

*From the question of 'what' to the question of 'how' or
how to write about the lives of others?*

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*Under history, memory and forgetting
Under memory and forgetting, life.
But writing a life is another story.
Incompletion*

(Ricoeur 2002, 506)

One of the most frequently posed questions in the burgeoning field of narrative research is the simple ontological one: what is narrative? Drawing on the tradition of narratology, narrative researchers have attempted to address this question and have come up with a variety of answers and definitions. Despite the different angles that narratives have been looked at from, however, there seems to be a consensus as to the importance of the ontological question, which needs to be continuously raised and explored. Throughout my work I have interrogated this consensus around the primacy of the ontological question. Instead, I have put it in brackets, and have raised questions that are much more pertinent and interesting for me: What do narratives do? How have they emerged? What are the possibilities of becoming other?

In tracing conditions of possibility that have historically shaped conceptual understandings of what a narrative is, sequence emerges as a dominant theme. Drawing on the sequential canon, researchers have suggested that narratives should be understood as organizing a sequence of events into a whole so that the significance of each event can be understood through its relation to that whole. The following definition is exemplary of this approach: 'Narratives (stories) in the human sciences should be defined provisionally as discourses with a clear sequential order that connect events in a meaningful way for a definite audience and thus offer insights about the world and/or people's experiences of it.' (Hinchman and Hinchman, cited in Elliott, 2005:3) The triangle of sequence/meaning/representation creates here a conceptual framework within which narrative research is being placed. This framework seems to be shaken, however, within the post-narratological scene, where the sequential condition is interrogated, meaning is decentred and representation is problematised. In this light there has been a shift of interest from the ontology of *what is* to the historical ontology (Foucault, 1986) of how it has emerged and historically constituted, further moving to the ontogenesis (Simondon, 1992) of how it works, with what effects and what are its possibilities of becoming other. It is I have argued (Tamboukou 2008) on this transitional ground from ontology to ontogenesis that the

conceptual triangle of sequence/meaning/representation should be interrogated and narratives should be theorized as entities open to constant becomings, stories in becoming. In this light, it is to the consideration of process, rather than sequence, that the interest in narrative research should shift.

Process as an organising plane derives from a conception of time as simultaneity and duration, where past, present and future co-exist in the 'now' of narratives. Narratives are therefore taken as events that express *moments of being* crystallized into narrative forms. These narrativised moments however, create conditions of possibility for more stories to emerge. As Hannah Arendt has poetically put it, 'The world is full of stories, of events and occurrences and strange happenings, which wait only to be told, and the reason why they usually remain untold is [...] lack of imagination' (1968, 97)

Narratives are indeed at the heart of how Arendt conceptualizes the human condition. Drawing on the Aristotelian notion of *energeia*, [action] Arendt's thesis is that 'action as narration and narration as action are the only things that can partake in the most "specifically human" aspects of life' (Kristeva 2001, 41). As the only tangible traces of the human existence, stories in Arendt's thought evade theoretical abstractions and contribute to the search of meaning by revealing multiple perspectives while remaining open and attentive to the unexpected, the unthought-of; they 'respect the contingency of action' (Guaraldo 2001, 214) and express the unpredictability of the human condition. In doing so stories ultimately reconfigure the sphere of politics as an open plane of horizontal connections, wherein the past can be remembered and the future can be reimagined. This is how I am led to my own work: what it means to narrate the moment/the event, to tell stories whose end you do not know but you actively want to re-imagine and hence my fascination with the notion of narratives as 'portraits of moments' in writing about women's life stories. (See Tamboukou 2010a, b, c).

The phrase 'portraits of moments' comes from Hannah Arendt's (2000) biography of *Rahel Varnhagen: the story of a Jewish woman*. The book was first published in 1957 when Arendt was already living in the States but it was actually her second doctoral thesis, the *habilitation* that would give her the right to teach at in the German academic system. Arendt's supervisor was Karl Jaspers and following his idea of problematizing what it means to be German, Arendt wanted to problematize Jewish identity and particularly the problem of Jewish acculturation. She thus studied Rahel Varnhagen's letters and diaries and then wrote her story interweaving disparate moments and events into a drawing that had a meaning.

