

# TRAGEDY, SOLIDARITY, AND IMPARTIALITY

## THE MEANING OF HANNAH ARENDT'S THINKING FOR OUR NARRATIONAL IDENTITY

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### *Abstract*

The aim of the article is to outline the meaning of the tragic component of action in Hannah Arendt's theory of politics, and to relate it to the problem of modern storytelling and historiography by means of the concepts of solidarity and impartiality. Tragedy, inalienably connected with suffering, is the inherent, although not always conspicuous, feature of action in Arendt's thought. It comes to the fore more often through the quotations of poetry or poetic historiography than in the conceptual

framework of Arendt's oeuvre. Therefore, the interpretation of the tragic component of action in Arendt requires tracing these citations and linking them to the Arendtian conceptual framework. But there is more to it: such an interpretation is fulfilled only if it informs and inspires our critical consciousness concerning our own narrations and identities.

*Keywords:* Hannah Arendt, tragedy, solidarity, impartiality, history.

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### **Tragedija, solidarnost in nepristranskost. Pomen misli Hannah Arendt za našo narativno identiteto**

#### *Povzetek*

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Namen članka je oris pomena tragične sestavine delovanja v politični teoriji Hannah Arendt in njegoa povezava s problemom modernega pripovedovalstva in historiografije s pomočjo konceptov solidarnosti in nepristranskosti. Tragedija, neodtujljivo povezana s trpljenjem, je notranja, čeprav ne vselej očitna poteza delovanja v misli Arendtove. Pogostejše prihaja v ospredje skoz navedke iz pesništva ali pesniške historiografije kakor znotraj konceptualnega okvira njenega dela. Interpretacija tragične sestavine delovanja pri Arendtovi zato zahteva zasledovanje takšnih navedkov in njihove povezavo s konceptualnim okvirom. Toda pri tem gre za več: takšna interpretacija se lahko spopolni samo, če informira in navdihuje kritično zavest glede naših lastnih pripovedi in identitet.

*Ključne besede:* Hannah Arendt, tragedija, solidarnost, nepristranskost, zgodovina.

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*To understand the promise of Arendt's mode of tragic storytelling to foster kinds of heroism compatible with democratic community, attention should be given to the other dimension of the tragic hero, his or her role as doomed sufferer.*  
Robert C. Pirro<sup>1</sup>

In this article, I endeavor to present the bi-dimensional structure of Hannah Arendt's conception of action and connect it with the key concepts of political spectatorship and storytelling: solidarity and impartiality. Usually, when we speak of the category of action in Arendt's thought, what becomes evident is a certain promise for human beings: action, although difficult and conditioned, brings fulfillment and happiness for human beings and glory to the public sphere. When we speak of the inalienable fragility of the human world of action, the suffering and pain inherent to it, their appearance in Arendt's thought seem to be more elusive. It is no accident that, when the latter are at stake, Arendt more often than in other cases resorts to citations. And it is mostly citations of poetry or *poietic*, metaphoric philosophy or historiography, rather than the conceptual structure of her political thought.

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When addressing *suffering* in Arendt's thinking, one cannot avoid the reference to the tragic component of human action. A systematic analysis of tragedy as a matrix for Arendt's political theory has been undertaken by Robert Pirro. His book provides both a thorough reconstruction of Arendt's understanding of the Greek tragedy as well as a systematic analysis of the meaning of the tragic for Arendt's conception of politics (Pirro 2000). The aim of this essay is far more modest. Firstly, to let the ambiguity of action come to light: the ambiguity of suffering and fulfillment, or, of tragedy and happiness. This means also looking on action from another, non-heroic point of view, to read Arendt through these poetic citations, in the hope that action's inherent fragility will become more graspable. Secondly, to relate this reinterpretation of action through suffering and tragedy to the problem of storytelling in the hope that it sheds light on certain very current aspects of contemporary action: solidarity, impartiality, and the meaning of history.

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<sup>1</sup> Pirro 2000, 182.

