Arendt versus Ellison on Little Rock: The Role of Language in Political Judgment

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Few of Arendt's writings have drawn more criticism from her own supporters than "Reflections on Little Rock," in which she opposes the federally mandated desegregation of schools in Arkansas.¹ Seyla Benhabib, for instance, criticizes Arendt's failure to understand the function of public schools as well as her misguided attempt to employ her distinction between the social and the political.² While I agree with these criticisms, I want to take Arendt's comments as a way of opening up problems in her conception of the relationship among political storytelling, plurality, and judgment. I will do this through comparison with the work of an American thinker who responded to her piece on Little Rock, Ralph Ellison. Ellison's differences with Arendt are not just about race or schools but about the proper conception of language in political judgment. From Ellison's point of view, Arendt's understanding of language is hamstrung by Kantian and phenomenological commitments that prevent her from giving a cognitive and ontological dimension to language that a deliberative politics requires. Thus, my essay is not directed at historical questions but at the way in which Ellison rather than Arendt shows us how language and judgment should be understood.

Before getting into either thinker, I will discuss several competing understandings of narrative in contemporary philosophy, for distinguishing among these often confused positions is crucial to my exposition. "Narrative" ("storytelling") is a space in which different political and theoretical positions are articulated.

I divide contemporary philosophical treatments of narrative into four groups. My purpose is not to be comprehensive but to help locate the issues concerning Arendt and Ellison. First, there are structuralists, such as Hayden White, who think of narrative as an epistemologically suspect yet inevitable structure imposed on chaotic individual and collective existence. Narrative is a retrospective construction that does not inform the phenomenology of daily life; "No one and nothing lives a narrative."³ Historians often want us to believe that "the stories told in narrative histories inhere either in the events themselves . . . or in the facts derived from the critical study of evidence,"⁴ but we should view such claims with suspicion. White's metahistorical project looks at narratives as constructs without any decisive epistemological purchase on the world, for "there are no grounds to be found in the historical record itself for preferring one way of construing its meaning over another."⁵

The Third Critique approach to narrative, which appears in the work of Paul Ricoeur and Arendt, brings the resources of Husserlian phenomenology together with Kantian reflective judgment. Narrative is still formal rather than substantive, but the emplotment emerges from a reflective rather than determinant, referential judgment. The result, says Ricoeur, is that narrative, like metaphor, produces “semantic innovation,” which comes from the synthesis provided by plot. Plot “integrates into one whole and complete story multiple and scattered events, thereby schematizing an intelligible signification attached to the narrative taken as a whole.”⁶ For the Third Critique view, narrative does not organize intuition, nor does it make an argument. Instead, it only reflexively orders already cognized facts and events. Narrative is not woven into the fabric of everyday life but is a retrospective reflective construction. Action, says Arendt, “reveals itself fully only to the storyteller, that is, to the backward glance of the historian, who indeed always knows better what it was all about than the participants.”⁷

Next there are the hermeneutic philosophers of narrative, such as Alasdair MacIntyre, Charles Taylor, and Hans-Georg Gadamer. These thinkers reject four important and interrelated features of the Kantians: subject/object vocabulary, formalism, aesthetic separatism, and methodological individualism. Unlike the Third Critique Husserlian phenomenologists, these thinkers do not keep a formal space of reflection or a material space of reference outside language. Narrative is less an ordering of the subjective or objective world than the reinterpretation of the existing narratives and symbols that always already inform one’s self-understanding. That is, narratives, both literary and nonliterary, are part of the preunderstanding of our being in the world, part of the medium through which we live. “Stories are lived before they are told,” MacIntyre says.⁸ This means, as Taylor explains, that “our self-interpretations are partly constitutive of our experience,” such that “certain modes of experience are not possible without certain self-descriptions.”⁹ This group abandons Kantian attempts to isolate the aesthetic from discussions about the “true” or the “good” since all these questions are best formed through rather than against our linguistic, historical embeddedness. Hence, narrative is not a mere reflexive ordering of the heterogeneous but an argument.

Lastly, we need to consider the quite different kind of ontological thinking about language and narrative that is provided by Foucauldian genealogies. These genealogies redescribe the self-understandings of traditions in terms of their unthought relational identities and social practices. Indeed, genealogy – like other poststructuralist ontologies, such as Derrida’s ontology of the sign and its other and Lyotard’s ontology of the sentence – set themselves up against the ordering presuppositions of first-order narratives as well as metanarratives.¹⁰ For the genealogist, to think of our historical being as a dialogical play of tradition, as Gadamer does, or in terms of Kantian judgments, is to misdescribe language’s participation in the disciplinary practices of modernity. The structuring forces of history and being are not to be found in the consciousness of historical actors or the logic of history, but in the systems and practices revealed by the desituated

ethnographer.¹¹ Poststructuralism offers an important corrective to the hermeneutics of Taylor and Gadamer, who place too much of the blame for modernity's ills on subject-centered scientific reason rather than seeing the problems in language itself. Genealogies unmask the narratives and self-understandings that shape identities and historical studies from the outside, though they never account for their own judgments or the unspoken narratives that inform them. What Foucault shares with Taylor and MacIntyre is that he gives language and narrative historically specific powers to inform the subject's being in the world that the neo-Kantians discussed above do not.

While Arendt's phenomenology draws on Kant's *Critique of Judgment* and the Kantian distinction between reason (thinking) and intellect (knowing) to block out the question of our being in language, the model of interpretive judgment that I will be developing through Ellison shows that the way we bring the question of our being in language and narrative into interpretive judgment is not decided in advance as either part of the play of tradition (Taylor, MacIntyre, Gadamer) or the ontology of power (Foucault, Lyotard, Derrida). One of the central problems of judgment is to decide how to interpret one's historical and cultural embedding; hence, narrative choices themselves call on political judgment. This question is perspicuously thematized in Ellison's account, while it must struggle to appear through Arendt's Kantian presuppositions. The dispute over Little Rock will serve as a point of entry to these differences and their significance.

In her essay on Little Rock, Arendt opposed federally ordered desegregation for three reasons: 1) it asked children to take on political activities that were the province of adults; 2) it confused the social and the political ("what equality is to the body politic discrimination is to society"¹²); 3) it violated states' rights. I will focus on the second in connection to language and storytelling.¹³

For my purposes, Arendt's most revealing comments come when she tells us the two questions that she asked herself when formulating her essay: "What would I do if I were a Negro mother?" and "What would I do if I were a white mother in the South."¹⁴ Here Arendt assumes that the question is a private one and that she has access to the self-understanding of African-American political thought that informs the judgment of the black families. Certainly, her misreading is reinforced by her racism, in which she treats her differences with the NAACP over the social and the political not as a difference of equals, but as a symptom of the damaged judgment of "oppressed minorities [who] were never the best judges on the order of priorities in such matters."¹⁵ However, I want to push beyond racism – Arendt's kind of misreading is parodied in the Prologue to Ellison's *Invisible Man*, as we'll see later – and her particular understanding of the role of education, which is quite interesting and controversial but beyond my subject.¹⁶ Rather, I will explore how Arendt's judgment points to problems in the way she conceives of the relationship among the public world, plurality, and language, relationships that Ellison's work addresses more successfully.

