

## **Against Compassion: Post-traumatic Stories in Arendt, Benjamin, Melville, and Coleridge**

Abstract: The paper suggests that Samuel Taylor Coleridge's arguments against sympathy after the French Revolution, Walter Benjamin's claims against empathy following the traumatic shock of Modernity and the First World War, and Hannah Arendt's critical take on compassion after the Holocaust are similar responses to singular historical crises. Reconsidering Arendt's *On Revolution* (1963) and its evocation of Hermann Melville's novella *Billy Budd* (1891), I show first that the novella bears the traces of an essay by Samuel Taylor Coleridge, "The Appeal to Law" (1809). Then, drawing on Walter Benjamin's writings on trauma in *Illuminations* (1968, edited by Arendt), I discuss the political importance Arendt attaches to the *proper way* of telling a story, at a time when "the communicability of experience is decreasing" (I, 86). Through the analysis of Benjamin's "The Storyteller" and Arendt's "heartless" report on the Eichmann trial (1963), I equally show that, according to Arendt, testimonies must be narrated, or rather performed, in a dispassionate, dry, and compact manner so that they can be historically and politically relevant.

keywords: Compassion, Trauma, Storytelling, Judgement, Performative, Performance, Testimony, Coleridge, Benjamin, Melville, Arendt

### Coleridge, Melville, Arendt

There is a certain scholarly agreement that literature has the potential to brush history against the grain by generating empathy with victims. Lynn Hunt, for instance, typically argues that the 18<sup>th</sup>-century sentimental novel could generate sympathy for those who had been considered "less than human," and this paved the way for the 18<sup>th</sup>-century invention of universal human rights.<sup>1</sup> The role empathy with real human beings plays in preventing

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<sup>1</sup> Hunt gives the example of Richardson's *Pamela* and *Clarissa* and Rousseau's *Julie; ou La nouvelle Héloïse* that appeared shortly before the concept of *les droits de l'homme*. Hunt, Lynn. *Inventing Human Rights* (New York: Norton, 2007) Other scholars, like Joseph Slaughter or Martha Nussbaum, equally share Hunt's view of the politically beneficial effects of literature and the narrative empathy it generates. See Slaughter, Joseph. *Human*

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dehumanization, in general, has also often been commented upon, in Arendt scholarship as well.<sup>2</sup>

The present paper aims to show why three thinkers, Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834), Walter Benjamin, and Hannah Arendt, who lived amid the greatest historical crises, offered strong arguments *against* sympathy, empathy, and compassion, even though they can all be considered as advocates for human rights.<sup>3</sup> More particularly, I argue that Coleridge's arguments against "sensibility" and "constitutional Sympathy" (*AR*, 57) after the French Revolution, Walter Benjamin's claims against "empathy" following the shock of Modernity and the First World War, and Hannah Arendt's critical take on "compassion"<sup>4</sup> after the Holocaust can be considered as similar responses to singular historical traumas. Revisiting Arendt's *On Revolution* (1963), and its evocation of Hermann Melville's *Billy Budd*, I also show that Melville's novella bears the traces of an essay by Samuel Taylor Coleridge, "The Appeal to Law" (1809), being itself argument against the use of fellow-feeling in politics. In the second part of the paper, I shall turn to Benjamin's writings, especially "The Storyteller", and to Arendt's "heartless" report on the Eichmann trial (1963) to investigate the importance Arendt attached to politically effective ways of telling stories, especially post-traumatic testimonies. I suggest that, according to Arendt, testimonies must be narrated, performed, in a dispassionate and compact style so that they can be historically and politically relevant and act upon the community.

The claim that Coleridge argued against sympathy may first look counterintuitive for those unfamiliar with the British debates around the French Revolution in general, and Coleridge's political itinerary in particular, with his turn from Revolutionary radicalism towards Anglican conservatism, following the Terror and the rise of Napoleon. Indeed, for many, Coleridge may be the poet of sympathetic imagination. However, recent scholarship

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*Rights, Inc.: The World Novel, Narrative Form, and International Law* (Fordham UP, 2007) and Nussbaum, Martha. *Poetic Justice, The Literary Imagination and Public Life* (Beacon Press, 1995.)

<sup>2</sup> E.g.: Lang, Johannes. „Explaining Genocide: Hannah Arendt and The Social- Scientific Concept Of Dehumanization” in *The Anthem Companion to Hannah Arendt*, (Anthem Press London, New York, 2017). 175. Scholars use different criteria to define the degrees and forms of the cluster of intersubjective emotions variously termed sympathy, empathy, or compassion and frequently describe the historical and cultural contexts in which they have been put to use. For a comprehensive account, see Breyer, Thiemo, "Empathy, sympathy and compassion," in *The Routledge Handbook of Phenomenology of Emotion* ed. Thomas Szanto and Hilge Landweer (Abingdon: Routledge, 2020), accessed 05 júl. 2021, Routledge Handbooks Online.

<sup>3</sup> I will investigate these related concepts as they appear in specific contexts, defining their shifting meanings in different ways.

<sup>44</sup> Arendt's critique of compassion has often been discussed, see e.g.: Newcomb, Matthew J. "Totalized Compassion: The (Im)Possibilities for Acting out of Compassion in the Rhetoric of Hannah Arendt." *JAC*, vol. 27, no. 1/2, 2007. 105–133. *JSTOR*, [www.jstor.org/stable/20866770](http://www.jstor.org/stable/20866770). Accessed 5 Feb. 2021.

has shown that many conservative writers of the period, including Coleridge himself, endowed sentiment and sympathy with a negative political significance, considering "sympathy as a disruptive social phenomenon, which functioned to spread [...] like a 'contagion'".<sup>5</sup> And while we can equally witness a growing critique of sensibility as a literary and cultural bourgeois affectation best represented by Austen's *Sense and Sensibility*,<sup>6</sup> in this essay, I would like to foreground how sensibility got associated with susceptibility to radical fanaticism in the conservative imagination of the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in general, and in Coleridge's in particular.

Recently, it has become customary to use trauma theory to examine British responses to the French Revolution;<sup>7</sup> in my *A Modern Coleridge. Cultivation, Addiction, Habits*, I also drew a parallel between Coleridge's response to the French Revolution and Benjamin's response to Modernity by referring to Benjamin's Freudian explanation of the trauma of Modernity.<sup>8</sup> Of course, the vocabulary of trauma still sounds anachronistic in discussions of the French Revolution, and Walter Benjamin's Modernity cannot be considered traumatic in the same sense as does the Holocaust. In *On Revolution*, Arendt quotes Tocqueville's words to shed light on her own understanding of the unprecedented nature of the Revolution: "I find no parallel to what is occurring before my eyes; as the past has ceased to throw its light upon

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<sup>5</sup> It was "associated with both riotous political protest and the diffusion of information through the press" cf. Fairclough, Mary, *The Romantic Crowd. Sympathy, Controversy, and Print Culture*, (Cambridge UP, 2013.) blurb. See also, Csengei: "Sentiment, taken to an extreme, carried [...] politically sensitive concern. During the eighteenth century, many worried that the excess of altruistic feeling and the power to disrupt gender and class boundaries and thus threaten the balance of the social and political order. The ideal of the 'man of feeling' could potentially push men beyond reformed manners into the realm of the effeminate and unmanly, while women, pursuing the dictates of their feelings, could transgress the prescribed boundaries of domestic, patriarchal sexuality. Rousseau's novel, *Julie, or the New Heloise*, presented a case where sentimental values like pity, affection, and sensibility functioned as bases for the revolutionary transgression of sexual and class boundaries. During the violent phase of the French Revolution, the period's fascination with the uncontrollable mechanism of impulsive or 'contagious' feeling was exploited in the works of many literary, medical, and political writers, underlining the energy and power inherent in feelings that fuel group attitudes and behavior" Ildikó Csengei, *Sympathy, Sensibility and the Literature of Feeling in the Eighteenth Century*, (Palgrave, 2012.) 49.