## Happiness, tragedy, and despair

Hannah Arendt's *The Human Condition* is known mostly for her admiration of the possibilities given in human action. Unlike other activities, action bears a promise of purely human ways of being. The significance of "words and deeds," the main activities of humans among other humans, and the meaning of politics, is perseverance and renewal of the world. It is a prerequisite of humanity, which in Arendt expresses itself in the human ability of "appearance," i.e., being among others, talking to them, and persuading them of something, attempting to see the world from a different perspective. The sense of the world is the multispectrality of its inhabitants. This multispectrality exactly constitutes the basic ontological feature of the world; thus, acting people, "actors," as Arendt sometimes says, bestow the world of artifacts with worldliness, and human life with fulfillment. "Because of its inherent tendency to disclose the agent together with the act, action needs for its full appearance the shining brightness we once called glory, and which is possible only in the public realm." (Arendt 1998, 180)

This means that action bears not only a promise of humanity, but also of a flourishing of greatness and glory, impossible outside the public sphere, the stage of action. *The Human Condition* is infused with statements corroborating this optimistic, even heroic account of politics: "Action can be judged only by the criterion of greatness because it is in its nature to break through the commonly accepted and reach into the extraordinary" (Arendt 1998, 205); "The art of politics teaches men how to bring forth what is great and radiant" (Arendt 1998, 206). Action is bestowed with greatness and fulfillment because it is the only aspect of the human condition that enables people to be free.

In this place, it is crucial to note that the pivotal term in Arendt's thought, the concept of freedom, quite contrary to the tradition that started as early as the Stoics, is not an attribute of will. Freedom is by no means simply the freedom of choice. The primordial experience of will, described by St. Paul and Augustine, contains rather impotence than power. Although will has an imperative character and is connected with commands, it is simultaneously hampered by an inherent blocking mechanism: each "I will" is accompanied by "I will not," which makes the passage from will to action, from "I will" to

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“I can” doubtful. Thus, while on the one hand will is impotent, on the other it generates a sort of inherent resistance. This explains why, in spite of such powerlessness, it was associated with strength and power, and in modern times dominated the problem of freedom in political thought, where freedom was associated with a type of sovereignty. The typical representatives of this kind of thinking would be Rousseau with his concept of general will, and, to find a more contemporary example, Carl Schmitt. Nevertheless, for Arendt, will can be phenomenologically associated more with oppression and tyranny than with freedom:

The fact that I-will has become so power-thirsty, that will and will-to-power have become practically identical, is perhaps due to its having been first experienced in its impotence. Tyranny at any rate, the only form of government which arises directly out of the I-will, owes its greedy cruelty to an egotism. (Arendt 2006a, 161)

Rather, for Arendt, freedom means the ability to begin something new, which is characteristic for action. Of fundamental importance here is her phenomenological observation that “we first become aware of freedom or its opposite in our intercourse with others, not in the intercourse with ourselves” (Arendt 2006a, 147). Upon freedom, as the beginning of something new, Arendt puts a difficult theoretical stipulation: action, to be free, needs to be free from both a motive and from a goal. This condition, however bizarre it might sound to our ears, was necessary to avoid the instrumentality we usually connect with human action. Pre-given goals would strip our action of freedom and reshape it into fabrication, which is never free. 243

Astonishingly for those who consider Arendt to be a nostalgic thinker of antiquity, it is in modernity in which Arendt seeks earlier unknown glimmers of freedom and the public world. New experiences of action, modern revolutions, “are the only political events which confront us directly and inevitably with the problem of beginning” (Arendt 2006b, 11). At the same time, since revolutions were connected with the ability of persons to begin something new, they “brought to the fore the experience of being free” (Arendt 2006b, 24). Thus, *On Revolution* can be read as a book that intensifies Arendt’s description of

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action. A poetic support for the intensive happiness of revolutionary action present in Arendt's account can be found in Wordsworth's poem *The Prelude* (book 10, v. 693–697):

Oh! pleasant exercise of hope and joy!  
For mighty were the auxiliars which then stood  
Upon our side, we who were strong in love!  
Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive,  
But to be young was very heaven.

