing of him that doth fade
But doth suffer a sea-change
Into something rich and strange
(Benjamin 1968, 38).

She adopted the image of the pearl, of something that once was alive but now waits to be raised, examined, and cherished, as a metaphor for her approach to political theory. The way she described Benjamin's work—his ability to think poetically—also aptly characterizes

her own thinking:

Like a pearl diver who descends to the bottom of the sea, not to excavate the bottom and bring it to light but to pry loose the rich and the strange […] What guides this thinking is the conviction that although the living is subject to the ruin of time, the process of decay is at the same time a process of crystallization, that in the depth of the sea, into which sinks and is dissolved what once was alive, some things 'suffer a sea-change' and survive in new crystallized forms and shapes that remain immune to the elements […] (Benjamin 1968, 50-1).

The idea that history is more a record of pearl diving than of 'true' chronological events has a Foucauldian and even a Nietzschean ring to it.[3] Although her attention to meaning stood opposed to much of Nietzsche's nihilism and her insistence on plurality contradicted his theory of the Übermensch[4] (see Arendt 1998, 190), Arendt most certainly would have agreed with his oft-cited dictum that 'there are no facts.' One of the aphorisms in his book, The Will to Power (1968), hints at this process of pearl diving: 'Interpretation,' the introduction of meaning—not 'explanation' (in most cases a new interpretation over an old interpretation that has become incomprehensible, that is now itself only a sign). There are no facts, everything is in flux, incomprehensible, elusive;

what is relatively most enduring is—our opinions' (Nietzsche 1968, 327). Arendt understood history in precisely this way—as a process of interpretation, not explanation. History only comes about when a diver explores the depths, raises certain pearls, and leaves others behind.

Arendt's propensity for pearl diving, for selecting and examining pieces of history, for favoring certain stories over others, for discussing limited aspects of political culture, for engaging parts of texts but almost never the whole, became the central concern of many of her critics. In an article about Arendt's controversial approach to history, Judith Shklar made the observation that Arendt's method was more than a personal preference, that it carried important political ramifications:

> [Arendt] became convinced that the notion of history as an inevitable process contributed materially to the mentality of totalitarian leaders…It is therefore hardly astonishing that she resorted to so different a way of considering the past. It is selective, dwelling only on those moments that have a constructive present bearing, and it emphasizes the avoidable in contrast to the inevitable (Shklar 1977, 87).

Her goal, it seems, was to tell the tragic stories of history as if they might have been otherwise and to ask us to think about our futures in non-inevitable terms.

This narrative approach to history and politics, an approach designed both to inform and to instruct, is controversial among political theorists because Arendt refused to feign neutrality.[5] Her readers always knew her views on any given subject. As Lisa Disch insightfully remarks in her article on Arendt's methodology, 'storytelling signals [Arendt's] resistance against the dictate that the political thinker must withdraw to a vantage point beyond the social world in order to understand its relations of power and adjudicate its conflicts of interest' (Disch 1993, 668). Arendt was not interested in 'objectivity' as it typically is understood. In fact, she sought a redefinition of the concept altogether. In reply to colleagues who accused her of sentimentality, moralizing, and failing to be objective, Arendt argued that her narrative approach to history was truer to the nature of events and thus, in a sense, more 'objective' than traditional political theory. 'In this sense,' she writes, 'I think that a description of the [concentration] camps as hell on earth is more 'objective,' that is, more adequate to their essence than statements of a purely sociological or psychological nature.' And she went further, claiming that, 'to describe the concentration camps *sine ira* is not to be 'objective,' but to condone them' (Arendt 1953, 79). Arendt's redefinition of objectivity resembles her emphasis on understanding over explanation, on interpretation

over the gathering of 'facts.' Her failure to be 'objective' in the usual sense of the word is the true power of the narrative approach.

In a 2006 article in *Atlantic Monthly*, E. L. Doctorow surveyed various pieces of Western literature—Homer's *Iliad*, Melville's *Moby Dick*, Shakespeare's *Richard III*, and Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, among others—with an eye to the question in his subtitle: 'Who would give up the Iliad for the 'real' historical record?'. The section on *War and Peace* illustrates the fiction of history, the truth of fiction, and the political dimension of narrativity. After summarizing Tolstoy's physical description of Napoleon, Doctorow notes that:

> The issue here is not the accuracy of Tolstoy's description—it seems not that far off from nonfictive accounts—but its selectivity: other things that could be said of the man are not said. We are meant to understand the incongruity of a warring imperator in the body of a fat little Frenchman. Tolstoy's Napoleon could be a powdered boulevardier putting a pinch of snuff up his nose—and that is the point. The consequences of such a disparity of form and content can be counted in dead soldiers strewn across the European continent (Doctorow 2006, 88-9).