<sup>6</sup> I would like to express my thanks to the anonymous reviewer for this remark. Coleridge's rejection of sentimentality, sentimental literature (and radical fanaticism) thus aligns well with the spirit of the age. As Miranda Burgess also argues, „contemporary writers also warned that the manipulation of print in the service of sympathetic feeling could foster corrupt forms of sentiment or mobilize unthinkingly reactive crowds.” (228) Meanwhile, Jane Austen can indeed be seen as the starkest critique of sentimental tradition, and „much Austen criticism, particularly analyses focused on sensibility, does engage in readings centered on 'the spectacle of the Girl Being Taught a Lesson.'” 233. (Burgess, Miranda, *A Companion to Jane Austen* Edited By Claudia L. Johnson and Clara Tuite. Blackwell, 2009. 226 - 236) Small wonder that there is a certain elective affinity between Austen and Arendt herself, as we will see, especially in their use of irony!

<sup>7</sup> E.g. Astbury, Katherine *Narrative Responses to the Trauma of the French Revolution*. (Oxford: Legenda, 2012.) Hanley K. *Describing the Revolution in Wordsworth*. (Palgrave Macmillan, 2001.)

<sup>8</sup> Timár, Andrea. *A Modern Coleridge. Cultivation, Addiction, Habits*. (Palgrave. 2015.)

the future, the mind of man wanders in obscurity."<sup>9</sup> It was this sense of historical discontinuity that was repeated and largely amplified, according to Arendt, first by the change in the structure of experience following the trauma of the First World War and then, the Holocaust. Benjamin evokes how "men returned from the battlefield grown silent",<sup>10</sup> while Arendt points to the "absolute interruption of continuity occurred during and after the First World War"<sup>11</sup> Then, the abyss opened between past and present, present and future, turned into a wide gap after the Holocaust: as Arendt puts it, "this abyss [...] has become deeper and more frightful every single year from the fateful year of 1914 onward until the death factories erected in the heart of Europe definitely cut the already outworn thread"<sup>12</sup> Being aware of the intensification (and, indeed, incomparability) of their sense of historical discontinuity, I still suggest that Coleridge, Benjamin, and Arendt responded similarly to these crises: by the disavowal of sentimentality.

In *On Revolution*, Arendt argues that to understand revolutions in the modern age, "the idea of freedom and the experience of a new beginning should coincide" (29). One of her main problems with the French Revolution (as opposed to the American Revolution) is that necessity, namely, biological necessity related to life processes took over the idea of freedom: "the poor, driven by the needs of their bodies, burst on the scene of the French Revolution" (59). The existence of poverty as a social question is dehumanizing because it puts men under the dictates of their bodies, i.e. necessity as opposed to freedom. In Arendt's view, this scene of poverty, the existence of sans-culottes, then moved men to pity, because, according to Rousseau, they had "an innate repugnance at seeing a fellow-creature suffer" (quoted by Arendt, 71). The terms "innate" and "repugnance" mark the intimate bond between compassion, pity, and natural necessity, which thus override what should be the true aim of the revolution: freedom. Since then, according to Arendt, "compassion has haunted and driven the best men of all revolutions, and the only revolution in which compassion played no role was the American Revolution" (71). The evocation of Melville's novella, *Billy Budd* seems to

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<sup>9</sup> Arendt, Hannah. *On Revolution* (Penguin Books, 1963) 57 As for Coleridge, he often speaks of the necessity to re-create tradition with the help of the imagination after the historical crisis of the French Revolution, In "The Statesman's Manual" (1816), he argues as follows, "if there exist means for deriving resignation from the general discontent [generated by the events in France] that antidote and these means must be sought for in the *collation* of the present with the past, in the habit of thoughtfully *assimilating* the events of our own age to those of the time before us" (Coleridge, S.T. *Lay Sermons*, 9, italics added) See also Timár. *A Modern Coleridge*, 77

<sup>10</sup> Benjamin, Walter, "The Storyteller" *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, transl. Harry Zorn (Pimlico, 1999 (1968)), 84.

<sup>11</sup> Arendt, Hannah. "No Longer and Not Yet" *Reflections on Literature and Culture*, ed. Suzanna Young-AH Gottlieb (Stanford UP, 2007) 121.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.* 122.

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come as a surprise in this argument; Arendt reads it as an allegory of a quasi-Manichean struggle between nature and politics, between compassion/natural goodness as the negative pole, and Virtue as the positive one.

*Billy Budd* had a lasting impression on Arendt: she not only used it as an illustration in *On Revolution* in 1962, but ten years later, she even arranged for a library copy to be sent to Martin Heidegger.<sup>13</sup> The year 1962 witnessed a veritable *Billy Budd* boom. In the first half of the year, a new, critical edition of the novella, *Billy Budd, Sailor (An Inside Narrative)*, more faithful to Melville's original manuscript, was published to great critical acclaim.<sup>14</sup> Then, on the 12d of November, the movie *Billy Budd*, directed by and featuring Peter Ustinov was released in the US. Most probably, Arendt was acquainted with the pre-1962 edition of the novella, still entitled *Billy Budd, Foretopman*, which had been immensely popular among critics and readers alike.<sup>15</sup> Its Preface, absent from the subsequent editions, presented the story as an explicit commentary on the French Revolution and on the possible consequences of mutinies: "in a way analogous to the operation of the Revolution at large, the Great Mutiny, though by Englishmen naturally deemed monstrous at the time, doubtless gave the first latent prompting to most important reforms in the British navy."<sup>16</sup> This may offer a direct explanation for Arendt's evocation of the novella in an analysis of the French Revolution.

*Billy Budd* has three main characters: Billy Budd, the sailor, who, in Arendt's interpretation, is the representative of innocence. He has one handicap: he has a stutter. The

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<sup>13</sup> Arendt, Hannah, Heidegger, Martin, *Lettere 1925-1975*, Edizioni di Comunità, 2001, 185.

<sup>14</sup> Stafford, William T. "The New "Billy Budd" And The Novelistic Fallacy: An Essay-Review." *Modern Fiction Studies* 8, no. 3 (1962): 306-11. Accessed January 6, 2021. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26277263>.

<sup>15</sup> As William Stafford argued in 1962: "critical comment on the story has been so extensive and varied, [...] that even comment on James's "Turn of the Screw" is somewhat sketchy and limited by comparison" (306). The example of the "Turn of the Screw" may also shed light on the reasons why *Billy Budd* was so widely read: the New Critical climate of the age was beneficial for texts displaying ambiguity and uncertain authorial intentions, such as James's "The Turn of the Screw" or Melville's novella.

<sup>16</sup>The Preface as a whole reads "THE year 1797, the year of this narrative, belongs to a period which, as every thinker now feels, involved a Crisis for Christendom not exceeded in its undetermined momentousness at the time by any other era whereof there is record. The opening proposition made by the Spirit of that Age involved rectification of the Old World's hereditary wrongs. In France, to some extent, this was bloodily effected. But what then? Straightway the Revolution itself became a wrongdoer, one more oppressive than the kings. Under Napoleon, it enthroned upstart kings and initiated that prolonged agony of continual war whose final throe was Waterloo. During those years not the wisest could have foreseen that the outcome of all would be what to some thinkers apparently it has since turned out to be, a political advance along nearly the whole line for Europeans. // Now, as elsewhere hinted, it was something caught from the Revolutionary Spirit that at Spithead emboldened the man-of-war's men to rise against real abuses, long-standing ones, and afterwards at the Nore to make inordinate and aggressive demands --- successful resistance to which was confirmed only when the ringleaders were hung for an admonitory spectacle to the anchored fleet. Yet in a way analogous to the operation of the Revolution at large, the Great Mutiny, though by Englishmen naturally deemed monstrous at the time, doubtless gave the first latent prompting to most important reforms in the British navy."  
<http://xroads.virginia.edu/~Hyper/BB/Preface.html> accessed January 6 2021.

second one is Claggart, the Master at Arms, who represents absolute evil, according to Arendt. The conflict emerges when Claggart falsely accuses Billy Budd of organizing a mutiny on the ship. The third main character is Captain Vere, who, according to Arendt, represents "Virtue". Upon hearing Claggart's accusation, Captain Vere summons both Billy and Claggart to his cabin. Claggart makes his case, but Billy, astounded, is unable to respond. In his extreme frustration, he strikes out at Claggart and kills him instantly. Although Captain Vere feels for Billy and knows that his character is innocent, he sentences Billy to be hanged. Pledging allegiance to the King and not to Nature, as Melville puts it, he executes the Mutiny Act regardless of "Budd's intent or non-intent".<sup>17</sup> In fact, Vere seems to make a decision about likely consequences whose deliberative force would be undermined if it was strictly legally mandated.<sup>18</sup> As if in a tacit acceptance of Vere's judgement, Billy, before his execution, eventually cries out, "God bless Captain Vere!"