Ellison responds to Arendt by saying that she “has absolutely no conception of what goes on in the minds of Negro parents when they send their kids through those lines of hostile people.” Parents “are aware of the overtones of a rite of initiation which such events actually constitute for the child. . . .” The black child is “required to master the inner tensions created by his racial situation. . . . It is a harsh requirement, but if he fails this basic test, his life will be even harsher.” Ellison foregrounds the “implicit heroism of people who must live within a society without *recognition*.”¹⁷ Arendt replies with the cryptic concession that takes little back, “It is precisely the ideal of sacrifice that I didn’t understand.”¹⁸

Unfortunately, there is no evidence that they continued this dialogue. However, there is an important biographical incident that Arendt never mentions in her letter but that she reveals in a television interview in 1964: her own experience with the drama of recognition at school, for school was the place where Arendt came to self-consciousness about herself as “A Jew.” “The word ‘Jew’ was never mentioned at home. I first encountered it – though it is hardly worth recounting – in the anti-Semitic remarks of children as we played in the streets.” Although Arendt states that “the ‘Jewish Question’ had no relevance” in her home, she describes how her family dealt with anti-Semitism: “All Jewish children encountered anti-Semitism. And the souls of many children were poisoned by it. The difference with me lay in the fact that my mother always insisted that I not humble myself. One must defend oneself!”¹⁹ Developing the biographical, cultural, and psychological dimensions of this denial of her own experience would take this essay in another direction. What is important from my point of view is that this denial, this blind spot, appears in her political philosophy as well as in her particular judgment in this case.

In her dispute with Ellison, Arendt assumes the existence of a common world that is in good enough shape to articulate and draw together her own position and that of black mothers. Arendt’s idea of the world includes plurality but presupposes that there is a language and an intersubjective visibility that provide adequate resources for the articulation of difference.

The reality of the public realm relies on the simultaneous presence of innumerable perspectives and aspects in which the common world presents itself and for which no common measurement or denominator can ever be devised. . . . Being seen and being heard by others derive their significance from the fact that everybody sees and hears from a different position.²⁰

This idealized assumption inscribed in the metaphors of vision and aestheticized appearances operates in her judgment about black mothers, who cannot “appear” in the world except as the objects of white media. Her understanding of the world is reinforced by a subject-to-subject theory of judgment, as we’ll see later on, in which the imagination “goes visiting” without interrogating the historical medium of language and culture. Arendt vacillates between a transhistorical philosophical conception of the public realm as part of the human condition and

particular analyses of sociohistorical institutions of modernity that have eroded this realm's historical possibilities. However, Arendt does not integrate history and the institutions of meaning into her conception of judgment.²¹ Thus, Ellison not only contests her particular assumption about the American public realm but her way of conceiving of the relationship of language to the public world.

To understand Arendt's privileging the fullness of the space of appearances over language we must step away momentarily from her conception of judgment to examine another Kantian dimension of her thought, the distinction between reason and intellect. Reason addresses the unknowable but important questions of meaning, while the intellect addresses cognitive questions of truth: "The need of reason is not inspired by the quest for truth but by the quest for meaning. And truth and meaning are not the same. The basic fallacy, taking precedence over all specific metaphysical fallacies, is to interpret meaning on the model of truth." She clarifies this later in the text: "Truth is located in the evidence of the senses. But that is by no means the case with meaning and with the faculty of thought, which searches for it."²² In making this Kantian distinction, Arendt keeps a firm wedge between truth and linguistic, interpretive practices. This wedge, which will have important consequences for her idea of political dialogue, is one that Ellison, like Taylor and Foucault, challenges.²³

For Arendt, truth is of two kinds, rational and factual, and what lies behind these distinctions is her understanding of totalitarianism, in which distinctions between facts and lies and between rational and empirical truths are destroyed by the loss of the public sphere. The public sphere provides a place for different opinions about the facts: "Facts inform opinions, and opinions, inspired by different interests and passions, can differ widely and still be legitimate as long as they respect factual truth. . . . Factual truth informs political thought just as rational truth informs philosophical speculation."²⁴ Totalitarianism deprives its citizens of "the distinctions between fact and fiction (i.e., the reality of experience) and the distinction between true and false (i.e., the standards of thought) no longer exist."²⁵

By "rational truth," she means "mathematical, scientific, and philosophical truths rather than factual truth."²⁶ Arendt wants to keep truth and meaning distinct because she sees a disastrous philosophical tradition that denigrates the public world by putting truth beyond appearance and common sense, beyond the realm of judgment. This tradition, which begins with Plato and continues through Hegel and Marx, finds contemporary articulation in Heidegger. "The modes of thought and communication that deal with truth, if seen from a political perspective, are necessarily domineering; they don't take into account other people's opinions, and taking these into account is the hallmark of all strictly political thinking."²⁷

From my point of view, what is important in this discussion is Arendt's separation of language/narratives from factual and rational truth. In challenging this separation, my point is not the fungibility of facts once we accept that interpretation goes "all the way down," but the irreality she assigns to narrative and language, an irreality that follows from her Kantian presuppositions, as we will

see. In her view, facts are not linguistically and narratively mediated by the actors' self-understandings but stand outside narrative emplotment: "Truth," says Arendt, "is what we are compelled to admit by the nature either of our senses or of our brain."²⁸

Arendt wants to keep a space between language and the world, for giving language greater purchase on experience opens the door to the philosopher/storyteller with a truth behind appearance and to *homo faber* who confuses politics and fabrication: "Was it not precisely the discovery of a discrepancy between words, the medium in which we think, and the world of appearances, the medium in which we live, that led to philosophy and metaphysics in the first place?" Because Arendt wants to preserve the priority of the world over language, she reverses philosophy's typical unmasking operation, so that everyday self-understanding unmasks the thinking self, which "is unaware of its own withdrawal from the common world of appearances." Reciprocally, she must plunge everyday self-understanding into an unreflective certainty: "The quest for meaning [is] absent from and good for nothing in the ordinary course of human affairs, while at the same time the results remain uncertain and unverifiable."²⁹

Arendt's conception of the world deflates the self-creating pretensions of both the literary and the philosophical storyteller from Plato to Marx who puts "an actor behind the scenes who, behind the backs of acting men, pulls the strings and is responsible for the story." Thus, "although everybody started his life by inserting himself into the human world through action and speech, nobody is the author or producer of his own life story. In other words, the stories, the results of action and speech, reveal an agent, but this agent is not author or producer."³⁰ What such narrative strategies reveal is an equation of meaning and truth, such as Hegel's "Science of the Experience of Consciousness," which "eagerly blurs Kant's distinction between reason's concern with the unknowable and the intellect's concern with cognition."³¹

Ellison is sensitive to these arguments, and he too affirms the priority of the historical actors' self-understanding to third-person Hegelian or Marxist transsubjective accounts. He lashes back at Irving Howe's Marxist reading of the politics of African-American representation since Howe's reading disregards the agency and achievement of African-American culture: "When he [Howe] looks at the Negro he sees not a human but an abstract embodiment of hell." Ellison insists that a "Negro" is "no product of the socio-political predicament,"³² and he develops this point in *Invisible Man* through the protagonist's relationship to the Communist Party. But spontaneity here is not opposed to a historical understanding of one's linguistic and cultural constitution; it is made possible by these languages.