Doctorow's point about Tolstoy's treatment of Napoleon applies equally well to Arendt's treatment of the many historical people and events that interested her. In order to understand Eichmann's role in the Final Solution, Arendt concentrated on his mediocrity and his obedience instead of on his moral depravity and political power (see Arendt 2006). In her section on Dinesen in *Men in Dark Times* (1968), Arendt praised the wisdom of Dinesen's storytelling instead of the accuracy of her reporting on a story that happened to be true (see Arendt 1968, 95-109). Even in her criticisms of Karl Marx, Arendt focused more on the problems with his storytelling and his interpretations of history than on the 'fact' that his utopic vision did not turn out as planned (see Arendt 1998, 159-165). The current that runs through all of her work, whether she is writing about history, politics, or literature, is the desire to capture and record stories that give meaning, to polish and preserve these pearls.

The force of fiction

The manner in which Derrida approached the problem of objectivity bears a striking resemblance to Arendt's approach: both discussed objectivity in a larger section on Benjamin and both used the example of the Holocaust to illustrate the dangers in the perceived neutrality of objectivity. In his lecture *Force of Law: The 'Mystical Foundations of Authority'* (1989), Derrida deconstructs the idea of legal authority, highlighting the paradox that enforceability requires force. 'How

are we to distinguish,' he asks, 'between the force of law of a legitimate power and the supposedly originary violence that must have established this authority and that could not itself have been authorized by any anterior legitimacy, so that, in this initial moment, it is neither legal nor illegal—or, others would quickly say, neither just or unjust?' (Derrida 1989, 6). Such seemingly simple questions rock the foundation of Western legal authority. Derrida continues his line of questioning and eventually demonstrates that law is not justice, that law is deconstructable but justice is not, that deconstruction is justice. By disassociating justice and law Derrida challenged legal authority and by demonstrating that deconstruction is ever-occurring, he shattered the guise of objectivity.

In praising novelists over historians, E. L. Doctorow commented that, 'to be conclusively objective is to have no cultural identity, to exist in such existential solitude as to have, in fact, no place in the world' (Doctorow 2006, 92). Arendt clearly agreed with this statement, but as far as Derrida was concerned, she did not take her critique of objectivity far enough. In her report on Eichmann's trial, Arendt sought to understand the accused in the context of Nazi law and political culture. But Derrida saw a danger in Arendt's approach, the danger that limiting the context in which Eichmann can be judged and attempting to be 'objective' in one's assessment of his ac-

tions leads to a sense of normalcy. '[O]ne cannot think the uniqueness of an event like the final solution, as extreme point of mythic and representational violence, within its own system,' Derrida argued. 'One must try to think beginning with its other, that is to say, starting from what it tried to exclude and to destroy, to exterminate radically, from that which haunted it at once from without and within (Derrida 1989, 59-60).'

The mythological scale of the violence of the Holocaust and the attempt to exterminate the 'other'—this attack on plurality also deeply offended Arendt—generated in Derrida a desire to demonstrate that law is not and cannot be conflated with justice. Deconstructing law and objectivity allowed Derrida to challenge the sense of normalcy that inevitably arises when such crimes are tried in the usual manner:

> [Nazi Germany] kept the archive of its destruction […] with a terrifying legal, bureaucratic, statist objectivity and paradoxically produced a system in which its logic, the logic of objectivity made possible the invalidation and therefore the effacement of testimony and responsibilities, the neutralization of the singularity of the final solution…even 'normalize[d]' it as an act of war (Derrida 1989, 60).

Thus, the best weapon against the normalization of such violence is not law, but literature.6

Barbara Leckie explores Der-

rida's use of literature as a method of legal critique in her extraordinary article, 'The Force of Law and Literature' (1995). Literature, as Derrida understands it, 'carries a 'revealing power' with respect to language; it shares certain similarities with the law, 'but at a certain point it can also exceed them, interrogate them, 'fictionalize' them'' (Leckie 1995, 118). Literature's ability to 'fictionalize' the law, to deconstruct it, to challenge its authority and objectivity, leads to a blurring of the disciplinary lines and a reemphasis on the narrativity of politics. 'Not only does literature simultaneously depend on and interrogate laws,' Leckie writes:

> ...but the law—the continual subject of narratives—can only be understood as self-contradictory, lacking in pure essence, and structurally related to what Derrida terms différance or, in its metaphysical sense, 'literature'. The disciplinary integrity of both law and literature, then, are both thoroughly 'contaminated' at the outset (Leckie 1995, 116).