In Arendt's reading, *Billy Budd* "talks back to the men of the French Revolution", by showing the detrimental effects of the actions of the natural man: both the one endowed with natural goodness, like Billy *and* the one left with natural wickedness, like Claggart. For even though "'natural' nature is stronger than depraved or perverted nature" (*On Revolution*, 78), and Billy's speechless violence can assert itself more forcefully than the eloquence of slander ("Billy Budd strikes dead the man who bore false witness against him," *ibid*), Arendt finds the clash between nature and politics more important than the conflict of good and evil. The virtue of Captain Vere consists precisely in his being able to counteract his own nature, his natural compassion for Billy, and deliver what Arendt elsewhere calls "disinterested" judgment, condemning Billy to be hanged. As is established, in Arendt's political philosophy, what partakes only of the natural is necessarily pre-political (such as violence, which is "incapable of speech", or compassion, *On Revolution* 19), and would not be capable of prevailing in political institutions. Vere's verdict, by aiming to prevent any future mutiny, is therefore eminently political. (In a later part of this essay, I shall comment further on Arendt's understanding of the political.)

Melville died in 1891, and *Billy Budd* was published posthumously. The various literary and real-life experiences that might have influenced the story's conception and writing are well researched in Melville scholarship. However, as to my knowledge, the name of Samuel Taylor Coleridge as a possible influence on *Billy Budd* is mentioned by one critic

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<sup>17</sup> Melville, Herman. *Billy Budd, Sailor, and Other Stories* Penguin Classics, 1985. 387-389

<sup>18</sup> I would like to thank the anonymous reviewer for this remark.

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only, even though Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" is one of the most often quoted sources of *Moby Dick*.<sup>19</sup> Melville was not only familiar with Coleridge's poetry but with his prose works as well. In a letter dated April 9<sup>th</sup> 1854, he promises to return Coleridge's *The Friend: A Series of Essays* (1818) to Richard Lathers,<sup>20</sup> indicating that he most probably read it. *The Friend* includes the essay "The Appeal to Law", bearing striking resemblances to *Billy Budd*. Without reference to this letter, William Bartley notices a parallel between Sir Alexander Ball, the main character of Coleridge's essay, and Melville's Captain Vere: according to Bartley, both are captains of a mutinous navy with "Orphic" powers.<sup>21</sup>

However, there is a much more peculiar parallel in the behavior of Ball and Vere: they both act as the "inflexible organ of the Law" surmounting their natural inclination for fellow-feeling. In fact, the drama staged by both Coleridge's essay "The Appeal to Law," and Melville's *Billy Budd* revolves around a conflict between compassion on the one hand, and political expediency inspired by the Kantian categorical imperative on the other, and both opt for a Kantian ideal.<sup>22</sup> The setting of Coleridge's and Melville's text is also very similar: both present potentially mutinous ships in the aftermath of the French Revolution, and both show up the figure of an exemplary captain, who represents Virtue. I suggest that disclosure of the dialogue between Melville's text and Coleridge's may contribute to a better understanding of Arendt's reading of *Billy Budd* in particular and her response to the French Revolution in general.

Between July 1804 and September 1805, Coleridge served as a secretary to the governor of Malta, Sir Alexander Ball, "the best and greatest public character" he had ever met.<sup>23</sup> Ball was dealing with the civil administration of Malta, and his central idea was that

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<sup>19</sup> e.g. Gravid, R. (1997). The Whale and the Albatross. *The Wordsworth Circle*, 28(1), 2-10. Retrieved January 6, 2021, from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24042516>

<sup>20</sup> Melville, Herman, *Correspondence*. Horth. L ed. Northwestern University Press, 1993. 260.

<sup>21</sup> Bartley, William. "'Measured Forms' and Orphic Eloquence: The Style of Herman Melville's *Billy Budd, Sailor*." *University of Toronto Quarterly* 59, no. 4 (1990): 521-522. [muse.jhu.edu/article/513622](http://muse.jhu.edu/article/513622).

<sup>22</sup> As Kant famously argues: "It is very beautiful to do good to human beings from love of them and from compassionate benevolence, or to be just from love of order; but this is not yet our conduct's genuine moral maxim appropriate to our station among rational beings as human beings. [...] Duty and obligation are the only designations that we must give to our relation to the moral law." Kant, Immanuel. *Practical Philosophy*. Trans. and Ed. Mary J. Gregor. (Cambridge UP1996.) 82.

<sup>23</sup> Coleridge, Samuel Taylor *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Volume 4: The Friend (Two Volume Set)*. Ed. Rooke, Barbara E. Princeton University Press, 1969. II. 99.

Britain should permanently occupy Malta and Sicily to secure the sea routes to India. Coleridge, already fueled by anti-French sentiments, accepted the position as a secretary mainly to possibly cure himself of his opium addiction. He had the task to write "position papers" to present Ball's arguments.<sup>24</sup> Meanwhile, Ball might also have been among those who introduced "important reforms in the British navy" which, as the Preface (that later editors erroneously attached) to Melville's *Billy Budd* evokes, had been latently prompted by the Spithead and Nore mutinies by sailors of the Royal Navy in 1797. In the words of Coleridge's "The Appeal to Law", the Governor of Malta introduced a "new system of discipline" to regulate his crew composed of "uneducated Irishman" (*The Friend*, I, 169). According to Coleridge's report, Ball first affixed a set of rules in some conspicuous part of the ship and made sure that each member of the crew understood them. If any rule was violated, the violation had first to be acknowledged by the offender and then punished with his own consent. However, Coleridge also points to a clash in Ball's attitude towards his navy between what he sees as the transcendental, Kantian Law on the one hand, and fellow-feeling on the other. As he says, "the feelings of the commander, as a man, was so well blended with his inflexibility, as the organ of the law; [...] and he suffered [so much] previous to and during the execution of the sentence [...] that it became a common saying with them [...] 'The captain takes it more to heart than the fellow himself'" (170).

Reading Coleridge with Melville, one may thus venture to say that the character of Captain Vere is Melville's late 19<sup>th</sup>-century rewriting of the figure of Alexander Ball. In *Billy Budd*, Vere speaks of "the clash of military duty with moral scruple – scruple vitalized by compassion", and the "heart [to] be ruled out" (Melville, 387, 388), and the narrator mentions that "the condemned one suffered less than he who mainly had effected the condemnation", Melville, 393). Finally, Billy's blessing of Vere ("God bless Captain Vere!") can be read as an echo of the experience of Ball's mariners who "were tamed and overpowered" by the invisible power of the Law, impersonated by Ball himself (*The Friend*, 170-171).<sup>25</sup>

At the same time, Coleridge's emphasis on a contract between the mariners and the captain, and the mariners' consent to the rules supports the conclusion of the essay: "if there

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<sup>24</sup> Cf: Holmes, Richard, *Darker Reflections* (Pantheon Book, 1999) 18. Earlier versions of a few parts of this argument can be found in my *Modern Coleridge*, 39-47, in a different context.