Both Arendt and Ellison are committed to a phenomenology as the first step in historical understanding, for this approach preserves two interrelated features of subjectivity that are dear to them: freedom and difference. For both, liberty has to be maintained not only in the face of explanation, as we saw above, but also in

the face of homogenizing liberalism. In an interview, Richard Stern asks Ellison directly about the liberal tenet of neutrality toward the good: "The familiar liberal hope is that any specialized form of social life which makes for invidious distinctions should disappear. Your view seems to be that anything counts is the result of such specialization." Ellison replies at first with a simple "yes" and then develops his critique of liberalism when Stern asks about what equal access to all aspects of society would mean to African Americans: "Most Negroes would not be nourished by the life white Southerners live. It is too hag-ridden, it is too obsessed."³³ Like Arendt, Ellison is not interested in homogenizing public life whether through the schools or other means. He too wants a common world, not a common will. For Ellison, liberalism and Marxism fail to recognize African Americans despite their "good intentions," because both focus on the conditions of oppression rather than the self-understandings of either the oppressor or the oppressed.

However, unlike Ellison, Arendt believes that the kind of interpretive reflection that we find in works of art should be conceived of as "thought" rather than "cognition," since the former "has neither an end nor aim outside itself."³⁴ Storytelling is closer to thought rather than knowing, for stories perform a "de-sensing operation" on the phenomena and on common sense. "Even the simple *telling* of what has happened, whether the story then tells it as it was or fails to do so, is *preceded* by the de-sensing operation."³⁵ Because Arendt accepts the epistemological tradition of philosophy that locates truth outside language and symbols, "she must," as Albrecht Wellmer says, "locate the human world, that is, the common world of men opened up by speech, the world of politics and poetry, of thinking and judging, beyond or above the sphere of cognition."³⁶

The result is that culture is deprived of any constitutive dimension: "Culture and politics then belong together because it is not knowledge or truth which is at stake but rather judgment and decision."³⁷ What this understanding ignores is the movement in the other direction, in which stories inform experience, which the hermeneutic understanding of language makes available. Arendt's statement denies the ontological and politically ambiguous force of culture (and art) to constitute identities, in enabling and oppressive ways. Thus, for Ellison, Arendt's conception denies the constitutive public force of the stories that his work thematizes, a force that makes the characters in the novel invisible to each other and that infects the relationship between text and reader. Ellison foregrounds the role of language and art in the public sphere by giving narrative a referential dimension. In speaking of his relationship to Richard Wright, particularly Wright's naturalism, Ellison says that his books would be implicit criticisms of Wright's, just as "all novels of a given historical moment form an argument over the nature of reality and are, to an extent, criticisms of each other."³⁸ Ellison's commitment to a relentless stripping away of the Invisible Man's sense of reality is a critique of the referential languages available at the time.³⁹ Truth, not just meaning, is part of public political deliberation. This truth appears not simply as an appeal to the

world but by a historical argument against or with his predecessor's language, the interpretive medium. Obviously, this view of history is "interpretive" rather than causal.⁴⁰

My Ellisonian critique of Arendt is that she employs a phenomenological vocabulary that misdescribes the linguistically informed heterogeneity and historicity of the public world as well as the dynamics of our dialogic interaction. We are gripped and transformed by our experiences with language and stories in a way that Arendt never makes available. Ellison's point is twofold. First, we cannot wish into existence a prelinguistic space so as to separate "the medium in which we think" from "the world of appearances."⁴¹ Second, we do not need to because the political problem that Arendt sees in the relationship between language and making is not a global problem that haunts all abstraction from the prepredictive world; rather, the problem of construction is a particular instrumental, antidialogical understanding of our being in language. Moreover, the possibility of transformation in language is not necessarily something that philosophers and politicians do to "remake" the lifeworld; rather, there is a transformative dimension to the first-order dynamics of dialogue. What her phenomenology keeps out is a constitutive conception of language either from the Taylorian side, in which "language itself serves to set up spaces of common action,"⁴² or the genealogical side, in which language forecloses such spaces. In her effort to avoid philosophy's habitual denigration of appearance – and to avoid Heidegger's conception of being in the world, in which *Dasein* seeks isolated authenticity in the midst of idle talk – Arendt is forced to flatten all language's unavoidable influence over the constitution of the world into the neutral vocabulary of appearances; hence, she leaves undeveloped the question of our being in language.⁴³

Ironically, one of the ideas that drives language into exile is her understanding of a common, public realm and how it becomes available. Although "the public realm, as the common world, gathers us together and yet prevents our falling over each other, so to speak,"⁴⁴ we do not access the space of appearances through a straightforward perception in the "natural attitude," to speak as a phenomenologist. Instead, the space of appearances emerges when we adopt the stance of Kantian aesthetic judgment, which does the work of a kind of phenomenological epoche by shifting us from determinant to reflective judgments:

In order to become aware of appearances we first must be free to establish a certain distance between ourselves and the object, and the more important the sheer appearance of a thing is, the more distance it requires for its proper appreciation. The distance cannot arise unless we are in a position to forget ourselves, the cares and interests and urges of our lives, so that we will not seize what we admire but let it be in its appearance.

In brief, "common sense . . . discloses to us the nature of the world insofar as it is a common world." Arendt thinks that this is an appropriate model for political

judgment since this model gets us beyond the self-interests and moral interests that constrict our appreciation of the world: "Taste judges the world in its appearance and in its worldliness . . . neither the life interests of the individual nor the moral interests of the self are involved here. For judgments of taste, the world is the primary thing, not man, neither man's life nor his self."⁴⁵ Abandoning the legacy of the Second Critique, in which the solitary subject, "consulting nothing but his own reason, finds the maxim that is not self-contradictory," Arendt urges us to attend to "men in the plural as they really are and live in societies."⁴⁶ The issue is what she calls after Kant, "enlarged mentality," the ability to "think in the place of everybody else."⁴⁷

The focus of Arendt's conception of judgment has been her reading of Kant's *Critique of Judgment*, which has received so much sensitive and detailed commentary recently. What underwrites Arendt's idea of judgment amidst the particularities of the world is Kant's idea of *sensus communis*: common sense is assumed "as the necessary condition of the universal communicability of our cognition, which is presupposed in any logic and in any principle of knowledge that is not skeptical." Kant's common sense articulates the transcendental conditions of traditional common sense:

The idea of a sense shared [by all of us], i.e., a power to judge that in reflecting takes account (a priori), in our thought, of everyone else's way of presenting [something], in order as it were to compare our own judgment with human reason in general and thus escape the illusion that arises from the ease of mistaking subject and private conditions for objective ones.⁴⁸

This characterization presupposes an arena of consensus in which differences can appear. Kant goes too far when he moves from the need for common sense to the conclusion that reflective judgment can adopt a universal perspective ("human reason in general"). To be sure, Arendt's move to reflective judgment opens up the question of shared meaning in a way that is unavailable in Kant's practical philosophy, in which historical meanings are driven out by the rules of determinant judgment.⁴⁹ She thus seeks to minimize the objectification mistake common to Kantian liberalism in which shared meanings, languages, and facts are simply assumed.⁵⁰ But she nonetheless does not leave a place for an ontological interrogation of our being in language, which is what is required for her to avoid a misreading of the African-American mothers.