Nevertheless, one would be mistaken to think that Arendt's conception of action accepts this optimistic attitude fully. It is exactly this poetic upheaval of happiness of action that refers us to its tragic component: instability and vulnerability. And, also, to the fact that suffering is inalienable from happiness. When reading *On Revolution*, one has the feeling that something hidden behind the scenes of *The Human Condition* now comes to the fore. For instance, 244 Arendt refers to Theseus, who "let us know what it was that enabled ordinary men [...] to bear life's burden: it was the polis, the space of men's free deeds and living words, which could endow life with splendor" (Arendt 2006b, 273).

This quotation indicates two important things: firstly, obviously, that action, i.e., words and deeds, create freedom, the most important phenomenon of human life, and, secondly, less obviously, that freedom of action is a sort of consolation for the suffering inherent in human life. In *The Human Condition* Arendt renders it succinctly: "Because the actor always moves among and in reaction to other acting beings, he is never merely a 'doer' but always and at the same time a sufferer." (Arendt 1998, 190) Public happiness, or in another word, freedom, is then inalienably doomed with pain. "One pays dearly for freedom," Arendt said in 1964 during an interview with Günter Gauss (Arendt 2005a, 17).

In her *Lectures on Kant's Philosophy* and in *On Revolution*, she cites *Oedipus in Colonus* by Sophocles (1224–26):

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Not to be born  
 is far best scenario; but if a man appears,  
 next best to go swiftly as he may  
 back down the path from whence he came.<sup>2</sup>

Although Arendt refers here to the “Greek pessimism,” it is clear for the reader that her reference to tragedy is not of purely historical interest. Her own conception of action is infused with a tragic note. The first who noticed that was Karl Jaspers (to whom the book on revolution was dedicated), who wrote in his letter immediately after publication: “In the course of your presentation, the greatness to which you give expression is a source of encouragement. Ultimately, the whole is your vision of a tragedy that does not leave you despairing: an element of a tragedy of humankind.”<sup>3</sup> Arendt responded: “A tragedy that warms and lightens the heart, because such great and simple things were at stake.”<sup>4</sup>

It seems that tragedy for Arendt has nothing to do with hopelessness, it is rather an attempt to come to terms with the conditions of human existence. As in Robert Pirro’s words: “Arendt’s use of the term, tragedy, is consistent with her long-held idea that the defeat of human aspirations to political freedom, if it is made an appropriate object of historical or poetic remembrance, may yet inspire future attempts to be free.” (Pirro 2011, 39)

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The problem with very important political experiences of modern man is that freedom, which appears on the stage and is shared by the participants of an event, tends to disappear as soon as the event fulfills its task and comes to an end. This was the fate of both the French and American revolutions, as well as the French Resistance during the Second World War (or, one wants to add, with the revolution of the Polish “Solidarity” movement). It is no accident that *On Revolution* ends with the same quotation that begins *Between Past and Future*, namely with one of René Char’s aphorisms: “Our inheritance was left

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2As cited in Hannah Arendt (1992, 23): “Not to be born prevails over all meaning uttered in words; by far the second-best thing is for life, once it has appeared, to go back as quickly as possible whence it came.”

3 Karl Jaspers to Hannah Arendt, May 16, 1963 (Arendt and Jaspers 1992).

4 Hannah Arendt to Karl Jaspers, May 29, 1963 (Arendt and Jaspers 1992).

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to us by no testament.” And the latter is continued by: “If I survive, I know that I shall have to break with the aroma of these essential years, silently reject (not repress) my treasure.” For Arendt’s readers it is no secret that the treasure René Char speaks of is freedom, indeed the most essential and at the same time fragile of human experiences. Freedom “appears abruptly, unexpectedly, and disappears again [...] as though it were a *fata morgana*” (Arendt 2006a, 4).