Derrida insisted on the 'contamination' of disciplines in order to legitimate literature as a method of legal critique. In this way, literature transcends history, politics, and law, because literature acknowledges its own fictive qualities and it can reveal the fictive qualities of those disciplines that cling so futilely to the guise of objectivity.

In one of the most insightful com-ments in his article on the history of fiction, E. L. Doctorow asserted that, 'the novelist hopes to lie his way to a greater truth than is possible with factual reportage' (Doctorow 2006, 92). Although reading Derrida's *Force of Law* (1989) highlights some potential problems with Arendt's reporting of the Eichmann trial, her narrative style, her free use of 'nonobjective' commentary, and most importantly, her rendering of an alternative, fictitious verdict reinforces Derrida's challenge to legal authority. After two hundred and seventy-seven pages of 'factual' reporting on Eichmann's trial, Arendt concluded the epilogue with the verdict she wished the court would have handed down:

> Just as you supported and carried out a policy of not wanting to share the earth with the Jewish people and the people of a number of other nations—as though you and your superiors had any right to determine who should and should not inhabit the world—we find that no one, that is, no member of the human race, can be expected to want to share the earth with you. This is the reason, and the only reason, you must hang (Arendt 2006, 279).

This alternative verdict—whether one agrees with Arendt or not—undermines the legitimacy of the actual verdict by revealing its inadequacies. Eichmann was condemned to death on shaky legal precedent and

in a country with no real authority to try him, yet his execution was hailed by many as a triumph of international law. Arendt touched upon the 'true' reason for our abhorrence of Eichmann's actions in her fictitious verdict, and through Derrida we can acknowledge her verdict as a valid legal critique.

What's in a name?

Returning to the metaphor of the pearl diver, Arendt once commented that, 'there is no more effective way to break the spell of tradition than to cut out the 'rich and strange,' coral and pearls, from what had been handed down in one solid piece' (Benjamin 1968, 40). Cutting out the 'rich and strange' is what Arendt and Derrida sought to do, each in their own way. But in addition to the construction and destruction of political narratives, Arendt and Derrida jointly passed to posterity an understanding of the role of language in preservation and disremembering. One of the most disturbing elements of the Holocaust, for Derrida, was the systematic destruction of names. '[W]hat the [Nazis] tried to exterminate,' he writes, 'was not only human lives by the millions, natural lives, but also a demand for justice; and also names: and first of all the possibility of giving, inscribing, calling and recalling the name' (Derrida 1989, 60).

Destroying the record of their victims' names—what Arendt referred to as negating their humanity (see Disch 1993, 673)—was the Nazis' attempt to force disremembering. Examples of such negation and willful forgetting abound. In Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables* (1862), Jean Valjean is referred to as prisoner number 24601 so that even he loses the sense of his own worth. Looming over Arlington Cemetery in Washington, D.C. is the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, famous because his identity is unknown, because he will not be forced to join his comrades buried under row after row of white crosses until a name can be etched on his tombstone. The folly in Romeo's plan to marry Juliet without his family's consent consists precisely in their failure to understand the implications of Juliet's question, 'what's in a name?' (*Romeo & Juliet*, Act II Scene 2). Memory is in a name. History is in a name. Politics is in a name. Together Arendt and Derrida taught us where to begin our search for political meaning: in language, in stories, in names.

To think is to judge: tracing political responsibility

Over the centuries, the search for meaning has consumed many influential thinkers and generated a multitude of schools of thought. From various forms of religion and spirituality, to hedonism, existialism, and nihilism, 'meaning' has maintained its central place in Western thought, even in the works of those who deny its existence or importance. Eschewing both singu-

lar and eternal meaning, Arendt and Derrida found a way to speak about meaning without advocating one. For Arendt, finding meaning was not a quest for an unchanging truth but rather the pursuit of understanding and acceptance. Similarly, Derrida believed that the exposure of infinite meanings was a necessary precondition for decision-making and responsibility. Although faulting the Jewish leadership for their role in the Holocaust seems incredibly insensitive and deconstructing the Western canon may appear to discredit it, both endeavors require a good deal more thought than political correctness otherwise would demand. In the preface to *The Human Condition*, Arendt articulated her most fundamental motive for conducting political theory the way she did: 'What I propose, therefore, is very simple: it is nothing more than to think what we are doing' (Arendt 1998, 5). Although they offended many along the way, Arendt and Derrida certainly made us think what we are doing. Thinking, as they understood it, leads to judgment, and responsibility must follow.