Arendt wants to keep reflective judgment apart from the concept, the domain of determinant judgments about truth (and morality) with its attending antipolitical, non-persuasive forms of argument rather than having reflective judgment go "all the way down" so as to place the terrain of the First Critique within the horizon of reflective, interpretive judgment. Hence, she must separate art and politics from truth: "Taste judgments [unlike demonstrable facts or truths demonstrated by argument] . . . share with political opinions that they are persuasive; the judging person – as Kant says quite beautifully – can only 'woo

the consent of everyone else' in the hope of coming to an agreement with his eventually."⁵¹

Ellison's disagreement with Kant shares much with Gadamer's reading of "the Kantian subjectivization of aesthetics," in which art is sequestered from the historical dialogues in which it is passed down, dialogues that both inform and make claims of the subject of interpretation.⁵² To speak of an "enlarged mentality" capable of appreciating a world ignores our being in language and the claims to truth, goodness, etc. made through these languages. The challenge of difference and otherness to judgment is better captured through a dialogical/genealogical model, in which the subject of judgment is made vulnerable through the linguistic tissues of his/her being by the appeal of the other. (I'll return at the end of the essay to the question of historical consciousness.) The hope of the *Invisible Man* is that the act of reading will produce such a public self-interrogation that a new dialogical space is opened, a space that is currently foreclosed by the existing languages of self-understanding. "Who knows," says Ellison's narrator, "but that on lower frequencies I speak *for* you."⁵³ The way to break through the linguistic prison is not through an appeal to appearances – as Arendt says, "For us, appearance – something that is being seen and heard by others as well as ourselves – constitutes reality"⁵⁴ – but through a dialogical transformation that is possible only if we risk engaging the referential and ethical claims of the text, claims that an Arendt's Kantian aesthetic blocks out.

The opening scene of *Invisible Man*, in which the narrating self of the present – that is, the self that has been through the entire story that is about to be told – confronts the reader with an allegory of recognition. In this fable, the black protagonist is attacked by someone who does not see him. This initiates a drama of recognition, not just within the work but between text and reader. The text deliberately disorients the reader, playing off the slave narrative, *Notes from Underground*, and jazz traditions. This is a warning that the reader will simply repeat the action of the assailant, commit a hermeneutic mugging of the text, if he/she is not prepared to give up the assumption of a shared linguistic world, which will mean giving up his/her self-understanding. Self-recognition has required transformation and loss for the narrator – i.e., in order to recognize himself – and readers should expect a similar wrenching. Recognition of difference is not merely additive and synchronic but transformative and historical both individually and collectively. Ellisonian judgment does not ricochet between indeterminate "bannisterlessness" in politics and culture and determinacy in cognitive matters; rather, judgment emerges from dialogical reflection with the full range of experience. By making a common world a matter of aesthetic reflection rather than what emerges from a dialogical engagement about the true, good, and beautiful, Arendt shows that the danger of the Third Critique is not too much but too little *agon*.⁵⁵ The damage done to language and historical self-understandings by the forces of racism cannot be recognized or assessed by taking her aesthetic attitude.

Arendt resists a conception of judgment informed by language and stories for several reasons. First, such a view threatens to make the subject of judgment into an artist who, by prospectively putting lives into narratives, turns people into things. Arendt thinks that work involves instrumental relationship, in which an “element of violation and violence is present in all fabrication, and homo faber, the creator of human artifice, has always been the destroyer of nature. . . . [H]omo faber conducts himself as lord and master of the whole earth.”⁵⁶ This is what Dana Villa calls the “Promethean” conception of authorship as willfulness against which Arendt reacts: “From Habermas to Marx, the hope has been to place human creations back under the will of their authors, and so to curtail the process of reification by which means become ends.”⁵⁷ Arendt speaks of the “common error of regarding the state or government as a work of art.” The arts “bring forth something tangible and reify human thought to such an extent that the produced thing possesses an existence of its own”; hence, “politics is the exact opposite of art. . . . Independent existence marks the work of art as a product of making; utter dependence upon further acts to keep it in existence marks the state as a product of action.” Second, the artist, unlike the public, political actor, “must be isolated from the public, must be sheltered and concealed from it. Truly political activities, on the other hand, acting and speaking, cannot be performed at all without the presence of others.”⁵⁸

Arendt differentiates the perspective of the artistic creator from that of the perceiver:

The conflict, dividing the statesmen and the artist in their respective activities, no longer applies when we turn our attention from the making of art to its products. . . . These things obviously share with political ‘products,’ words and deeds, the quality that they are in need of some public space where they can appear and be seen; they can fulfill their own being, which is appearance, only in a public space which is common to all.⁵⁹

The reason Arendt can draw this line between reception and creation is because she does not think of the aesthetic observer as always already in narratives and symbols, as a being in language who risks his/her stories through dialogue with art or people.

From the Ellisonian perspective, Arendt gives a one-sided and ahistorical view of art as a thing rather than art as speech. To be sure, there is a long tradition of philosophical and literary thought that speaks of art in nondialogical terms, e.g., as *poesis*. However, these accounts fail to describe the dialogical dynamics of the Western literary traditions. The most thorough articulation of this view is Mikhail Bakhtin’s philosophy of the novel and of the subject. Bakhtin mounts a critique of the institutions of literary theory and criticism, which are set up only for poetry and *poesis* and which misunderstand the history of prose. (Aristotle’s *Poetics*, formalism, and structuralism are the centerpieces of Bakhtin’s critique.⁶⁰) Three points about Bakhtinian/Ellisonian philosophy are relevant for contrast with

Arendt. First, the author is not a maker who carves material into a shape but a speaker and listener whose medium (words) is already populated with the meanings and intentions of the speakers of the past and present. Bakhtin thus abandons the author as willful fabricator without giving up constitutive dimension of language and narrative. Second, Bakhtin describes and valorizes the richness and multiplicity of everyday speech and writing so that the public space of intelligibility cannot be framed by such a unifying concept as “lifeworld.” Such a frame is the first step in a process of creating unexamined presuppositions about the background necessary for intelligibility. Third, the relationship between the languages of daily life and the history of the novel is a fluid dialogical movement, not an opposition in which the fabricator carves out an object against the lifeworld.