Why is the treasure of revolution lost, or, why has freedom the inevitable tendency to disappear? The problem with unexpected events, such as Resistance or revolutions, that bear the treasure of freedom, is that they are not inherited from any testament or, to leave the metaphor, not foreseen by any tradition. And it is tradition that secures continuity and remembrance. For tradition is not simply the past, but a narration of the past. Without this narration “which selects and names, which hands down and preserves [...] there seems to be no willed continuity in time and hence, humanly speaking, neither past nor future, only sempiternal change of the world and the biological cycle of living creatures in it” (Arendt 2006a, 5).

246 When tradition cannot foresee and conceptualize the appearance of freedom (which is the case of all unprecedented historical events), it is as if a “failure of memory” happens on a historical, collective level. There is “no mind to inherit and to question, to think about and to remember [...], no story left that could be told” (Arendt 2006a, 6). Freedom needs its own narration, otherwise a historical amnesia brings about the loss of identity of a group or generation that tastes it. That is why in René Char we hear not tragedy anymore but a premonition of despair: one knows to have experienced something new and still can feel the aftertaste of the events, but it is too elusive to be grasped in language. Historical and personal identity are doomed with the danger of being lost. That is why the enormous effort of understanding “without banisters” is necessary. But this effort is unthinkable without the question of individual identity.

Paul Ricoeur grasped this nicely: “To answer the question ‘Who?’ as Hannah Arendt has so forcefully put it, is to tell the story of a life. The story told tells about the action of the ‘who.’ And the identity of this ‘who’ therefore itself must be a narrative identity.” (Ricoeur 1998, 246) Arendt’s questioning is beyond a shadow of a doubt inspired by Heidegger’s *Who of Dasein*. As we know, Heidegger did

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not raise the traditional question of *what* man is. Instead, he asked *who* is *Dasein*. Such is the direction of the analyses of *Being and Time*: they are not an answer to the question *what* man is, rather: what it actually *means* that man *is*.

Arendt, like Heidegger, quests for a phenomenological description of humanity directed against metaphysics, but, unlike Heidegger, has a different goal in mind: she does not want to give a foundation for ontology. She does not so much want to remind us of being as such, she instead strives at remembering the specifically *human* ways of being. Her phenomenology is anthropology. The account of the human condition is an account of being human in human terms only; in other words: an account of the fragile circumstances in which man appears human. This fundamental difference between both thinkers might be grasped conceptually. But one quote from Heidegger sheds light on it. It is the passage when he justifies the bizarre language of his ontological analyses:

It is one thing to report narratively about beings and another to grasp beings in their being. [...] If we may allude to earlier and in their own right altogether incomparable researches on the analysis of being, then we should compare the ontological sections in Plato's *Parmenides* or the fourth chapter of the seventh book of Aristotle's *Metaphysics* with a narrative passage from Thucydides. (Heidegger 1996, 34)

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For Arendt, the narrative passage from Thucydides is by no means inferior to Plato. Both sources are testimonies of two different attitudes to life and two different streams of the Western tradition. While philosophers glorify the *vita contemplativa*, which can be seen as a remedy for the fragility of unstable human affairs, historians and poets cherish and perpetuate vestiges of action. From the perspective of timeless and impersonal ontology, human words and deeds *per se* are irrelevant (they are only beings). From the perspective of a narrative, they constitute the identity of the doer, the only identity he or she has a chance to get. The non-philosophical narration binds together scattered events, and, by presenting them as a biography, saves them from falling into oblivion. Philosophical tradition, since it favors contemplation, is unable to preserve the original content of action. Human experience is by nature not stable enough to be preserved without a narration and stories to be told and retold.

Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to think that a remedy for the forgetfulness of action in philosophy is only a unique, unrepeatable, individual story. A narrative, being the necessary initial step of memory, is not enough. Elusive events need un-empty shells of concepts to be saved for generations. “All thought begins with remembrance [...] no remembrance remains secure unless it is condensed and distilled into a framework of conceptual notions” (Arendt 2006b, 212). Even more: “the human mind stands in need of concepts if it is to function at all” (Arendt 2006b, 212). The trouble with unexpected events generating freedom is that they are new, and the risk of losing their sense is greater than in the case of tradition continuing to function. This is because there is no language of description, no concepts to capture the elusive experience of freedom. The tragic note in Char’s aphorisms refers to the situation when someone is aware of losing something he is unable to save. The taste is still there but already disappearing, and, as Tocqueville said: “the mind of man wanders in obscurity” (Arendt 2006a, 6; Tocqueville 2012, Book IV, ch. 8).