But is it possible Cavarero (2000) has asked to tell a story that has a meaning? This was my challenge in writing a genealogy of the female self in art where I mostly drew on women artists' letters and diaries which I conceived, theorised and analysed as 'portraits of moments' linking them, to another significant proposition, what Arendt has called: 'writing from within', which I will now discuss.

In her approach to life writing Arendt is not concerned with the narratologists' obsession with sequence, particularly temporal sequence; she actually thinks that stories should reveal what sequence often covers: 'the story reveals the meaning of what otherwise would remain the unbearable sequence of sheer happenings.' (Arendt, 1968, 104) Rather than following the imperative of the beginning, middle and end of

the Aristotelian *Poetics*, Arendt's interest lies with the importance of narrative agency and closure in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*. As Julia Kristeva pithily notes in this philosophical text 'the art of narrative resides in the ability to condense the action into an exemplary moment, to extract it from the continuous flow of time, and reveal a *who*.' (2001, 16) This interest in freezing the exemplary moment wherein human beings reveal themselves to the world through action and speech also differs from Ricoeur's theories that focus on the interrelation between temporality and narrativity. While Arendt's interest lies in the moment of action and speech, Ricoeur emphasizes the importance of the plot in the formation of narrative identity and dismisses the 'now' as concealing the 'true constitution of time.' (Ricoeur 1981, 166)

Although Arendt highlights the importance of stories in creating meaning she makes the distinction between revealing meaning and defining it, thus pointing to the impossibility of pinning down what stories are about or what subjects should be or do. 'It is true', she notes 'that storytelling reveals meaning without committing the error of defining it.' (1968, 105) It has to be noted here however that as an existential concept 'meaning' remains rather elusive in Arendt's work. As Lewis and Sandra Hinchman have pithily noted, meaning for Arendt 'became a jigsaw puzzle, whose pieces are distributed among actors in the public realm, spectators, poets, historians and philosophers.' (1994, 164)

Still, who is this 'evasive' meaning addressed to? Who is the audience of these stories? Sheldon Wolin has commented that for Arendt 'audience is a metaphor for the political community whose nature is to be a community of remembrance.' (1977, 97) In this light it is important to remember that closure refers here to the power of stories to reveal the meaning of actions and thus complete them; it does not refer to the closure of the story itself, the Aristotelian *telos*, the end of the plot.

Liliane Weissberg has commented that for Arendt, 'biography reflects on an individual life, but this life becomes public for history.' (2000, 18) But how can this be done? What does it mean to write from within, while you also write for history? Arendt's approach is controversial in that she attempts to write about *inner lives* keeping a distance from what Foucault (2000) has famously criticized as the 'sciences of man'. As Weissberg notes, 'instead of a psychological analysis, [Arendt] proposes a turn outward, to the mimetic gesture ... she addresses the notion of action and speaks of the public self in terms of performance.' (2000, 19)

In writing Varnhagen's a life *from the inside*, Arendt did not discuss external facts, unless they were absolutely necessary, but she did not write within the biographical discourse of introspection either. She was interested in the life and actions of the mind, not of the soul or the psyche. The biographer, she has further argued, has to respect the life she is writing about and should refrain from investing the biographical subject with meanings she might neither recognize, nor understand. How to keep psychology or psychoanalysis at bay while at the same time writing about the subject's inner life has been of course a difficult and risky endeavour, but still an exciting path to follow in life writing, the idea of 'writing from within.' (Weissberg 2000, 5)

Arendt never wrote an autobiography. However *Rahel Varnhagen* has been considered and discussed as coming very close to an intellectual autobiography; in

writing Varnhagen's biography, Arendt looks at the shape of a life that has been completed and responds to it with intellectual rigour and unbounded passion: as her biographical subject, Varnhagen would ultimately become for Arendt, 'my closest friend, though she has been dead for some hundred years.' (in Weissberg 2000, 5) Apart from unfolding Arendt's philosophical ideas and concerns, what is autobiographical in Varnhagen's biographical text however?