<sup>25</sup> As Captain Vere himself puts it in Melville's novella, "I feel as you do for this unfortunate boy. But did he know our hearts, I take him to be of that generous nature that he would feel even for us on whom in this military necessity so heavy a compulsion is laid." (Melville, 390)



be any difference between a Government and a band of robbers, an act of consent must be supposed on the part of the governed" (174–175) Indeed, this essay, like many others in *The Friend*, ultimately serves as an argument against the terror of Robespierre and Napoleon: according to Coleridge, their "bestial Theory" introduced "terror" that "applies to beasts" and "slaves". Instead of this, Coleridge advocates for a Government based on "contract", which relates to "men" and "subjects", and on "consent" characterized by "deliberate choice and considered opinion" (71). This train of thought may sound familiar to Arendt scholars: in *On Revolution*, Arendt similarly argues against the terror implicit in the unanimity characterizing Rousseau's "general will", bounding the many into one: during the Revolution, according to Arendt, "the very word 'consent', with its overtones of deliberate choice and considered opinion, was replaced by the word 'will'" (76).

However, Arendt's own interpretation of Billy's blessing of Captain Vere is different from both Melville's and Coleridge's; she misreads the novella to use it for her purposes: both Coleridge and Melville present the subject's full submission to the Captain as a submission to the power of Law in which political expediency and practical reason (ethics) coincide. In both Melville's and Coleridge's text, there is a symbolic (*pars pro toto* / part for the whole) relationship between the Captain, ethics, and politics. Arendt, however, is more ambiguous towards Billy's final gesture: she sees it as further proof of his natural innocence, displaying compassion even for his executor. And, as she critically remarks: "As a rule, it is not compassion which sets out to change worldly conditions to ease human suffering, but if it does, it will shun the drawn-out wearisome processes of persuasion, negotiation, and compromise, which are the processes of law and politics." (*On Revolution*, 86)

Hence, while Arendt opposes Billy's heart-felt acceptance of Vere's judgment, precisely because it is rooted in (non-political) compassion rather than in the disinterested judgment partaking of the processes of law and politics, she endorses Vere's decision to execute Billy Budd as a sign of his "Virtue", which, as opposed to compassion, alone "is capable of embodiment in lasting institutions." (84) <sup>26</sup> Yet, if we accept Arendt's interpretative framework, in which violence, nature, and compassion are the negative poles that are opposed and must be overridden by persuasion, the political and the law, then Billy's

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<sup>26</sup> The distinction she makes between forgiveness and judgment could also be applied to Vere, who, in this specific situation, cannot display love: "for the judge, only actions count, and not the person who committed them. The act of forgiving, on the contrary, takes the person into account [...] We always forgive *somebody*, and never *something*, and this is the reason people think that only love can forgive" ("What Is Permitted to Jove...", 1966 in *Reflection on Literature and Culture*. 257)

blessing of Vere and his consent to his execution, could be equally read, like the subjection of Ball's mariners, as a final consent to a political justice that also exhibits the disinterestedness of judgment and the Law.

To Arendt's views on the French Revolution, it has been customary to link the conservatism of Edmund Burke.<sup>27</sup> Indeed, Arendt introduces her analysis of *Billy Budd* in a Burkean vein by saying that "Melville [...] knew how to talk back directly to the men of the French Revolution and to their proposition that man is good in a state of nature and becomes wicked in society." (78) Burke is a proponent of man's "second nature", of God-given social hierarchies and customs, and rejects the idea of both abstract reason and man's natural rights. However, as I will show next, Coleridge's political and moral conservatism, bearing both Burke's and Kant's influence, is much closer to Arendt's stance than Burke's is.

Like Burke, both Coleridge and Arendt see something suspect in nature, in what has been called "human nature". The later Coleridge, turning away from his youthful French revolutionary sympathies (which was accompanied by a belief in uncorrupted nature, including human nature), places more and more emphasis on what he calls "cultivation", to be conducted with the help of an educated "clerisy".<sup>28</sup> During this process of cultivation, "the harmonious development of those qualities and faculties that characterize our *humanity*",<sup>29</sup> man leaves behind the state of nature, where he had been governed by desires and inclinations, and develops into Person, which Coleridge understands in a specifically post-Kantian-Christian sense: "The Spontaneous rises into the Voluntary, and finally after various steps and a long Ascent the [...] Conditions are prepared for the manifestation of a Free Will, having its Law within itself".<sup>30</sup> But, equally eager to mark the importance of religion, he adds elsewhere, "observe that Freedom [...] is impossible except as it becomes one with the Will of God"<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Swift, Simon. *Hannah Arendt* (Routledge 2009). 22. Benhabib, Seyla. *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt*. (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications 1996.) 157-170

<sup>28</sup> Coleridge, Samuel Taylor. *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Volume 10: On The Constitution Of The Church And State*. Ed. Colmer, John. (Princeton University Press, 1976.) 49.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.* 42.

<sup>30</sup> Coleridge, Samuel Taylor. 1969. *The collected works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Aids to reflection / ed. by John Beer.* 9 9. (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul 1993) 98.

<sup>31</sup> Coleridge, Samuel Taylor, and Kathleen Coburn. 2002. *The collected works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge.* 15 15. (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul. 2002) 144. On the Coleridgean idea of cultivation, and the process of education, see my: *Modern Coleridge*. pp.1-39; 107-125; as well as Timár, A. "A human being may be dishumanised": Coleridge and the Human Life", <https://living-ideas.org/2019/05/06/andrea-timar-eotvos-lorand-university/> Meanwhile, Coleridge was so disappointed with the French, that the term "cultivation" is defined not against nature *per se*, but against man's natural and, therefore, passive susceptibility to the stimuli offered by civilization, associated with both the spirit of instrumental reason characterizing, according to Coleridge, the

According to Coleridge, will and agency make us human, while passivity is related to the animal, to the natural,<sup>32</sup> to being driven by (animal) spontaneity, instincts and inclinations. It is for his contempt for passivity too that Coleridge dismisses both sentimentality (when the subject falls prey to his or her emotions), and sympathy.<sup>33</sup> In the first part of one of his most important late writings, *Aids to Reflection* (1825) -- a fragmentary, aphoristic work summoning up successive topics and presenting Coleridge's latest thinking concerning them -- he devotes an entire chapter to the critique of "Sensibility":

"Sensibility, i.e., a constitutional Sympathy with Pain and Pleasure is not even a sure pledge of GOOD HEART' [...] the term Sensibility, marks its *passive* nature [...] proves little more than the coincidence or contagion of pleasurable or painful Sensations in different persons [...] Sensibility is not necessarily Benevolence. Nay, by rendering us tremblingly alive to trifling misfortunes, it frequently prevents it." (*Aids to Reflection*, 57-62)

Opposing the passivity of sentiments, Coleridge attributes a major role to the Christian idea of love as an *active* principle, which *is* the true pledge of good heart. This love is both active and relational: it unites man with the symbolic community of the Church and State. In the same vein, to establish an opposition between active love and passive sentiments ("the profanation of the word Love"), does he later condemn the likes of Laurence Sterne, author of *Sentimental Journey*; sentimental novelists, as was mentioned in the beginning, were seen, in the period, as transmitting the dangerous sentimentality attributed to both Rousseau and the English culture of sensibility emerging in the 18<sup>th</sup> century:

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French *philosophes*, and a passive indulgence in luxuries that he attributes to the French aristocracy. Cf: "Never can a society comprehend fully, and in its whole practical extent, the permanent distinction, and the occasional contrast, between cultivation and civilisation; never can it attain to a due insight into the momentous fact, fearfully as it has been, and even now is exemplified in a neighbour country [France], that a nation can never be a too cultivated but may easily become an overcivilized race." (*The Friend*, I., 494)

<sup>32</sup> According to Coleridge man shares with animals the property of Sense, that is, "whatever is passive in our being", the "sensations, and impressions", but he is distinguished from them in equally possessing active faculties, that is, agency: "the faculty of thinking and forming *judgments*" as well as "Practical Reason [...]" the power by which we become possessed of Principles" such as "Justice, Holiness, Free-Will, &c. in Morals" (*The Friend* II., 104).