248      That is why Arendt’s oeuvre can be considered as a constant battle for new concepts for the events unpredicted by tradition. Writing is based on stories, but it strives at a new conceptual framework for what is unprecedented in personal life and history. The very example of such a type of writing is *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, where Arendt masterfully combined the discreteness of historical, individual narration with forging a new, non-traditional conceptual framework for her later mature anthropology (see Arendt 1985).

### **Solidarity and impartiality**

“In making suffering the flip side of acting, Arendt established the basis for recognizing another dimension of the politics of tragedy: the promotion of solidarity.” (Pirro 2011, 187) But the phenomenon of solidarity refers us to its even more important correlate: impartiality.

The very concept of solidarity is not pertinent to Arendt’s political writings. In *The Human Condition*, *The Promise of Politics*, *Responsibility and Judgment*, as well as in the monumental *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, it is missing in the indexes. The exception is, again, *On Revolution*, where *solidarity* appears as

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an opposite concept to *pity*. While the latter is a sentiment and a modification (or, in Arendt's word, a perversion) of compassion, solidarity does not belong to the emotional sphere. Solidarity is rather an intellectual insight that strives at establishing "deliberately and [...] dispassionately a community of interest with the oppressed and exploited" (Arendt 2006b, 79). Solidarity, then, refers to the common interest of humanity as a whole and its medium is reason, which provides us with the understanding of generality and "is able to comprehend a multitude conceptually" (Arendt 2006b, 79).

Solidarity, if we continue exploring these scarce remarks, as any relevant concept in Arendt, has a worldly, political quality that needs to be practiced. It demands imagination and insight rather than feeling and sentiment. While its incentive is the suffering of others, as tangible as it may be, it is (unlike pity) not dependent on it and is never nourished by it to the point of glorification. It is both more abstract and more concrete. It is more abstract because it is based on a community of people, of whom everyone can become the oppressed, so it refers to a certain potentiality of the human condition. At the same time, it is more concrete, because it does not define and separate the sufferers as an external and abstract group (the poor, the workers, etc.), but refers to the condition of any member of the community. It may refer to a particular group at a given time, but its interest is general and based on the plural and multispectral character of the human world. Its proper political medium is primarily not charity, but a just law that secures the rights of the (potentially) weak or minorities, and action that compels us to protect this law once it is violated, even at the cost of becoming the sufferer (like in cases of civil disobedience). But thus understood solidarity, it seems, can also be expressed in historical or poetic narration, when the weak is appreciated and a due place in the story is given to him.

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The phrase indicating this kind of solidarity can be found in Lucan, a Roman poet of the 1<sup>st</sup> century, whom Arendt quotes twice: once in *The Promise of Politics* with a clear reference to impartiality (Arendt 2005b, 174), once, in *The Life of the Mind*, in the context of a "reclamation" of human dignity from the modern, Hegelian concept of history (Arendt 1981, 216): "Victrix causa deis placuit, sed victa Catoni" ["if the victor had the gods on his side, the defeated had Cato"] (*Phersalia*, I, 128). The quotation from Lucan is significant, because it shows how solidarity is intertwined with, or, how it can

be a concretization of another key-concept of the tragic component of action in Arendt, impartiality. In non-Christian faiths it is godlike to appreciate the strong, but it can be human to feel for the sufferers. The ambiguity hidden in human action, happiness and the suffering inalienable to it make, Cato and us sensitive for solidarity with the defeated, even if only in an intellectual sense. In parallel, within the Hegelian conception of history, where history and its Reason appears as the god-like super-judge, Success becomes the final criterion of human action. But it is the task of a non-Hegelian historian, the one who tells and re-tells the story, to reclaim human judgment and to judge according to different criteria. These criteria, being individual, by no means have to be “subjective.” For sure, solidarity is not so in the above-mentioned sense, since it coexists only with impartiality.

