

Editor's Introduction

Among the many possible ways to pay tribute to a thinker such as Hannah Arendt, on the fiftieth anniversary of her death, we were decided to adopt an unprecedented approach: an imaginary interview. This choice responds to her desire – expressed repeatedly in her works – to invite future readers to grasp the vitality of her thinking, without stopping at the final results and avoiding the risk of imprisoning her philosophy within systematic and rigid formulas. It is a way of questioning the nature of concepts, the development of arguments and the dynamics of Arendt's reflections, which often germinated in virtuous exchanges of opinion during meetings with her friends – philosophers and poets, historians and writers – who crowded her home. Having emigrated to the United States and always eager for new intellectual stimuli, Arendt was sustained by her insatiable desire to learn and meet new people. It is no coincidence that her small flat at 130 Morningside Drive was often filled with a wide circle of acquaintances: publishers such as William Phillips and Philip Rahv, critics such as Alfred Kazin, writers such as Robert Lowell, poets such as Randall Jarrell and Wystan Hugh Auden, philosophers such as Hans Jonas, as well as numerous German friends who, like her, had shared the burden of emigration.

Keen intelligence, frank sincerity and genuine friendship were the gifts that she generously offered to the people, granting them her trust and affection without reserve. This is how she was remembered

by literary critic Alfred Kazin, who often spent long hours discussing with her, deeply admiring her thinking even though he did not always agree with it. He was struck by her extraordinary analytical skills in her works on totalitarianism and by her formulation of the famous idea of the banality of evil, although he feared that the latter might be misunderstood or abused. Kazin particularly appreciated her faith in thought as a tool of intellectual independence and her constant commitment to thinking about what we are doing. In his words: 'When I met her in the late 1940s, she was a charming Jewish woman full of temperament. She was tender and witty, yet feminine, sharp and incredibly cultured. When she was enthusiastic about a new friendship, her Jewish features and husky voice softened into a thoughtful kindness [...] She charmed me and others because her interest in her new homeland and in English-language literature were part of her very being, like her accent and her passion for discussing Plato, Kant, Nietzsche, Kafka and Duns Scotus himself, as if they all lived with her.'

We want to remember her in this way, just as in the portrait that emerges from Kazin's testimony: attentive and always ready to respond to those who today ask her about the great issues she has faced over time, convinced that the dark history of those dark years did not allow her to take refuge in the reassuring places of abstraction, but rather required her to translate thought into active knowledge. This goal was fully in line with her need to align thought with the urgency of understanding reality, without giving in to false consolations.

The interview – perhaps an unusual literary genre for academic dissertations – becomes, in this case, a possible way to approach her through with her works, precisely at the moment when the pages of her writing were filling up, punctuated by the sound of the keys of her beloved typewriter.

We imagine her thus, struggling with the difficult transition from her mother tongue to English and, again, with the transition from the oral expression of thought – expressed in our imaginary interviews – to the fixity of writing. It goes without saying that writing is never a simple reproduction of orality, as she herself will have experienced during philosophical discussions with friends, when she found herself alone with the silence of the blank sheet of paper inserted into her typewriter. Yet, precisely to make her presence among us even more vivid, we intend to depict her as attentive to the question and precise in her answer. In this sense, an interview with a thinker of such calibre aims to capture the oral thread of her thinking, while acknowledging that her answers unfold in the density of her writing – sometimes complex and intricate, not always immediately comprehensible – as it constantly strives to penetrate the wall of difficult reality.

However, one should not think that Hannah Arendt was part of that intense 20th-century season of dialogical thought: nothing could be further from her sensibility and intellectual physiognomy. Her primary interest was to understand the world of plurality, thoroughly investigating the perverse mechanisms of totalitarian power in order to identify the patterns of active political life, aimed at guaranteeing every existence the right to participate in the world of the polis.

Ultimately, we like to remember her as her teacher and mentor Karl Jaspers saw her: a horse running without reins, striving to encounter life “in a storm without an umbrella”.

I would like to thank all those who have listened to this extraordinary figure through individual themes: Laura Botella (on the human condition), Giuseppe Bottaro (on freedom and revolution), Giovanna Costanzo (on birth rates), Francesco Ferrari (on Jewish pariah status), Antonino Giannetto (on Buber and the Judenfrage), Matteo Negro (on

judgement), Maria Teresa Pacilè (on power and totalitarianism), Paola Ricci (on forgiveness), Maria Felicia Schepis (on mass society).

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