<sup>33</sup> This equally testifies to Kant's influence.

"All the evils [...] will appear inconsiderable if it be compared with the mischief effected and occasioned by the sentimental Philosophy of Sterne, and his numerous imitators. [...] About this time too, the profanation of the word Love rose to its height. The French naturalists, Buffon, and others, borrowed it from the sentimental Novelists. The Swedish and English Philosophers took the contagion" (*Aids to Reflection*, 60- 62)

Coleridge's critique of the *contagious* character of sentiments (including sentiments transmitted through novels) shows that his understanding of sentimentality inscribes itself into the sentimental tradition initiated by Shaftesbury and Hume, philosophers of "sympathy". Hume and Shaftesbury consider sympathy as a kind of affective migrancy, a process during which the subject, contaminated by the pleasures and pains of the other, is supposed to feel what the other feels. However, for Coleridge (in a way similar to Arendt), the passivity proper to sentimentality not only prevents true benevolence but can also turn into a political threat by rendering, as he puts it elsewhere, "the mind liable to superstition and fanaticism".<sup>34</sup>

In *On Revolution*, Arendt equally associates the contagious character of compassion with revolutionary fanaticism, with *le zèle compassionant de Robespierre*, and especially with man's being susceptible to falling under the spell of what Arendt calls "the vehemence of [Robespierre's] great revolutionary oratory" (*On Revolution* 76). She equally foregrounds "the crucial role compassion had come to play in the minds and hearts of those who prepared and of those who acted in the course of the French Revolution" (74) and sees Rousseau's "selflessness", his "capacity to lose oneself in the suffering of others" as something opposed to "active goodness" (76).<sup>35</sup> She argues that when compassion is generalized and, therefore, politicized, it turns into abstract pity (dictating the "general will"), losing sight of singular individuals. What she calls this "emotion-laden insensitivity to reality" (*Ibid*), which characterizes Rousseau (irresponsible of his own family) will equally emerge in Arendt's characterization of Eichmann, as we will see, in her report on the banality of evil.

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<sup>34</sup> Coleridge, Samuel Taylor, *Biographia Literaria. 1 I*.ed. and John Shawcross. (Oxford Univ. Press. 1979) 30.

<sup>35</sup> She underlines the necessary bias involved in compassion, which results from its individual character. "It cannot reach out farther than what is suffered by one person and still remain, what it is supposed to be, co-suffering" (*On Revolution*, 85)

The phrase "active goodness" points to the active and relational character<sup>36</sup> of (political) "goodness", or much rather, Virtue, in Arendt's political philosophy too, although Virtue is clearly not love and does not have to do with religion either. Vere's virtue is the virtue of the men of the American Revolution, who "spoke and acted as [the people's] representatives in a common cause" (74). They aimed at the *res publica*, as opposed to Robespierre, whose so called virtue only represented the identification of his own will with the will of the people, *le peuple*, which, according to Arendt, is a word "born out of compassion" (75). Criticizing pity and the "misplaced emphasis on the heart as the source of political virtue" (96) during the French Revolution,<sup>37</sup> Arendt places a constant emphasis on what she calls "solidarity", and the web of human relationships characterizing any meaningful human life.<sup>38</sup> Solidarity, a principle, rather than sentiment, is a "dispassionate" and "deliberate" "community of interest" (*OR*, 88-89), paving the way for political judgment, famously modelled on Kant's aesthetic judgment:<sup>39</sup>

„Political thought is representative. I form an opinion by considering a given issue from different viewpoints, by making present to my mind the standpoints of those who are absent; that is, I represent them. [...] *this is a question neither of empathy, as though I tried to be or to feel like somebody else, nor of counting noses and joining a majority but of being and thinking in my own identity where actually I am not.*"<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> See her critique of Kant: "it is most striking that in *The Critique of Practical Reason*, and his other moral writings, Kant hardly can speak of *other people* [*Mitmenschen*]. It is really just about the Self and Reason functioning in isolation." Hannah Arendt, *Denktagebuch: 1950 bis 1973*, ed. Ursula Ludz und Ingeborg Nordmann (Munich: Piper, 2002), p. 818. [Trans. by the translators of this volume; emphasis in original.]

<sup>37</sup> I.e. the heart, as the repository of any active love of goodness, should remain hidden in darkness, instead of being exposed to the public, in the political sphere.

<sup>38</sup> "The realm of human affairs [...] consist[s] of the web of human relationships which exists wherever men live together. (Arendt, Hannah, *The Human Condition*. eds. Allen, M. Canovan. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958.) 183-4.

<sup>39</sup> According to Arendt, in Kant's aesthetics, "the judging *spectator*" has "taste" which must be understood as an "active relationship to what is beautiful" (italics added) Later, the emphasis will shift from activity to spectatorship, but in "The Crisis in Culture", these are the statesman and the artist that are put in parallel, with a regard to their respective products, which *appear* in the public world common to all as words and deeds. As Maurizio Passerin d'Entreves argues, "Arendt's writings on the theme of judgment can, in this respect, be seen to fall into two more or less distinct phases, an early one in which judgment is the faculty of political actors acting in the public realm, and a later one in which it is the privilege of non-participating spectators, primarily poets and historians in 'To Think Representatively': Arendt on Judgment and the Imagination Article in *Philosophical Papers* · November 2006 DOI: 10.1080/05568640609485187

<sup>40</sup> Arendt, Hannah. *Between Past and. Future* (New York: Penguin Books, 1968.) 241. italics added.

Representative thinking is also related to what Arendt calls, via Kant's *Critique of Judgement*, "enlarged mentality"<sup>41</sup>. Captain Vere's decision that Billy must be hanged exemplifies precisely this kind of judgment. When the mariners ask the Captain "Can we not convict and yet mitigate the penalty?", he answers: "Gentlemen, were that clearly lawful for us under the circumstances, consider the consequences of such clemency. [...] They [the ship's company] would think that we flinch, that we are afraid of them-afraid of practicing a lawful rigor *singularly demanded at this juncture*" (Melville, 389-340, italics added) Vere takes into consideration the perspective of everyone present (the other mariners), in the specific historical and political context of the potentially mutinous warship. For, on the one hand, Arendtian judgment is never a-historical: it never exceeds the points of view of those who are present, its "claims to validity can never extend further than the others in whose place the judging person has put himself for his considerations" (*Between past and Future*, 221). On the other hand, for Arendt, each judgment is *singular*, or, put it differently, each judgment is a singular decision, being potentially agreed upon by others sharing the historical and political context in which the judgment takes place.

Meanwhile, Arendt's "enlarged mentality" may not only bring to mind Kant's theory of taste or his aesthetic judgment, as it is usually argued, but a conception of sympathy too, which is different from the contagious compassion model introduced by the sentimental philosophy Shaftesbury and Hume. This second, "theatrical" or "spectatorial" model of sympathy was introduced by Adam Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments* and is the rejection of the Humean model.<sup>42</sup> As I also argue elsewhere, in Adam Smith's conception of sympathy, we *imagine* what it would feel like for *us* to be in *another's situation*, and our actions are ideally performed in the imaginary presence of what Smith calls the "impartial spectator", whose sympathy (approval) we seek. Although Smith's sympathy has been criticized for being merely an imaginative *self*-projection, and Arendt is adamant that we *can* think from the perspective of *others*, there is a certain affinity between Smith's version of sympathy and Arendt's idea of "enlarged thinking". Indeed, the necessary aesthetic distance<sup>43</sup> going together with Smith's spectatorial model equally helps us redraw the sharp distinction between Arendt's ideal of

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid. 220.