Arendt’s point, of course, is not about the history of literature but about politics, and how the importation of the metaphor of a constructed, fabricated society destroyed political freedom. This insight has no counterpart in Ellison’s work, and it is of great importance, not just for understanding totalitarian regimes but for coming to terms with the paradoxes of the modern political project from Hobbes through liberalism.⁶¹ Bakhtin’s critique of this understanding of art acknowledges the force of Arendt’s point as he dissents from this understanding of all of literature.

Thus, I am not denying that there is a relationship between art and the politics of making that is a danger. Rather, the danger of artifactual models that seek to co-opt and deform political freedom can be better thematized through a dialogical understanding of subjectivity rather than by putting freedom beyond the reach of language. The interweaving of art and life is an important issue for political judgment, in which “art” is not precatagorized as merely aesthetic, teleological, and reifying whether from the perspective of the speaker or receiver.

The Gadamer/Taylor line that I am following insists that storytelling is not just on the thinking side but on the knowing side precisely because it informs common sense. That is, we are always already in narratives that emerge from literary and nonliterary sources. Gadamer recognized the threat that Arendt sees in Plato’s and Hegel’s understanding of language: “What he [Hegel] calls dialectic and what Plato calls dialectic depends, in fact, on subordinating language to the ‘statement,’” which is “antithetical to the nature of hermeneutic experience and the verbal nature of human experience of the world.” However, instead of driving a wedge between the speculative pursuits of philosophy and everyday speech, Gadamer finds speculation in our ordinary conversations: “Even in the most everyday speech there is an element of speculative reflection,” since this happens anytime “words do not reflect being but express a relation to the whole of being.” The stories that inform our self-understandings open and foreclose experience.⁶² The history of the novel is about – among other things – differences concerning the relationship of language, fiction, and truth, in which art draws on and informs the common world. For Arendt, on the other hand, art only disengages from the

world: "Art therefore, which transforms sense objects into thought-things, tears them first of all out of their context in order to de-realize and thus prepare them for their new and different function."⁶³

This dialogical understanding of our being in language also means that truth claims are not necessarily peremptory and anti-dialogic forms of speech, even if this has often been the historical practice. Hence, the problem is not the claim of truth but the linguistic practices that inform our dialogues. Moreover, these claims cannot and should not be excluded. (One afternoon with the discourse of *Oprah* illustrates how philosophical and metaphysical so-called "ordinary conversation" is.) *Doxa* does not always understand itself as mere opinion, but as a claim to truth. To characterize the views expressed in such forums as "*doxa*," "opinion," or "appearance" is to make a metaclaim about them, to take an unmasking philosophical stance toward these views, albeit a different one than the Platonic tradition's. The differences between speakers in the public sphere are not just "horizontal" but also "vertical," even when the speakers are not philosophers. We are better off starting from the Gadamerian premise that all "understanding is . . . an encounter with something that asserts its truth."⁶⁴ Democratic institutions and virtues, not the exclusion of truth claims, preserve the plural public space of political action. The question is how to do public philosophy rather than whether to do it. In Ellison's case, this means that the new self-understanding that emerges during the course of the novel has political relevance because it reveals the oppressive shape to the public imagination that liberal and Arendtian concepts of freedom cannot bring out.

Ellison and I are not following Habermas here, even though he too objects to the absence of a cognitive dimension in Arendt's judgment: "Arendt sees a yawning abyss between knowledge and opinion that cannot be closed with arguments." Habermas is referring here to "de facto recognition of validity claims that can be discursively redeemed and fundamentally criticized."⁶⁵ In Ellison's view (and mine), Habermas's understanding of 'cognitive' is too limited precisely because he has repackaged our being in language into three narrow Kantian/Weberian boxes. Ellison rejects any sequestering of aesthetics, in either its Arendtian or Habermasian versions, since "the work of art . . . is social action in itself."⁶⁶ Ellison is particularly sensitive to the way the category of the "aesthetic" has been used to exclude African-American literature and its overt social and political concerns – that is, such literature was/is "too prosaically political" and particularistic to be beautiful and universal.⁶⁷

Moreover, Habermas's treatment of history places "the normative foundations of a critical theory of society . . . at a deeper level than any particular epoch."⁶⁸ He appeals to the universal presuppositions of communication and his conception of presupposition is Kantian, not historical. Despite his reliance on the familiar Hegelian account of modernity in *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, Habermas must tread very lightly on any historical substance so that the universal is accessible through many historical routes.⁶⁹ By making Kant come after

Hegel, Habermas blocks out how the language of democratic ideals is bound up with historical damage that continues in symbolic systems. In developing a deliberative space of facts and norms, Habermas squeezes out the interpretive, historical dimension through which we interrogate historical and ontological backgrounds of our current concerns.⁷⁰ The vindication of claims is thus inevitably an historical claim and not just synchronic one.

In addition, Ellison is critical of the Taylor/Gadamer ontology of tradition, play, and dialogue, for it too fails to account for many features of our relationship to language and history. Thus, Ellison would agree with McCarthy's charge that Gadamer's ontological claim that "we are always and inevitably more being than consciousness" carries no necessary normative claim.⁷¹ McCarthy rightly points out that "this is no less true of the revolutionary critic than the traditional conservative." Its value is as corrective to a "sense of being outside history – and not as prescription for belief or action."⁷² Ellison would agree but not, like McCarthy, conclude that one must replace ontological questions about language with rule-based questions from the project of Kantian reconstruction and proceduralism. Instead, Ellison would say that Gadamer, like Foucault, mistakenly puts the question of our ontological embedding – e.g., play versus power – beyond the scope of judgment rather than within it. Hence, play is not a necessary ontological dimension of the dialogue with a text, for this ignores the force of gender, race, etc., which can make interpretive experience a violent one, as Ellison shows.⁷³ The relationship of ontological and normative questions is a matter of judgment, and Ellison's narrator gives us an example of this kind of judgment in the way he presents his protagonist's being in his situation at different moments. That is, the narration of the story itself is about the exercise of political judgment. He tries to genealogize those constitutive elements he wants to slough off, while he narrativizes and incorporates those he wants to retrieve.⁷⁴ Such judgment is neither determined nor "bannisterless," to use Arendt's well-known phrase.⁷⁵

Arendt, on the other hand, leaves us with a stark choice between Kant and Hegel: "Either we can say with Hegel: *die Weltgeschichte ist das Weltgericht*, leaving the ultimate judgment to Success, or we can maintain with Kant the autonomy of the minds of men and their possible independence of things as they are or as they have come into being."⁷⁶ To say that we do not want historical success to replace judgment or a transsubjective spirit to absorb plurality does not require a rejection of any constitutive conception of language and the adoption of Kantian conception. What is wrong with Hegel is not that he is speculative; rather, his ontology and the perspective of the absolute that informs it are unpersuasive as a public philosophy of democratic interpretation. Taylor, Bakhtin, and Ellison show us how ontology itself can be pluralized so that judgment can be informed rather than determined or isolated by such claims. Ellison's own practice of interpretive judgment shows how he engages with conflicting ontological claims of different traditions – liberal, Marxist, African-American, canonical American – and he is certainly not the only novelist to do so. Indeed, one way of reading the

nineteenth-century European novel is to see it as an argument about the legacy of the dispute between Kantians and Hegelians over how to tell the stories of embedded subjects concerned with freedom.