250 Arendt found this impartiality and solidarity as early as Homer, in the poetic prefiguration of Western historiography. It was Homer who, when describing the events of the Trojan War, showed how “one and the same event can have two sides” (Arendt 2005b, 174). Arendt stressed the utmost importance of this model of impartiality for the often ideologized and manipulated history of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. That is why, in this context, the words of another poet, Friedrich Schiller (*Das Siegesfest*), appear in the interview with Günter Gauss in the context of Bolshevism, Leo Trotsky, and the manipulated narrations of WWI:

Wenn des Liedes Stimmen schweigen  
Von dem überwundnen Mann,  
So will ich für Hectorn zeugen [...]

[If the voices of the song are silent  
For him who has been vanquished  
I myself will testify for Hector ...] (Arendt 2005a, 19–20)

This testimony of solidarity is followed by the reference to impartiality of Herodotus who starts his *Histories* in a significant way, putting on equal footing fame of strangers and enemies and his own people:

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THESE are the researches of Herodotus of Halicarnassus, which he publishes, in the hope of thereby preserving from decay the remembrance of what men have done, and of preventing the great and wonderful actions of the Greeks and the Barbarians from losing their due meed of glory. (Herodotus *The Histories*, 1.1)

Taken together, solidarity and impartiality should be the most important keywords for modern post-9/11 global politics, which seems to suffer from a lack of both. Both terms rely on the Kantian enlarged mentality, i.e., the ability to imagine as if one was looking at the world from the position of another. Arendt extrapolated the aesthetic faculty of judgment into the sphere of morality and connected it with critical thinking (the public use of reason): the judgment of taste can help us not only to distinguish beauty from ugliness (like in Kant), but also good from evil. Indeed, the judgment “this is wrong” has for Arendt something of an aesthetic element. For instance, betrayal is wrong not only in the individual perspective, since it makes me live with a traitor, but also because, irrespective of this individual perspective, it disfigures the common world. Judgment, not being based on private individual feeling, but engaging the enlarged mentality, the ability to see the world from another’s perspective, can claim universal validity, or, to put it in Arendt’s language, could be related to the common world. 251

Impartiality and solidarity are challenged worldwide by contemporary historical policies, information bubbles, and new-old political mythologies, constructed according to the rules of modern advertising. They all need to be taken seriously because they answer a very deep psychological need of identification and rootedness which neutrality and distance undermine. But we need to remember that identification and belonging, natural as they are, are akin to the biological, un-political realm. Their principle is not action and freedom with inherent vulnerability, but they result in a tendency to homogenize and exclude, and, ultimately, in a complete one-sidedness of the stories told.<sup>5</sup>

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5 In this context, it is at the same time understandable and alarming that the modern search for a national homogeneous identity is often supported with a (more or less explicit) resurrection of the ideas of Carl Schmitt (which is, of course, not the same as academic critical interest). He attempted to endow identification and partiality with

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Such partiality loses the inherent ambiguity of action and polarizes people in two general types of petrified groups: those who are violent with words and deeds, and those who suffer from this violence. A succinct passage from Thucydides quoted in *Responsibility and Judgment* illustrates this best: “The strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must.” (*The Peloponnesian War*, 1; Arendt 2003, 183) It is worth mentioning because of the contemporary tendency to connect this type of partiality with “national identity” or “patriotism.” Although a thorough discussion of the meaning of patriotism and its connotational difference to such concepts as “nationalism” or “fascism” is impossible here, it needs to be addressed very briefly in the context of solidarity and impartiality.