<sup>42</sup> As Chandler notes, '[Shaftesbury's] contagion model of sympathy proves to be exactly the model that Smith rejects' (Chandler, James. *An Archeology of Sympathy: The Sentimental Mode in Literature and Cinema* (Chicago UP, 2013) 240.

<sup>43</sup> On this, see Eagleton, Terry. *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990.)

solidarity, when one can see a situation from the perspective of everyone present, and her later concept of judgement as spectatorship<sup>44</sup> on the one hand, and compassion on the other.

For Arendt, what compassion abolishes is precisely the distance necessary for argument, persuasion, and judgment, that is, for the truly political to take place. Indeed, Arendt, opposing the Platonic hierarchy, not only elevates opinion above truth in the realm of politics<sup>45</sup>, but equally foregrounds the *performative* character of judgment, opinion, persuasion, negotiation and compromise, as opposed to the constative character of truth claims: "Taste judgments [...] share with political opinions that they are persuasive; [...] Persuasion ruled the intercourse of the citizens of the polis because it excluded physical violence; but the philosophers knew that it was also distinguished from another non-violent form of coercion, the coercion by truth."<sup>46</sup>

Speech as persuasion thus not only excludes physical violence but also what Arendt calls "coercion by truth," the violence of truth claims; or, what we may just as well call, after Derrida, a performative camouflaging itself as constative. However, according to Arendt, speech can be right action, it can only fulfil its proper performative function, if and only if the right words are found at the right moment:

"most political action, in so far as it remains outside the sphere of violence, is indeed transacted in words, but more fundamentally that *finding the right words at the right moment, quite apart from the information or communication they may convey, is action.*"<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> "Hence, withdrawal from direct involvement to a standpoint outside the game (the festival of life) is not only a condition for judging, for being the final arbiter in the ongoing competition, but also the condition for understanding the meaning of the play. Second: what the actor is concerned with is doxa, a word that signifies both fame and opinion, for it is through the opinion of the audience and the judge that fame comes about. It is decisive for the actor, but not for the spectator, how he appears to others; he depends on the spectator's it-seems-to-me (his dokei moi, which gives the actor his doxa); he is not his own master, not what Kant would later call autonomous; he must conduct himself in accordance with what spectators expect of him, and the final verdict of success or failure is in their hands." Arendt, Hannah. *The Life of the Mind* (New York: Harvest Book, 1978) 94.

<sup>45</sup> "opinion and judgment obviously belong among the faculties of reason, but the point of the matter is that these two, politically most important, rational faculties had been almost entirely neglected by the tradition of political as well as philosophic thought." (*On Revolution*, 229.)

<sup>46</sup> And, as she goes on to say: Culture and politics, then, belong together because it is not knowledge or truth which is at stake, but rather judgment and decision (*Between Past and Future*, 222-223.)

<sup>47</sup> *The Human Condition*, 26. italics added.

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This may remind one of Aristotle's references to *kairos*, as both specific act in a concrete case (see: above), and right timing<sup>48</sup> in *Rhetoric*. What will be foregrounded in what follows is Arendt's own deployment of Aristotle's definition of *rhetorics*, the function of which is "not so much to persuade as to find out in each case the existing *means* of persuasion."<sup>49</sup> (*italics added*)

### Testimonies: how to tell a story?

In this section, I shall discuss the importance Arendt attaches to "the right words at the right moment", and to the *proper way* of telling a story, when the community of listeners has disappeared, and "the communicability of experience is decreasing" (Benjamin "ST" I. 86) to show how it complements the significance Arendt attaches to "enlarged thinking" or "solidarity" as opposed to "compassion".

Arendt wrote *On Revolution* while editing *Eichmann in Jerusalem, A Report on the Banality of Evil* in 1962. In October, she wrote to Mary McCarthy, "[t]he Revolution book is finished and will appear in January. The Eichmann article has also become a book." (October 30, 1962)<sup>50</sup> Coincidentally, what has often been called the "heartlessness" of the Eichmann report, has been equally read as a testimony to Arendt's own lack of compassion. For example, in the 1963 epistolary debate between Gershom Scholem and Arendt, Scholem, after pointing to "the heartless, frequently almost sneering and malicious tone" of the report, famously reproaches Arendt for not showing any trace of the "Love of the Jewish people". To this, Arendt responds that she does not "love the Jews" (but merely "belongs to them as a matter of course"), that never in her life did she ever "loved a people or a collective", and, even more importantly for our present purpose, that "the role of the 'heart' in politics seems to [her] altogether questionable".<sup>51</sup>

While in her analysis of *Billy Budd*, Arendt condemns Billy's failure to testify, to defend himself using words before Captain Vere, in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, she ridicules the

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<sup>48</sup> I would like to thank the anonymous reviewer for this suggestion.

<sup>49</sup> Book 1. ch. 1. 14; <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus:text:1999.01.0060> accessed 23.07.2021.

<sup>50</sup> Arendt, Hannah, McCarthy, Mary *Between Friends*, ed. Brightman, C. (Harvest Books 1996.) 142.

<sup>51</sup> Arendt, Hannah, and Ron H. Feldman. *The Jew as Pariah: Jewish Identity and Politics in the Modern Age*. (New York: Grove Press, 1978.) 241; 246-247



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survivor witness K-Zetnik (Yehiel Dinor), the famous writer,<sup>52</sup> who falls silent and collapses after a long, solipsistic monologue about the "planet Auschwitz"<sup>53</sup>. As Arendt comments, "This, to be sure [...] did not prove the rule of simplicity or of ability to tell a story."<sup>54</sup> Trauma theorists, like Shoshana Felman, have examined the shocking scene involving K-Zetnik's collapse from a psychological angle. According to Felman, K-Zetnik's "poetic" monologue, his collapse and silence could transmit (i.e. communicate) historical trauma. In other words, it is precisely the failure of testimony, K-Zetnik's inability to tell his story, the story of Auschwitz, that secured the success of its transmission, of its political and historical impact.<sup>55</sup>

Arendt refuses to feel "compassion", and "to be stricken with the suffering of someone else as though it were contagious." (*On Revolution* 85). She judges K-Zetnik's testimony as if it was the result of the witness's weakness, of his loss of the sense of reality, and the concomitant inability to communicate and utter politically relevant words. K-Zetnik, in Arendt's reading, is not able to "find the right words at the right moment", and thereby misses the opportunity of historical and political intervention. K-Zetnik's silence and the sudden shock of his collapse may thus remind us of Billy Budd's silence, and *his* inability to testify. In Arendt's interpretation, both silences would be "*politically speaking, irrelevant, and without consequence*" (*On Revolution*, 86, italics added).<sup>56</sup>

At the opposite end of the spectrum, there is Adolf Eichmann:

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<sup>52</sup> Her first motive for condemning K-Zetnik is that his being summoned to testify at the court represents, for Arendt, the trial's being a "show-trial", designed by Ben-Gurion.

<sup>53</sup> "the prosecution called upon a writer, well known on both sides of the Atlantic under the name of K-Zetnik - a slang word for a concentration-camp inmate - as the author of several books on Auschwitz. [...] He started off, as he had done at many of his public appearances, with an explanation of his adopted name. [...] He continued with a little excursion into astrology: the star "influencing our fate in the same way as the star of ashes at Auschwitz is there facing our planet, radiating toward our planet." And when he had arrived at "the unnatural power above Nature" which had sustained him thus far, and now, for the first time, paused to catch his breath, even Mr. Hausner felt that something had to be done about this "testimony," and, very timidly, very politely, interrupted: "Could I perhaps put a few questions to you if you will consent?" Whereupon the presiding judge saw his chance as well: "Mr. Dinor, please, please, listen to Mr. Hausner and to me." In response, the disappointed witness, probably deeply wounded, fainted and answered no more questions. *This, to be sure [...] did not prove the rule of simplicity or of ability to tell a story.*" Arendt, Hannah, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, (Penguin Books, 2006.) 224.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid. 224. italics added

<sup>55</sup> Felman, Shoshana. "Theaters of Justice: Arendt in Jerusalem, the Eichmann Trial, and the Redefinition of Legal Meaning in the Wake of the Holocaust." *The Juridical Unconscious*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts; London, England, 2002, pp. 106–130. *JSTOR*, [www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1cc2n1k.7](http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1cc2n1k.7). Accessed 24 July 2021.