The politics of plurality

Plurality, 'acting and speaking together,' is the very condition of politics. But for Arendt, plurality signifies more than the existence of a multitude of people. Plurality is an active force. It requires accepting that we do not inhabit the earth alone, committing to thinking from another's

perspective, and combating the fear of the other. A careful analysis of Arendt's writings on plurality reveals this three-step process toward the generation of meaning and the assumption of political responsibility.

First, Arendt insists that productive and memorable public actions begin with an acknowledgement that 'not one man, but men, inhabit the earth' (Arendt 1998, 234). In a thinly veiled attack on the Nietzschean Übermensch, Arendt argues that:

The popular belief in a 'strong man' who, isolated against others, owes his strength to his being alone is either sheer superstition, based on the delusion that we can 'make' something in the realm of human affairs…or it is conscious despair of all action, political and non-political, coupled with the utopian hope that it may be possible to treat men as one treats other 'material' (Arendt 1998, 188).

A man may fabricate something—a chair, a sword, a novel—in isolation, but he never can act in isolation. The existence of other people—the initial and superficial definition of plurality—is what allows for speech and action, and thus for politics, and thus for meaning and remembrance.

The second step toward the generation of meaning and responsibility in Arendt's political thought is the ability to think from another's perspective. In one of the most un-

forgiving passages in all her works, Arendt describes what she considers Eichmann's ultimate failing: 'bragging is a common vice,' she wrote, 'and a more specific, and also more decisive, flaw in Eichmann's character was his almost total inability ever to look at anything from the other fellow's point of view' (Arendt 2006, 47-8). The concluding sentence of her report on Eichmann's trial garnered instant fame because it ran counter to the most common assumptions about evil. The lesson Eichmann taught her as he was led to the gallows was 'the lesson of the fearsome, word-and-thought-defying banality of evil' (Arendt 2006, 252). Eichmann's greatest sin, according to Arendt, was the sin of refusing to think.[7] Over a decade after the publication of *Eichmann in Jerusalem* in 1963, the association between evil actions and thoughtlessness still fascinated her. Recalling Eichmann's demeanor, she noted that, 'the deeds were monstrous, but the doer…was quite ordinary, commonplace, and neither demonic nor monstrous…[his] only notable characteristic…was not stupidity but *thoughtlessness*' (Arendt 1978, 4). This observation led to her investigation of how we think and ultimately to the series of lectures she gave entitled *The Life of the Mind* (1978). In the introduction to the published version, she told her readers that the impetus for this project was the question: 'Could the activity of thinking as such, the habit of examining whatever happens to come to pass or to attract attention, regardless of results and specific content, could this activity be among the conditions that make men abstain from evil-doing or even actually 'condition' them against it?' (Arendt 1978, 5). Her resounding conclusion was, 'yes.' The ability and the commitment to think for one's self—which also encompasses a commitment to think from someone else's perspective—precludes the performance of evil actions. A self-reflective person has no one to blame but him or herself; thought is the crucial ingredient in responsibility.

The third and final obligation of plurality is not to fear the 'other' but to seek enrichment in multiple perspectives. With this understanding of plurality comes meaning, for 'the inexhaustible richness of human discourse is infinitely more significant and meaningful than any One Truth could ever be' (Topf 1978, 363). But this obligation does not require magnanimity or empathy so much as an acceptance of reality. As Arendt noted, 'the language of the Romans, perhaps the most political people we have known, used the words 'to live' and 'to be among men' (*inter homines esse*) or 'to die' and 'to cease to be among men' (*inter homines esse desinere*) as synonyms' (Arendt 1998, 8). The 'other' need not be the enemy; his or her existence is a necessary condition for the generation of meaning. This insistence on the multiplicity of

meaning is also where the thought of Arendt and of Derrida most closely overlap.