252 It seems to be a strong tendency of the first decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, in opposition to the more global and liberal education of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in the Western world, to pursue a “patriotic” education by means of biased, partial historiography. The augmentation of this tendency can be seen both in the USA as well as in Central Europe, where Poland and Hungary are infamous leaders. Patriotic education, which can be understood in many different ways, seems to be distorted into a heroic (monumental) story, where the glory, endurance, and heroism of one nation (or even a national group) is stressed to the point of the distortion of academic historiography. This can be done in two modes that are often combined: on the one hand the glorious victories of the nation are extracted from history, decontextualized, and elaborated, and on the other the moments of being conquered and suffering of one’s nation are distilled, their causes attributed to others and cherished. Public

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political, public significance, which was a failed attempt insofar as it finally supported the biological degeneration of politics. At first, Schmitt referred to the opposition between enemy and friend, which he understood as the fundamental structure of politics. Enmity has a purely political significance and has nothing to do with aversion. Originally, it is a prerogative of the sovereign (king) to define political enemies (Schmitt 2005). Later, sovereignty was ceded from one person (of the king) on the political body of the people, and the category of the internal enemy appeared, whom the people exclude in the name of national homogeneity (Schmitt 2008). Although in Schmitt it is still conceptualized in political terms, it is clear that from then on only a very small step is needed to translate this political category of enemy into biopolitical terms and, as a result, to introduce “a brake into the domain of life,” as Michel Foucault puts it (Foucault 2003, 254).

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memory is not to be distracted and confused by suffering and domination caused by one's own nation or by un-heroic, self-inflicted pain. Suffering is always caused by others; heroism is always our merit.

In order to avoid any airiness of this argumentation, I will illustrate it by referring briefly to contemporary Polish "historical policies." In the public discourse, operating with the concept of "patriotism" automatically refers to the concept of "nation." But if we consider the understanding of "nation," present in the public sphere and opinion, it becomes obvious that the concept is unanimously and unconsciously grasped within the perspective of a philosophical conceptual realism. Nation is pre-conceived as a substance, a being of different ontological status than its members, past or present. Such an understanding of nation presupposes the unification and homogenization of the whole: the omission of what is individual and unique, but also almost automatic exclusion of what differs from one idea infusing the unity. The normative ideas of authenticity and truth adhere to this concept of nation and are followed by the whole sequence of further historical exclusions. The "true" Poles are the ones who are "patriots," but an understanding of "patriotism" is limited to those who are ready to defend the "reputation" and "dignity" of the nation, which always means uncritical reference to military triumphs and concealing what was less politically glorious in them.<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, the "true Pole" always suffers and dies for his fatherland, which appears in inculcating the cult of all national uprisings, which, apart from one,<sup>7</sup> were military and political catastrophes.<sup>8</sup> The suffering of the nation is always the strangers' guilt. It was always others who attacked, conquered, and assailed our fatherland and spilled our "innocent blood."<sup>9</sup> The "innocence" of the Polish

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6 The military triumph over the Crusaders in 1410, not worth much from a political perspective; the victory of Sobieski at Vienna, which squandered the chance of avoiding the danger of Moscow and subordinated Poland to the interest of the papacy. Nowadays, it is succinctly rendered in the slogan *Polak-Katolik* (Pole the Catholic).

7 The Wielkopolska Uprising 1918–1919, not really apparent in public memory.

8 In the Warsaw Uprising more civilians died than soldiers and the capital city was razed to the ground.

9 For instance, the Massacres of Poles in Volhynia and Eastern Galicia in the years 1943–1945 were stripped of historical context, which from a political point of view has been harmful for Polish-Ukrainian relations, annihilating the endeavors to reconcile,

nation sometimes requires the negation of historical facts.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, Poland is depicted as a country of tolerance: in Polish-Jewish relations the support for Jews during WWII is exhibited and stressed, acts of betrayal and informing concealed. If a historical fact is so obtrusive that it cannot be denied anymore, the realistic and substantialistic understanding of the nation comes to the fore and a special logic switches on: if someone behaved dishonorably or outrageously (e.g., “shmalzovniks”), he or she automatically excluded himself or herself from the nation, and in this way the nation, by means of tautology, can always remain noble, heroic, and morally impeccable.