Thus, from Ellison's perspective, the problem with having the imagination "go visiting"⁷⁷ is that it accepts a subject-to-subject model without interrogating the historical medium which articulates these subjects, the tissue of being that connects and fragments subjects. Ellison is forever turning back on language, memory, and history as he moves through the world. He is sensitive to the resources and the oppressions of language and tradition in the articulation of the public realm – and the way African Americans are driven from it – in a way that Arendt is not. Arendt protects language from historical damage, as if language itself were not implicated in racial catastrophes of American life. Ellison portrays language as an ambiguous, protean medium that articulates pain, triumph, love, and failure, a medium that connects and isolates us, enables and deprives, that shapes in a way that opens and forecloses the possibilities of the world. No conception of the public/private distinction can keep these issues out of the public world, and Arendt's failure to see segregation's role in maintaining an exclusionary public sphere is remarkable. To be sure, Arendt describes the possibility of 'worldlessness,' to which persecuted minorities above all are subject when "the interspace we have called world . . . has simply disappeared"⁷⁸; however, her focus is on how modernity diminishes our world rather than the complex history of the languages of public imagination and institutions of meaning.⁷⁹ These linguistic institutions, which long antedate modernity, have a continuity and durability that Arendt's fragile worlds do not.

Although Ellison never discusses directly the question of political judgment, I want to explore briefly how his work exhibits a philosophy of interpretive judgment. Ellison's story is of a nameless black protagonist's coming to see that he is invisible, and how he has internalized a self-understanding that makes him unaware of the problem. It is a first-person retrospective story of the meta-philosophical search for a site for telling the story, and there is a tension throughout between the language of the narrating self of the present and the series of experiencing selves of the past. The task of judgment I will pursue is how the narrating self interprets his relationship to his individual and collective histories, how he situates language with regard to the self-understanding of the character.

Often, Ellison employs a genealogical narrative that unmask the racial vocabularies that inform both white and black self-understandings. He explains why such a genealogical strategy is necessary:

This unwillingness to resolve the conflict in keeping with his democratic ideals has compelled the white American, figuratively, to force the Negro down in the deeper level of his consciousness, into the inner world, where reason and madness mingle with hope and memory and endlessly give birth to nightmare and to dream; down

into the province of the psychiatrist and the artists, from whence spring the lunatic's fancy and his work of art.

One of the effects of this inarticulate conflict is the unacknowledged presence of race in every facet of what white culture understands as "white": "It is practically impossible for the white American to think of sex, of economics, his children, womenfolk, or of sweeping sociopolitical changes, without summoning into consciousness fear-flecked images of black men."⁸⁰ Ellison does not subscribe to an essentialist identity politics of experience, even though he acknowledges the constitutive dimension of discourse, for the work of interpretation foregrounds the public possibilities of linguistic differences through the transformations of the narrator's identity and the structures of address to the reader.

Moreover, Ellison insists – like MacIntyre – on the narrative understanding that must accompany any genealogical account. As MacIntyre says, "The function of genealogy as emancipatory from deception and self-deception thus requires the identity and continuity of the self that was deceived and the self that is and is to be."⁸¹ It is precisely here that a Foucauldian constructivist position falls into a crisis of judgment, for it views narrative only as a factitious product of power and hence deprives itself of the means of accounting for its own narrative/genealogical choices. For the narrating self, the experiencing self has internalized ideologies that have made him invisible to himself, not just others. To get beyond this, Ellison retrieves resources from African-American traditions and American constitutional documents. Retrieval is predicated on the acknowledgment that racism is inseparable from them. Ellison rejects any idealization of the past: "The fantasy of an America free of blacks is at least as old as the dream of creating a truly democratic society."⁸² Thus, Ellison makes the question of our being in language one of interpretive judgment, in which dialogical retrieval (Gadamerian strain) and genealogical unmasking make their claims on us and vice versa. Ellison thus asserts the worth of his claim against the claims of his historical predecessors.

What accompanies Ellison and Arendt's differences over language is a different conception of historical consciousness, even though they also share a great deal. In the interest of brevity, I will follow Benhabib's claim that Arendt's understanding of memory is pulled between a Husserl/Heidegger strain and a Benjaminian strain. In the former, we find "the mimetic recollection of lost origins of phenomena as contained in some fundamental human experience. Hence, in the *Human Condition*, we read of the 'original meaning of politics' or of the 'lost' distinction between 'private' and 'public.'"⁸³ In Benjaminian fragmentary history, the historian is the pearl diver or collector who "select[s] his precious fragments from the pile of debris" of the past.⁸⁴ As is well known, the pearls that Arendt recovers are the worlds of political action that were momentary achievements of Athenian democracy and the American Revolution. Benhabib praises the Benjaminian feature of her thought because it does not rely on a narrative of decline from some original way of being.

What interests me, however, is that both Benjamin and Heidegger understand modern historical consciousness in the context of catastrophe, in which the modern subjects are so wrenched and deracinated from the resources of their cultural inheritance that the only task is to pull out moments from a distant past. For both thinkers, the lifeworlds of modernity are so damaged as to be unworthy of nuanced attention. Arendt thinks that tradition has lost its capacity to inform judgment because of two blows: the modern “‘revolt’ against the authority of tradition and the twentieth-century ‘break’ with tradition.”⁸⁵ “The thread of tradition is broken and we shall not be able to renew it. . . . What has been lost is the continuity of the past. . . . What you then are left with is still the past, but a fragmented past, which has lost its certainty of evaluation.”⁸⁶ With such an understanding of historical rupture, she is pushed into a transcendental reconstruction of the human condition and the idealized intersubjective world it requires rather than examining the ambiguous historical shifts in public meanings and imagination.⁸⁷

Arendt’s storytelling follows these leads by giving rich, historically detailed accounts of the degradation of the world under totalitarianism, but historically thin and idealized discussions of the retrievals of the Greeks and the thinkers of the American Revolution for their momentary achievement of freedom. It is one thing to have these past moments enrich our understanding of political possibility, but quite another to overlook the failures of a Jeffersonian moment, which has also had its legacies. What is missing is a fine-grained account of historical consciousness of the subjects of the contemporary American public to whom she is speaking. Hence, the issue of what historical understanding of narratives and symbols inform the American public imagination at the time of her exchange with Ellison is not a question that Arendt’s philosophy of judgment brings into play. Although she provides an extraordinary account of the losses of modernity, her particular form of historical consciousness is not suited to tracking the imbrication of racism even in democracy’s great moments, to understanding the variegated linguistic medium that connects the rememberer to the remembered, or to providing a way of thematizing the workings of historical consciousness in everyday political life.