<sup>56</sup> At the same time, however, they may actually prepare for the coming into being of political justice. Arendt's reference to Billy Budd in *On Violence* may just as well turn her ironic presentation of K-Zetnik against itself: "under certain circumstances, violence -- acting without argument or speech and without counting the consequences-- is the only way to set the scales of justice right again" Arendt, Hannah. *On Violence*. (Harvest Books, 1970.)

"The longer one listened to him, 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. No communication was possible with him, not because he lied but because he was surrounded by the most reliable of all safeguards against the words and the presence of others, and hence against reality as such." (*Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 49)

Eichmann is not able to think from the standpoint of somebody else, he is guarded against the reality of other people. However, his inability to speak consists of his words being empty, of his repetition of the stock phrases used in the SS. It is not that he is unable to express himself, like Billy Budd; instead, as has been argued by many, he has no self to express.<sup>57</sup>

Both the inability to think from the standpoint of somebody else (exhibited by Eichmann) and compassion (being contaminated by the feelings of somebody else) oppose solidarity, the middle way proposed by Arendt: the ability to take into consideration the point of view of everyone present. How can this unique capacity be translated into politically relevant words, into persuasive speech?

Arendt sets Zindel Grynspan as a model for properly telling a story, a politically relevant story. His

„story took no more than perhaps ten minutes to tell, and when it was over - the senseless, needless destruction of twenty-seven years in less than twenty-four hours - one thought foolishly: Everyone, everyone should have his day in court. Only to find out, in the endless sessions that followed, how difficult it was to tell the story, that – at least outside the transforming realm of poetry – it needed a purity of soul, unmirrored, unreflected innocence of heart and mind that only the righteous possess” (*Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 229)

Grynspan has an exceptional ability to speak, to find the right words at the right moment, which -- as if Aristotle's rhetoric was lurking in the background of Arendt's text<sup>58</sup> -- is

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<sup>57</sup> Lacking a "self" and having lost contact with others, his speech is irrelevant. Except for its ability to stage irrelevance and emptiness during the trial.

<sup>58</sup> "The orator persuades by moral character when his speech is delivered in such a manner as to render him worthy of confidence; for we feel confidence in a greater degree and more readily in persons of worth in regard

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equally related to his virtuous character. Grynspan's story also succeeds in moving (cf: *emotion*) Arendt, the spectator, who, at the same time, immediately judges, reflects upon the possibility conditions of her own emotions: she has been moved because the story was told the way in which it had to be told. This is an aesthetic judgment on Arendt's part, which turns out to be a political judgment as well.

Arendt's taste in storytelling owes probably the most to Walter Benjamin. Benjamin's writings generally influenced her: mourning the loss of her friend, and wishing to rescue him from the hole of oblivion, she becomes the editor of a collection of his essays translated into English: *Illuminations* (1968). In her Introduction, which can also be considered her biography of Walter Benjamin, she evokes the incomparable uniqueness of his friend (9), with an implicit reference to *The Human Condition*, "Who somebody is or was we can know only by knowing the story of which he is himself the hero – his biography" (*The Human Condition*, 186). More to our point is the fact that Arendt uses as a "motto" for Benjamin's literary criticism his avoidance "of anything that might be reminiscent of empathy" (*Illuminations*, 52). Benjamin's appreciation of Kafka and Brecht (also shared by Arendt) and his analyses of Baudelaire's poetry all manifest this anti-sentimentalism: his claim for distance, alienation, and (self-)reflection in literature and literary criticism alike.

In her Introduction, Arendt returns several times to what she considers to be the most important characteristics of Benjamin's: his being a *flâneur* (*flânerie* was the way in which his mind worked, 47), and his collection and use of quotations. For "when the past has ceased to throw its light upon the future, the mind of man wanders in obscurity"<sup>59</sup> (*Illuminations*, 43), and there is an "irreparable break in tradition" (45), then "the destructive power of quotations was the only one which still contains the hope that something from this period will survive" (43). And this, as has been argued by Seyla Benhabib, among others, anticipates Arendt's own style of historiography too.<sup>60</sup>

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to everything in general, but where there is no certainty and there is room for doubt, our confidence is absolute. But this confidence must be due to the speech itself, not to any preconceived idea of the speaker's character; for it is not the case, as some writers of rhetorical treatises lay down in their "Art," that the worth of the orator in no way contributes to his powers of persuasion; on the contrary, moral character, so to say, constitutes the most effective means of proof" Book 1. Ch 2. 4.

<sup>59</sup> Tocqueville quoted by Arendt in both *On Revolution*, 57, and *Illuminations*, 43.

<sup>60</sup> Benhabib, Seyla. "Hannah Arendt and the Redemptive Power of Narrative." *Social Research*, vol. 57, no. 1, 1990, pp. 167–196. *JSTOR*, [www.jstor.org/stable/40970582](http://www.jstor.org/stable/40970582). Accessed 24 July 2021. See also: Wilkinson, Lynn R. "Hannah Arendt on Isak Dinesen: Between Storytelling and Theory." *Comparative Literature*, vol. 56, no. 1, 2004, pp. 77–98. *JSTOR*, [www.jstor.org/stable/4122287](http://www.jstor.org/stable/4122287). Accessed 24 July 2021. Wilkinson also takes Arendt's own introduction of Benjamin for granted and focuses on the citational, quotational character of Arendt's writing.

However, what has been less often examined (though sometimes commented upon<sup>61</sup>) is that Benjamin's idea of the storyteller, as described in his essay "The Storyteller", conspicuously anticipates the figure of Zindel Grynspan:

"There is nothing that commends a story to memory more effectively than that chaste compactness which precludes psychological analysis. And the more natural the process by which the storyteller foregoes psychological shading, the greater becomes the story's claim to a place in the memory of the listener, the more completely is it integrated into his own experience, the greater will be his inclination to repeat it to someone else." (*Illuminations*, 90)

Grynspan, like Benjamin's storyteller, can fix the story in the memory of his listener. And just like Herodotus, equally evoked in "The Storyteller", who tells the story of the Egyptian king Psammenitus, grieving his son, he "offers no explanations. His report is the driest" (89-90) Or, like another figure of "The Storyteller", Johann Peter Hebel, who can make a long period of years of mourning "graphic" in one sentence through the account of successive historical events, Grynspan equally excels in compactness, in the art of dry but evocative recounting of the events. Yet, even though Grynspan can be compared to Benjamin's figure of the storyteller "in which the righteous man encounters himself" (*Illuminations* 106), he is, in fact, a post-traumatic storyteller, who, just like Kafka, somehow managed to keep his ability to tell a story intact.

Arendt expresses her misgivings against "sentimentality" in her report on the Eichmann trial too. She claims that "cheap sentimentality" is an escape from the pressure of reality, rather than a way to engage with others, when she evokes the young, sentimental German readers of Anne Frank:

"Those young German men and women who every once in a while - on the occasion of all the Diary of Anne Frank hubbub and of the Eichmann trial - treat us to hysterical outbreaks of guilt feelings are not staggering under the burden of the past, their fathers'

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<sup>61</sup> See, particularly Felman, who evokes the connection between Benjamin's "The Storyteller" and Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, but only concentrates on the way in which K-Zetnik exemplifies Benjamin's understanding of trauma.

guilt; rather, they are trying to escape from the pressure of very present and actual problems into a cheap sentimentality.” (251)

Of course, Arendt’s critique is not launched against Anna Frank, but against her readership of hysterical Germans: the “normal” reaction to their actual problems (i.e. that they still are surrounded by ex-Nazis in positions of authority) would be “indignation”. But, rather than potentially risking their career, they escape into sentimentality. This “emotion-laden insensitivity to reality” is reminiscent of both Rousseau’s and Eichmann’s: the latter had a unique capacity to safeguard himself against reality by escaping into bathos (“elation”).