As Weissberg has pithily commented, Arendt's inner biography was only possible if staged as an autobiography, 'as a fictitious act seemingly necessary if one wants to come close to a life.' (6) To do that, Arendt had to imagine herself as participating in Varnhagen's life, following the public life of her salon, reading, transcribing and rewriting her letters and her diary entries, discussing the dreams Varnhagen had jotted down, not as interpretations of repressed thoughts or emotions, but as questions that entered the realm of the day, and ultimately became 'narratives of the day.' (6) Weissberg therefore observes that writing a story *from the inside* requires the author to retreat and allow the biographical subject to take the lead. This of course does not mean that the authorial intention is completely erased; it rather unfolds in parallel with the voice of the biographical subject, challenging as Weissberg has noted the power of the author.

Arendt wrote Varnhagen's biography very much drawing on her correspondence. Varnhagen's life was thus written in letters, conceived as 'portraits of moments': 'I want a letter to be the portrait of a moment: that in which it is written'. (in Weissberg 2000, 11). It is also interesting to note here that in her preface to Varnhagen's biography, Arendt uses the notion of 'the portrait' to denote her biographical work: 'My portrait therefore follows as closely as possible Rahel's own reflections upon herself.' (Arendt 2000, 82)

I have followed Arendt's idea of the portrait in my work but rather than conceptualizing it as a dyadic relationship between the author and the biographical subject I have drawn instead on the idea of the portrait as a painting that opens up a performative scene, a dialogic space wherein the subject, the researcher and the reader meet, interact and negotiate meaning about subjects and their world. In this light the portrait becomes a site of mediation and communication enabling the emergence of a multiplicity of meanings and traces of truth. Moreover the autobiographical subject of the analysis, far from being essentialised, pinned down in a fixed subject position, or encased within the constraints and limitations of her story, becomes a 'narrative persona' (Tamboukou 2010b, 180), who responds to the theoretical questions and concerns of the researcher, without necessarily validating them with 'the evidence of experience' (Scott 1991).

Although my initial idea of the narrative persona comes from a synthesis of Deleuze and Guattari's (1994) notion of the conceptual persona of the philosopher (as Socrates for Plato) and the aesthetic figure of the artist (as Jane Eyre for Brontë), it is in Arendt's work again that the concept has been ultimately grounded: As Arendt notes in her book *On Revolution*, the roots of *the persona* are to be found in ancient drama wherein it has a twofold function: a) as a mask disguising the actor in theatre and b) as a device that although disguising would allow the voice of the actor to sound through. (1990, 106) In the Roman times, *the persona* passes from the theatre to the legal realm and it means a legal personality, a right-and-duty bearing person, a Roman

citizen, not any natural person. So what we have is: the drama persona and the legal persona.

In this context my narrative persona is a dramatic figure and it is through her story that certain concepts can be rehearsed and dramatised so that their enactment can create a scene for dialogic exchanges and interactions. But also in its legal dimension the narrative persona takes up a position in discourse and assumes her rights as a subject. This positioning does not essentialise her but creates a person with whom one can be in dialogue, but also to whom one is responsible. 'A right-and duty bearing person, created by the law and which appears before the law' (1990, 107) becomes in my case a person created by her narrative, which appears in the order of discourse, but to whom I am accountable having taken up the responsibility of presenting her story as an Arendtian design that has a meaning; the latter is open to interpretation and negotiation between you as audience/viewers/readers, myself as an author and narrative researcher and my narrative persona, whose stories should be open to all.

Narrative connections

What I have argued in this paper is that I am not interested in setting the boundaries of what narratives are but rather in charting possibilities of what they can do; this is because narratives are inserted in the web of actions and deeds, which as Arendt says is boundless (1998). I am thus interested in studying narratives as process and as events because it is in the study of process that we can have the chance to follow the uncertainty and unpredictability of action as well as have a glimpse at moments/events, wherein new beginnings erupt, new subjectivities emerge—albeit as narrative personae—and freedom can once more be remembered and re-imagined.

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