In a recent article in the German Law Journal, Elisabeth Weber makes a brief but compelling argument that, 'deconstruction is justice since it calls for an untiring, in principle infinite, because never 'finished,' analysis of the philosophical heritage and its juridicopolitical systems, an analysis that is inseparable from an equally infinite responsibility' (Weber 2005, 184). She shows that the dominant power—as Derrida defined it, 'the one that manages to impose and, thus, to legitimate, indeed to legalize (for it is always a question of law) on a national or world stage, the terminology and thus the interpretation that best suits it in a given situation' (Weber 2005, 183)—is always in danger of being challenged by deconstruction, a position she holds in direct contradiction to many of Derrida's critics who see deconstruction as nothing more than 'an aestheticizing apolitical and ahistorical exercise' (Weber 2005, 179). For example: the dominant international powers, the United States of America and its Western European allies, have employed the term 'war on terror' to characterize their military actions in the Middle East. These military actions are a war in the sense that they are organized, state-sponsored acts of violence, but since the United States Congress has refused to declare war—and besides, how does one declare war against a noun?—these acts of violence are allowed to occur relatively unregulated by the 'rules of war.' Torture can be used as long as the victims of torture are labeled 'enemy combatants' and not 'prisoners of war.' In fact, torture is not torture anymore—it is 'enhanced interrogation.' Attacks on civilians can be forgiven as accidents instead of prosecuted as war crimes. And most importantly, by fighting a concept and not a people or a nation, the West can continue to view itself as unequivocally 'right' and virtuous. The phrase 'war on terror' is both descriptive and deceptive; it serves to justify the dominant powers but it is also haunted by those it seeks to silence. Only by understanding the plurality of meanings and intentions embedded within this phrase can we begin to assign responsibility to our political leaders. The slogan used by Big Brother in George Orwell's dystopic novel *1984* (1949) summarizes the power of 'doublespeak' best of all: 'War is peace. Freedom is slavery. Ignorance is strength.' In Orwell's novel, the government understood the power of language and sought to change reality through language—but phrases like 'war on terror' demonstrate that his story, in many ways, is true. Deconstruction is justice because it uses the plurality of language not to distort reality, but to reveal it.

The hope of responsibility

As the previous section outlined, plurality, in the sense in which Arendt and Derrida spoke of it, is a necessary condition of responsibility. To understand why this allows for a positive conception of politics, though, one must understand that Arendt and Derrida raised the threshold for what counts as 'responsibility.' They did not mean to equate blame or guilt or even causation with responsibility. Responsibility—in typical Derridian fashion—is a double gesture of acceptance and refusal, of action and abstention, of promising and forgiving, of remembering and forgetting, of seeking others' perspectives and relying on one's own judgment. Responsibility is understanding the past and thinking and judging in the present, with hope for the future.

Derrida's disassociation of law and justice resulted in a challenge to legal authority and an accompanying increase in political responsibility. By undermining the 'justness' of law, Derrida denied politicians recourse to the law when trying to determine a just course of action. That something is legal or illegal says nothing about whether it is right or wrong: Each case is other, each decision is different and requires an absolutely unique interpretation, which no existing, coded rule can or ought to guarantee absolutely. At least, if the rule guarantees it in no uncertain terms, so that the judge is a calculating machine, which happens, and we will not say that he is just, free, and responsible (Derrida 1989, 23).

The strongest indication of Arendt's agreement with Derrida's assessment of justice and responsibility is her report on Adolf Eichmann. The fact that Eichmann was convicted, tried, found guilty, and hanged for his role in the Final Solution did not, in Arendt's eyes, prove his responsibility. By her description, Eichmann was a man 'who never made a decision on his own, who was extremely careful always to be 'covered' by orders, who… did not even like to volunteer suggestions and always required 'directives'' (Arendt 2006, 94). He was not a monster, but a clown, not evil, but thoughtless (Arendt 2006, 54). If this pathetic character can be held responsible for the Holocaust, if his death is somehow retributively just, then we as a society mean very little by the words 'responsibility' and 'justice.' Certainly Derrida and Arendt demanded more.