Indeed, for Benjamin and Arendt alike, the proper response to historical traumas is astonishment or “indignation” at the circumstances, instead of empathy/compassion/sympathy with the individuals. Benjamin, speaking of Bert Brecht’s epic theatre, which “produc[es] astonishment rather than empathy.” (*Illuminations*, 147), argues that “instead of identifying with the characters, the audience should be educated to be astonished at the circumstances under which they function.” (*Illuminations* 147) Arendt herself defines *The Origins of Totalitarianism* as “an attempt at understanding what at first and even second glance appeared simply outrageous”<sup>62</sup>, and Edmund Burke, whom Arendt in the same work quotes, violently denounces the French Revolution as the “most astonishing [crisis] that has hitherto happened in the world” in his *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. (misquoted by Arendt, 175.) Conspicuously, the term “astonishment” is close to “wonder” (*thaumazein*) with which philosophy begins, as Arendt often writes; however, these terms do not mean the same:<sup>63</sup> while wonder is triggered by beauty or sublimity, and is inactive, astonishment may also imply indignation, outrage, some kind of unpleasantly shocking surprise. Indeed, as Peg Birmingham equally argues, while “the Greeks were provoked to think out of a sense of wonder (*thaumazein*) at the beauty of the world, wonder today, [Arendt] claims, is provoked by the twin senses of horror and shame at what human beings are capable of doing.”<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Arendt, Hannah. 1994. *Totalitarianism: part three of The origins of totalitarianism*. (San Diego: Harcourt Brace) 7.

<sup>63</sup> See also: “While Plato still held that the true *archi*, beginning and principle of philosophy, is wonder,\*<sup>1</sup> Aristotle, in the opening paragraphs of the *Metaphysics*,\*\* interpreted—and was the first to do so—this same wonder as mere astonishment or puzzlement (*aporein*); through astonishment men become aware of their ignorance of things that may be known...” “Admiring wonder conceived as the starting-point of philosophy leaves no place for the factual existence of disharmony, of ugliness, and finally of evil.” Arendt *The Life of the Mind*, 114. 150.

<sup>64</sup> Birmingham. Peg. “Jean-Jacques Rousseau's sovereign intimacy” *Bloomsbury Companion to Hannah Arendt*, (Bloomsbury: 2021) 520.

How is it possible to communicate historical trauma so that words provoke astonishment, indignation, manifesting an engagement with reality? How to find the right words at the right moment? Arendt's 1946 essay "Franz Kafka, Appreciated Anew" reveals her life-long dialogue with Benjamin's argument on the demise of storytelling as *communication* following the traumatic shock of Modernity and the First World War. (I 151-153). She writes that "Kafka's true gift is to create in the reader a general and vague fascination, along with an inevitably precise collection of particular images and events [...] that the reader endures long enough to make it a significant part of his life" (*Reflections on Literature and Culture* 95) Although Kafka is no Leskov, his stylistically compact stories, according to Arendt, create fascination (i.e. astonishment) and claim a "place in the memory of the listener".

In "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire", Benjamin discusses the causes of the demise of communication and the decline of story-telling in parallel with the rise of Modernity in the framework offered by Freud's trauma theory. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud analyses the consequences of accident neuroses, or individual traumas, and argues that when the subject is suddenly assaulted on all sides by a powerful amount of outside stimuli, these stimuli do not enter consciousness, but leave behind a memory trace leaving a lasting impact on the structure of experience. What is interesting for Benjamin, are not the individual traumas Freud investigates after the First World War, but much rather the relationship between what Freud calls trauma, the emergence of Modernity, and the subject's possible responses to the overwhelming stimuli offered by Modernity, which he interprets as a traumatic shock. As he explains:

““The greater the share of the shock factor in particular impressions, the more constantly consciousness has to be alert as a screen against stimuli; the more efficiently it does so, the less do these impressions enter experience (*Erfahrung*), tending to remain in the sphere of a certain hour in one's life (*Erlebnis*). Perhaps the special achievement of shock defense may be seen in its function of assigning to an incident a precise point in time in consciousness at the cost of the integrity of its contents.” (159)

For Benjamin, one of the most pressing questions of his traumatic and traumatized age is “how lyric poetry can have at its basis an experience for which the shock experience has

become the norm" His answer is an analysis of Baudelaire's poetry, which has "a large measure of consciousness" and "a plan [...] at work in its composition." (158) For what constitutes Baudelaire's singularity, what Baudelaire's poetry is eminently capable of, as a "peak achievement of the intellect", is to "turn the incident into a moment that has been lived," and thereby to *portray* the traumatic condition of the "failure of the shock defence", proper to Modernity (159). Thereby, as Kevin Newmark equally puts it, it also "affords its reader the opportunity to reproduce and develop the traumatic events that underlie it in order, retrospectively, to gain some control over them."<sup>65</sup>

Arendt's favorite authors (Kafka, Brecht, W. H. Auden), as well as Grynszpan himself are capable of reproducing the traumatic event, and at the same time gain control over it, and reveal its meaning. They succeed in *portraying* trauma (i.e. the failure of the shock defence), without succumbing to it re-traumatized, or becoming completely dispassionate, emotionally numb. As Arendt puts it with regard to Brecht's epic theatre of alienation: "compassion is the fiercest and most fundamental of Brecht's passions, hence the one he was most anxious to hide"<sup>66</sup> On Auden, she similarly writes: "There was nothing more admirable in Auden than his complete sanity and his firm belief in sanity; in his eyes, all kinds of madness were lack of discipline."<sup>67</sup>

What artists and proper storytellers share, according to Arendt, is a "certain detachment from the heady, intoxicating business of sheer living", which make it possible for them to reveal the meaning of the "unbearable sequence of sheer happenings"<sup>68</sup>. This meaning, however, lacks the element of definition, of determination ("storytelling reveals meaning without committing the error of defining it", 270), and, consequently, storytelling is also devoid of the coercion proper to truth claims. Instead, properly told stories share the reflective (rather than determinative) character of Kant's aesthetic judgments, while being "deprivatized and deindividualized" (*The Human Condition*, 50), demanding agreement from everyone. Properly told stories, such as Zindel Grynszpan's or Franz Kafka's, thus stay in the memory of the listener.

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<sup>65</sup> Newmark, Kevin. "Traumatic Poetry: Charles Baudelaire and the Shock of Laughter." *American Imago* 48, no. 4 (1991): 515-38. 239. We may remember that Arendt, when discussing Grynszpan's exquisite ability to tell a story, also mentions "the transforming realm of poetry", where it is possible to (properly) tell a story, even without the kind of purity of soul Grynszpan has.

<sup>66</sup> "What is permitted to Jove..." *RLC*, 244.

<sup>67</sup> "Remembering Wystan H. Auden" *RLC*, 298

<sup>68</sup> "The story reveals the meaning of what otherwise would remain an unbearable sequence of sheer happenings" ("Isak Diensen", *RLC*, 270.)

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Meanwhile, what endows the compact, dispassionate story of Grynszpan with special political relevance is that it is a successful testimony, contrasting Billy Budd's silence or K-Zetnik's collapse. In other words, what makes it possible for Grynszpan's narrative to meaningfully act upon an already existing web of human relationships, is his testimony being a public speech act in a legal, juridical context. Testimonies, as public performances and performative speech acts, not only remain in the memory of the listeners and acquire historical relevance, but can also persuade the (present) audience of the speaker's righteousness, and contribute to the condemnation of the criminal. Thereby, Grynszpan's ability to testify, as well as Billy Budd's or K-Zetnik's failure, can all serve to illustrate Arendt's important claim that only right words uttered at the right moment can act upon, and do good to the political community.