254 This understanding of patriotism and patriotic education is obviously harmful not only for international dialogue and mutual tolerance of nations. It is also harmful for the identity of the said nation. Arendt on many occasions expressed clearly her attitude towards such patriotism, many times in contexts clearly referring to the two nations that were dearest to her heart, the Jews and the Germans: “If someone is not capable of this impartiality because he pretends to love his people so much that he pays flattering homage to them all the time—well, then there’s nothing to be done. I do not believe that people like that are patriots.” (Arendt 2005a, 20) Why not? It seems that the role of tragedy returns here with an even stronger impact.<sup>11</sup> In her speech on the occasion of receiving the Lessing prize of the Free City of Hamburg in 1959, Arendt referred to the then still existing problem of concealments in German history, or, better said, in the German perception of the German history, since German history had been an object of utmost international interest for years. In this context, Arendt makes a very interesting distinction in our relationship with the past, between *mastering* and *reconciling*.

The situation where a nation is unable to come to terms with its past, either through concealment or through distortion, is often commented on as an

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undertaken on both sides.

10 Like the Jedwabne pogrom in 1941 or Kielce in 1946. Instead of facing and reworking this past, in public discourse, skillfully designed by politicians, we encounter the glorification and victimization of so called “cursed soldiers,” the anti-communist guerilla troops in Polish post-war history.

11 I owe the turning of my attention to this track to the analysis of Robert Pirro, both systematic and insightful (see Pirro 2000, 134–136).

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inability to “master” its past. For Arendt, such an expression is a cliché which leads to missing the point. Such a past like German history 1933–1945, the horrors of the First World War for Europe in general, the Soviet legacy for Eastern Europeans, or the anti-Jewish pogroms, to name just a few examples, cannot be *mastered*. But this does not mean they should not be *faced*: “The best that can be achieved is to know precisely what it was, and to endure this knowledge, and to wait and see what comes from knowing and enduring.” (Arendt 1995, 20) In a true story told about the past, nothing is mastered, but the past can be *recognized* as what it was. The events that recur in a story as a tragedy let the spectator (the reader) partake in “the tragic effect, or the tragic pleasure, the shattering emotion which makes one able to accept the fact that something like this could have happened at all” (Arendt 1995, 20). Such partaking in a tragedy enables the process of recognition.

In classic tragedy, this sort of recognition was reserved for the individual hero, who, at one point of the story, turned into a sufferer. The archetype of this recognition is the moment when Oedipus, the tragic hero *per se*, finds out what he had done in the past and re-experiences the genuine events for the second time, now being able to assess their full meaning. But we can extrapolate this figure of tragic hero and connect it with the enlarged mentality. While the Kantian enlarged mentality refers mostly to the synchronic potential community of citizens, to the actual multispectrality of the public world, and while for Arendt it predominantly has this meaning, it can be as well reinterpreted as being diachronic: the reader of a tragic story is a spectator of past events. When it comes to the recognition of the meaning of the events how they were, the reader becomes the actor and the sufferer at the same time. He can recognize the past deeds of his own nation as his own deeds, as his own past, even if this past is something one would desire to forget. This recognition, if it is not individual, but extended towards public consciousness or public use of reason, can be liberating, although it never leads to the “mastering” of this past. It causes pain which in Greek tragedy is expressed with lamentation, but it also protects the agent (the nation, the society) from suppressing its past and, as a result of this suppression, from losing its meaning for future generations, and forgetfulness leading to despair. “Even non-tragic plots become genuine events only when they are experienced a second time in the form of suffering

by memory operating retrospectively and perceptively.” (Arendt 1995, 21)

This means that historical events, in order not to become mystified or distorted, have to be retold once and again by every generation, sometimes from a different angle, but with the same passion, and also with the same dose of impartiality and solidarity. Just as “we can no more master the past than we can undo it” (Arendt 1995, 21), we can never deal with it once and for all. Events require the “ever-recurrent narration” for the sake of living remembrance and also for the sake of our own identity as spectators and sufferers at the same time.

In order to avoid losing our past and our identity we need to pay closer attention to the impartiality in our modern, national historiographies, since they sometimes seems to have lost the greatness of Greek historical and tragic narrations and Kantian multispectrality for the sake of ideology and political national myths.

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