A haunting sense of tragedy inevitably accompanies any discussion of justice and responsibility, for these concepts take on their true significance in dark times. Arendt spoke of the tragic heroes of Greek lore, the quest for immortality that plagues mortal beings, and the preventability of so many human atrocities. 'She elevated politics and political action to the level of epic and

tragedy,' noted Sheldon Wolin, 'not in order to exonerate actors from their misdeeds or to glorify a particular nation, but to impose a demand upon those who presumed to decide great public matters and upon those who presumed to theorize about political actors and actions' (Wolin 1977, 91). Much is at stake in discussions of the political and only a grave and seemingly tragic tone would suffice. But the tone of Arendt's writing stood in sharp contrast to the hope she held for natality, change, and action. A religious metaphor is not inappropriate here: she sought remembrance and reconciliation in the hope of a brighter future.[8] By seeking out the excluded, the disregarded, the forgotten, the disremembered, the erased, the dead, Arendt adds to the number of stories, experiences, and perspectives that can be considered in future political debates. And in so doing she forces decision-makers either to silence her as well or to think. Thinking necessitates judgment, and she based her assessment of the quality of political judgments on the politician's ability to think from another's perspective. In a paradox that Arendt understood no less than Derrida, hope for the future only arises from an understanding of the tragedy of the past, and responsibility is only possible because humans have an ever-present capacity for failure.

In contrast to Arendt, the hopefulness in Derrida's work lies not in the paradox of tragedy but in seemingly paralyzing indecision, although the unpredictability of action which forms a central part of Arendt's work makes its appearance in Derrida's as well. Political actors are faced with impossible decisions every day, impossible because their outcomes are unknown and unknowable. The greatest threat Derrida sensed in modern politics was the drive for singularity and simplicity. Rules, plans, programs, bureaucracies, operate on the assumption of decidability: if x happens, we will respond with y. 'The privilege granted to unity, to totality, to organic ensembles, to community as a homogenized whole—this is a danger for responsibility, for decision, for ethics, for politics,' Derrida explained in an interview (Derrida 1997, 13). True decision making depends on the uncertainty of the outcome.

In addition to their similar discussions of language, narrativity, and plurality, Arendt and Derrida share two more fundamental similarities: both convey an urgent mandate to *think* and both are fundamentally hopeful because of their willingness to embrace that which is so often considered frightening in politics, the 'other.' In an example that brings to mind Arendt's discussion about her methodology of 'pearl diving' as an attempt to avoid totalitarian thinking, Derrida spoke of plurality within contemporary debates over the politics of identity:

We often insist nowadays on cul-

tural identity—for instance, national identity, linguistic identity, and so on. Sometimes the struggles under the banner of cultural identity, national identity, linguistic identity, are noble fights. But at the same time the people who fight for their identity must pay attention to the fact that identity is not the self-identity of a thing, this glass for instance, this microphone, but implies a difference within identity. […] Once you take into account this inner and other difference, then you pay attention to the other and you understand that fighting for your own identity is not exclusive of another identity, is open to another identity. And this prevents totalitarianism, nationalism, egocentrism, and so on (Derrida 1997, 13-4).

In other words, plurality is inherent in any cultural identity. Against the singularity so often imposed by power, narrativity gathers this pluralism and deconstruction exposes it. Arendt's approach can be summarized as remembrance and reconciliation, Derrida's as deconstruction and decision, but both rely on the plurality of experience, the multiplicity of meaning, the urgency of thinking, the necessity of judging, and the hopefulness of responsibility.

A story is only the beginning

In this article I set out to explore what a joint reading of Arendt's

narrative approach to political theory and Derrida's articulation of deconstruction could tell us about the importance of political narratives. In support of my conclusions, the United States Congress has been debating various ways to cope with the crushing weight of America's debt. Among the possible solutions are tax increases. But the narrative about the American middle-class is so powerful and so pervasive that even the most progressive Senators have agreed to a discourse about taxes that assigns those households making up to $250,000 a year the label 'middle-class,' which exempts them from tax increases. And this at a time when the average annual income in America has declined to just over $40,000 (Social Security Online 2010). Cloaked in the rhetoric of the working middle-class, the lightly-taxed high-wage earners in America have succeeded (with ample help from Congress) in steering the debate toward which social programs should be cut in order to reign in the deficit. The longer some politicians further the narrative about middle-class millionaires, and the longer their opponents accept these terms of debate without questioning the narrative and linguistic framework, the more powerful this narrative (and its beneficiaries) becomes. But the debate about the American tax code is only one example of many found on the nightly news. Clever phrases like 'the war on terror,' 'pro-life,' 'The Freedom to Farm Act,' and

'the Death Tax' all give witness to the sophisticated way in which governments and politicians have used language to frame debates and alter (that is, create a new) reality. But luckily for those who oppose political 'double-speak,' in these debates, one can fight fire with fire. One of the most potent antidotes to political power is a people's innate ability to tell a story.

Today, Tolstoy is remembered as one of the greatest supporters of the Russian peasants. Charles Dickens has been honored with a similar position in support of the working poor in Victorian England, as has Virginia Woolf of pre-suffrage women, Hugo of revolutionaries in nineteenth-century France and Foucault of revolutionaries in twentieth-century France. It is no accident that writers, novelists, thinkers, storytellers, theorists of language and history, outlive most contemporary politicians in the cultural memory of successive generations. We remember these great men and women in part because their stories took on lives of their own. As Arendt said, 'even though stories are the inevitable results of action, it is not the actor but the storyteller who perceives and 'makes' the story' (Arendt 1998, 192). Therein lies the true potential of the political theory of Arendt and Derrida: their stories have outlived them and they have left us with the theoretical tools to craft a positive politics.

Arendt sought understanding from experience, reconciliation from remembrance, and hope from tragedy. Her work on plurality serves as a beautiful reminder that we do not inhabit the earth alone—the 'other' is necessary not only for politics but for meaning and even for reality. 'Only the experience of sharing a common human world with others who look at it from different perspectives can enable us to see reality in the round and to develop a shared common sense,' she wrote, 'Without it, we are each driven back on our own subjective experience, in which only our feelings, wants, and desires have reality' (Arendt, 1998, xvii). Her narrative approach was one of the first political theories to see in stories the true seed of resistance and change. But those who would use Arendt's theories to legitimate nontraditional forms of politics must also accept her demanding call for inclusion, understanding, and responsibility. Irish ballads may be used to fight British dominance, but they may not be used to exclude Protestants or gypsies from participation in Irish society. Stories of the Holocaust may be told by survivors to their children in order to preserve the memories and begin reconciliation, but they may not be told to exonerate the Jewish people from violence done toward the Palestinians. Arendt's narrative approach at once widens the field of traditional political theory and raises the standard for political participation and

responsibility.

Coupled with the more playful but equally serious Derrida, Arendt's work takes on an urgency and a hopefulness that are necessary if a positive revitalization of politics is to be effected. No text was sacred for Derrida - that is, no text was beyond his critical analysis and the ever-destabilizing effect of deconstruction. The Declaration of Independence, the Laws of Plato, and the Hebrew Bible were as likely to be the focus of his radical approach as the in-themselves-radical works of Heidegger, Kafka, or Joyce. Whether he was writing about literature, philosophy, or international relations, Derrida's recurring emphasis on linguistic plurality and undecidability *made* his subjects political. That words differ from themselves; that the intention of the author matters less than the contextual interpretation, that the outcome of a decision cannot be known beforehand in order for a decision to take place - all these conditions add to a sense of urgency about political decisions and demand responsibility for those decisions. Deconstruction is justice because justice cannot be deconstructed - it is the only thing immune to the destabilization of language. It is the only standard by which we may judge right and wrong; it is the foundation of ethics, politics, and morality. But in a sense, deconstruction assumes the fundamental premise of a Western tradition that it simultaneously deconstructs:

the assumption found in most religions that man is not omniscient or omnipotent. We do not and cannot know what will come, we are subject to the threefold frustration of action, we must exist in a world inhabited by others, but still we must act. Together Arendt and Derrida help to dispel the fear of the other, the fear of decision, and the fear of action while demanding thought, plurality, and responsibility.

Reading Joyce's *Ulysses* (2007) first awakened in Derrida his fascination with the playfulness and the endless possibilities of language. In many ways, Joyce was the literary frontrunner of deconstruction and he faced as much outrage over his alleged irreverence as Derrida did. Joyce rewrote the standard Catholic sign of the cross, 'In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.' to read: 'In the name of the former and of the latter and of their holocaust. Allmen' (Joyce 2007, 419). Sacrilegious perhaps, but the beauty in Joyce's rendition is its prayer to and for humanity. We remember the past, we hope for the future, and we presently call on all men. Embedded within Arendt's narrative approach and Derrida's deconstruction is a similar call. In a time when politics so often is characterized by wealth, power, war, fear, and division, Arendt and Derrida are hopeful without being naïve. They demand action as well as responsibility. They revitalize a sense of community that rightfully

belongs in the heart of politics. And they say both to those who have and to that which has been lost, forgotten, or silenced, 'yes I said yes I will Yes' (Joyce 2007, 806).

Endnotes

[1] Adolf Eichmann was a high-ranking member of the Nazi party in Germany during the Second World War. He was tasked with running the day-to-day operations of the Holocaust – literally making sure the trains ran on time. After the fall of the Third Reich, Eichmann escaped to Argentina where he eluded the famed Nazi-hunters until his capture by Israeli intelligence agents in 1960. He was taken to Jerusalem and tried and convicted for war crimes and crimes against humanity. In 1962 he was hanged. His case presented unique difficulties for the prosecution because although he organized the Nazi death camps, Eichmann never personally killed anyone. He also carefully followed German law at the time, so prosecutors could not charge him with breaking any laws. Additionally, there were many who questioned Israel's authority to try a German citizen. See *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (2006) for Arendt's discussions of the problems and complexities of this trial.

[2] John Searle wrote a series of pieces in The New York Review of Books criticizing Derrida and deconstruction for, among other things, 'the low level of philosophical argumentation, the deliberate obscurantism of the prose, the wildly exaggerated claims, and the constant striving to give the appearance of profundity by making claims that seem paradoxical, but under analysis often turn out to be silly or trivial' (Searle 1982). He also opined that, 'Authors who are concerned with discovering the truth are concerned with evidence and reasons, with consistency and inconsistency, with logical consequences, explanatory adequacy, verification and testability. But all of this is part of the apparatus of the very "logo-centricism" that deconstruction seeks to undermine' (Searle 1982).

[3] Michel Foucault, heavily influenced by the work of Friedrich Nietzsche, problematized the Western approach to history. Instead of recounting past events with an air of inevitability, Foucault preferred what he termed the 'genealogical approach.' He would take a historical happening, like the rise of the Western penal system, and trace its origins in the social and political thought of the society out of which such an institution arose. His goal was to demonstrate that many of the developments we understand to be rational, inevitable and progressive are, in fact, none of these. His approach to historiography is similar to Arendt's in that they both seek to dispel the notion that a single, chronological, and comprehensive history exists or can be created.

[4] Nietzsche introduced his idea of the 'Übermensch,' often translated into English as the 'Superman,' in his book Thus Spake Zarathustra (1883-5). Although the Übermensch was in many ways the embodiment of Nietzschean nihilism and the personification of Nietzsche's belief that man could be the creator of his own meaning and his own morality (replacing the need for a God), the idea often is used to describe an idealized individualist—someone who

depends solely on himself for success and happiness. Arendt's explanation of human speech, human action, and the importance of plurality stands in sharp contrast to the idea that a man can do or make anything of lasting value on his own.

5 Unlike so many social scientists, Arendt did not believe that in order to analyze and pass judgment upon political happenings, one somehow must be above the political fray. She thought that traditional social scientific virtues like neutrality, objectivity, and data-driven factuality were not only impossible to achieve but dangerous to pursue. In fact, the only people who can pretend to be distant, neutral, and objective are those who fundamentally are unaffected by the political questions at stake. Arendt believed that although her political philosophy was informed by her experiences as a woman, as a refugee, as a Jew, etc., the richness of perspective that each of those lenses provides is much more valuable than the ramblings of someone who claims to have no ties, no biases, and no defining experiences.

6 I have focused on the political power of literature in this article for two reasons. First, literature does what social science cannot: it allows for multiple, equally valid meanings. Second, literature, unlike art or music or other forms of expression, is a means of communicating through words and language. The fact that politics and literature both rely on the medium of language to convey meaning enables literature to be used to critique the political on its own terms. Simple anecdotal evidence reveals the power of literature to work against the normalisation of violence: federal law in America makes lynching African Americans illegal but Harper Lee's portrayal of Atticus Finch and Tom Robinson in To Kill a Mockingbird (1960) makes the reader feel deeply why it is wrong.

vii Arendt believed Eichmann's thoughtlessness to be his greatest sin because, under a totalitarian regime, his thoughts were the only element in his life that could have been free. Although his actions were monstrous, Arendt does not fault him for them primarily. Even Nazi Germany could not monitor or control a man's private thoughts. By refusing to think for himself, Eichmann placed his moral agency in the hands of Nazi Germany.

8 I believe the distinction between a utopic vision of politics and a positive or optimistic view of politics is crucial. The former has come to represent an idealized, perfected, almost Heaven-like community of peace and happiness. Arendt certainly had hope for the future of human communities, but her entire political theory was based on an understanding and an acceptance of human plurality. As long as humans experience the world differently, have different aspirations, and pursue different goals, discord is inevitable. Arendt would not have trivialized the enormity of the political problems we face by suggesting that perfection is attainable. But that concession did not dampen her hope that a better future is possible.

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