The politics of public memory, of how a particular democracy ought to remember its past, has been the subject of important debates about the interpretation of Holocaust or slavery, debates that call on both Arendtian and Ellisonian forms of historical consciousness for thinking about catastrophe. Arendt focuses on modernity’s power to impoverish and subject, while Ellison’s explores the specifics of what Saul Friedlander calls the historical working through process.⁸⁸ What Ellison’s texts dramatize are the deliberations of democratic historical consciousness and the revisions in public and private understandings that go with it. Ellison shows how we are in history and language in a way that we spontaneously project the damage and resources of the past. His work is part of the American

Historikerstreit over how to tell the story of American racism and the Civil War. This argument is taken up by contemporary novelists – from Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* to Sherley Anne William’s *Dessa Rose* and Charles Johnson’s *Middle Passage* – who retell and revise slave narratives because Americans of all races have not been able to bear witness and work through these issues. Thus, what Ellison does better than Arendt is help us think through the multiple ways our being in language informs political judgment so that it is neither determined by nor deracinated from the stories we tell ourselves.

NOTES

I would like to thank Alessandro Ferrara and the participants at Philosophy and Social Science meeting in Prague, May 1998 for their comments on an earlier version of this essay and Michael Halberstam for his careful reading and suggestions. Comments welcome at steelem@gwm.sc.edu

1. Arendt, “Reflections on Little Rock,” *Dissent* 6 (1959): 45–56 and “A Reply to Critics” *Dissent* 6 (1959): 179–181.

2. Benhabib, *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt* (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 1996), 146–48 and Robert Bernasconi, “The Double Face of the Political and the Social: Hannah Arendt and America’s Racial Divisions,” *Research in Phenomenology* 26 (1991): 3–24.

3. Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), 111.

4. “Historical Emplotment and the Problem of Truth,” *Probing the Limits of Representation*, ed. Saul Friedlander (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 39.

5. Hayden White, *Content of the Form* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), 75. White conceives of narrative as an arbitrary choice based only on the aesthetic or moral considerations of the particular historian; see *Metahistory* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973), 433.

6. Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, tr. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), I: ix.

7. Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 192. Ricoeur says, “I cannot overemphasize the kinship between this ‘grasping together’ power of the configurational act and what Kant says about the operation of judging” (*Time and Narrative* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), II: 66). I discuss at length the differences between Ricoeur’s and Taylor’s conceptions of narrative in “Ricoeur versus Taylor on Language and Narrative,” *Metaphilosophy* (forthcoming).

8. MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 212.

9. Taylor, *Philosophical Papers*, I (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 37. The debate on whether stories are “lived” or “told” is nicely summed up in David Carr’s *Time, Narrative, and History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986). Most treatments of Arendt ignore this important issue and hence do not describe the role of language in judgment in a perspicuous way. Benhabib, for instance, says that “all action, including agonial action, is narratively constituted. The what of our actions and the who of the doer are always identified via a narrative” (*Reluctant Modern*, 129). This sentence conflates precisely what Arendt is insistent in separating – that action is not prospectively constituted through narrative but only retrospectively cast this way. In a footnote, Benhabib cites MacIntyre’s “narrative character of action” as “a more interesting account of the impossibility of a social science of a nomological and predictive nature than upon its spontaneity” (96). MacIntyre’s Hegelian elements contradict Arendt. In short, she leaves unanswered all the key philosophical questions posed by narrative itself. Lisa Disch’s *Hannah Arendt and the Limits of Philosophy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994) and “More Truth Than Fact: Storytelling as Critical Understanding in the Writings of Hannah Arendt” *Political Theory* 21

(1993): 665–94 look at Arendt's storytelling as an alternative to foundationalism and relativism: "Arendt's understanding of storytelling proposes an alternative to the Archimedean model of impartiality as detached reasoning" (Limits, 109). However, she too cites MacIntyre's definition of narrative and does not address the questions of our being in language.

10. I discuss these different ontological claims of the poststructuralists in "The Ontological Turn and Its Ethical Consequences: Habermas and the Poststructuralists" *Praxis International* 11 (1982): 428–46 and in *Theorizing Textual Subjects* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), ch. 1. Poststructuralists are not merely skeptical about Archimedean points; they offer anti-narrative linguistic ontologies.

11. Axel Honneth, *The Critique of Power*, tr. Kenneth Baynes (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991), 146.

12. Arendt, "Reflections on Little Rock," 51.

13. See James Bohman's "The Moral Costs of Political Pluralism: The Dilemmas of Difference and Equality in Arendt's 'Reflections on Little Rock,'" *Hannah Arendt: Twenty Years Later* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), which goes beyond the social versus the political to examine "the problem of the moral and political costs of justice that include both equality and plurality" (57). This is an interesting but very different take from mine.

14. Arendt, "Reply to Critics," 179–80.

15. Arendt, "Reflections," 46. For a critique of Arendt's reading of African-American thinkers, see Anne Norton, "Heart of Darkness: Africa and African Americans in the Writings of Hannah Arendt," *Feminist Interpretations of Hannah Arendt* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995), 247–62. Benhabib defends Arendt against Norton's charges in *The Reluctant Modern*, 85–86. A nuanced discussion of Arendt on race is beyond my scope, but I don't think we have to choose between Arendt's insight about the connections between European imperialism and the rise of totalitarianism, on the one hand, and the racism in her judgments about American political issues, on the other. For a discussion of Arendt in the wider context of race and philosophy, see Linda Alcoff, "Philosophy and Racial Identity," *Radical Philosophy* 75 (1996): 5–14.

16. Arendt thinks that "the function of school is to teach children what the world is like" and "to prepare [children] in advance for the task of renewing a common world" (*Between Past and Future* (New York: Penguin, 1977), 195), a conception whose interest for the philosophy of education transcends this particular exchange.

17. Ellison, "Leadership from the Periphery," in *Who Speaks for the Negro*, ed. Robert Penn Warren (New York: Random House, 1965), 344, 344, 342 (my emphasis).

18. Cited Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt: For Love of the World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), 316.

19. *Ibid.*, 11.

20. Arendt, *Human Condition*, 57.

21. Benhabib says, "The two phenomenological dimensions of the public realm are (a) its quality as a space of appearance and (b) its quality of being a common world. These dimensions are phenomenological in that they are aspects of the human condition per se, under whatever sociohistorical conditions in whatever epoch. Humans 'appear' to each other in concentration camps. . . . But the aspect of the public realm as a common world is somewhat more fragile and more closely linked to sociohistorical conditions" (*Reluctant Modernism*, 128). She also notes that Arendt has not always kept "the categories of space, appearance, common world and public world" (129) distinct.

22. Arendt, *The Life of the Mind* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1978), I: 14, 57.

23. "In the realm of human affairs being and appearance are indeed one and the same" (*On Revolution* (New York: Penguin, 1965), 98). "But if it is true that thinking and reason are justified in transcending the limitations of cognition and the intellect – justified by Kant on the ground that the matters they deal with, though unknowable, are of the greatest existential interest to man – then the assumption must be that thinking and reason are not concerned with what the intellect is concerned with. . ." (*Life of the Mind*, I: 14).

24. Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 238.

25. Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1973), 474; also, *Between Past and Future*, 249–54. Hayden White tries to make this distinction between fact and narrative in his engagement in the debate over the historicization of the Holocaust, “Historical emplotment and the Problem of Truth,” *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the ‘Final Solution’* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 38, and he is forced to abandon judgment. Martin Jay calls him on it in an essay in the same volume, “Plots, Witnesses, and Judgments.”

26. Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 231.

27. *Ibid.*, 241.

28. Arendt, *Life of the Mind*, I: 61.

29. *Ibid.*, 8, 87, and 88.

30. Arendt, *Human Condition*, 185, 184.

31. Arendt, *Life of the Mind*, I: 16.

32. Ralph Ellison, *Shadow and Act* (New York: Random House, 1972), 112.

33. *Ibid.*, 20, 22.

34. Arendt, *Human Condition*, 170; *Life of the Mind*, I: 13–15.

35. Arendt, *Life of the Mind*, I: 87.

36. Wellmer, “Hannah Arendt on Judgment: The Unwritten Doctrine of Reason,” *Hannah Arendt: Twenty Years Later* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), 42.

37. Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 223.

38. Ellison, *Shadow and Act*, 117.

39. Ellison is not unique in giving literature an argumentative dimension. Proust argues against the presuppositions of the Goncourt’s realism through parody as well as his aesthetic philosophy. Kate Chopin argues against the gendered map of experience that she inherits from the male *Bildungsroman* through ellipsis, symbols, and allusion.

40. For the distinction between causal and interpretive history, see Taylor’s discussion in chapter 12 of *Sources of the Self*. An interpretive history asks for “an interpretation of the identity (or of any cultural phenomenon which interests us) which will show why people found (or find) it convincing/inspiring/moving, which will identify what can be called the ‘idées forces’ it contains” (203). See his exchange with Quentin Skinner, who argues for a causal account. Skinner, “Who Are ‘We’? Ambiguities of the Modern Self,” *Inquiry* 34 (1991): 133–53 and Taylor’s “Comments and Replies,” 237–54.

41. Arendt, *Life of the Mind*, I, 8.

42. Taylor, *Philosophical Arguments*, I: 173.

43. Arendt says, “In his [Heidegger’s] description of human existence everything that is real or authentic is assaulted by the overwhelming power of ‘mere talk’ that irresistibly arises out of the public realm, determining every aspect of everyday existence. . . . There is no escape, according to Heidegger, from the ‘incomprehensible triviality of this common everyday world’ except by withdrawal from it into that solitude which philosophers since Parmenides and Plato have opposed to the political realm” (*Men in Dark Times*, ix). Arendt is not just fighting off this aspect of Heidegger’s thought – I agree with Arendt here – but also the Heideggerian account of embeddedness, which I want to pursue as it is appropriated hermeneutically by Taylor and Gadamer and genealogically by Foucault.

44. Arendt, *Human Condition*, 52.

45. Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 210, 221, 222.

46. Arendt, *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy*, 49, 13.

47. Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 220, 241. Kant explicates the critical role of *sensus communis* in relation to three maxims of the common human understanding: “1. To think for oneself; 2. To think from the standpoint of everyone else; 3. To think consistently.” *Critique of Judgment*, tr. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987), §40, 160.

48. *Ibid.*, §88, 160.

49. “The space of appearances comes into being wherever men are together in the manner of speech and action, therefore predates and precedes all formal constitution of the public realm”

(*Human Condition*, 199). For an incisive critique of Arendt's reading of Kant that helped clarify my argument, see Alessandro Ferrara, "Judgment, Identity, and Authenticity: A Reconstruction of Hannah Arendt's Interpretation of Kant," *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 24 (1998): 1–24.

50. Michael Halberstam expresses this tendency well: "This disposition on Kant's part to posit a greater degree of consensus in matters of practical judgment than is warranted by the principles on which he bases such agreements" means that there "is a constant tendency to make objectification mistakes inherent in the Kantian position." *Liberalism, Totalitarianism, and the Aesthetic: An Investigation of the Modern Conception of Politics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 108. This line of critique begins with Hegel's critique of Kant's example of embezzlement to illustrate universalization in "Theory and Practice," *Political Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 70–71. Unlike Makkreel, Halberstam reads *The Critique of Judgment* as supplanting the account of meaning given in *The Critique of Pure Reason*. "Kant's transcendental analytic must . . . be seen as resting on top of this prior structure of conceptual experience, which receives its articulation through reflective judgment" (78). This understanding opens the way for a rapprochement between reflective judgment and the hermeneutic approach of someone like Taylor and Gadamer rather than setting *sensus communis* against them.

51. Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 222.

52. Gadamer, "The Subjectivization of Aesthetics Through the Kantian Critique," *Truth and Method*, 2nd rev. ed. (New York: Continuum, 1994), 42–55. Makkreel expresses the hostility of a Kantian approach to Gadamer: "The *sensus communis* provides a mode of orientation to the tradition that allows us to ascertain its relevance to ultimate questions of truth" (*Imagination and Interpretation in Kant: The Hermeneutic Import of the Critique of Judgment* (Chicago University of Chicago Press, 1990), 158). Makkreel reads Gadamer as driving out a space for reflective judgment rather than enriching the space of such judgments: "By applying Kant's spatial metaphor of orientation to the hermeneutic circle, we can transform the dyadic relation of relation of part to whole into a triadic one which includes the subject" (159). But Gadamer makes the subject much more vulnerable than does Kant by putting the historical languages of the subject on the line.

53. Ellison, *Invisible Man* (New York: Vintage, 1981), 568, my emphasis.

54. Arendt, *Human Condition*, 50.

55. Villa asks, "How then does the appropriation of the Third Critique enable Arendt to escape the excess of an aesthetic, agonistic conception of politics?" *Arendt and Heidegger: The Fate of the Political* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 102.

56. Arendt, *Human Condition*, 139.

57. Villa, *Arendt and Heidegger*, 268.

58. Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 153, 153, 217.

59. *Ibid.*, 218.

60. Bakhtin says, "The great organic poetics of the past – those of Aristotle, Horace, Boileau – are permeated with a deep sense of the wholeness of literature and of the harmonious interaction of all genres contained within this whole. . . . In this is their strength – inimitable, all-embracing fullness and exhaustiveness of such poetics. And the all, as a consequence, ignore the novel" (*The Dialogic Imagination*, 5). While the Russian Formalists and Heidegger find the everyday to be the place of automatized speech of the "they," Bakhtin finds a dynamism here that informs the novel. Moreover, Bakhtin's conception of authorship means that characters are "not only objects of authorial discourse but also subjects of their own directly signifying discourse" (*Problems in Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 7). This is not to say that Bakhtin's philosophy of language and literary histories provide a political philosophy or even an unproblematic literary account. Bakhtin does not provide an account of historical argument that is important to Ellison and me. I discuss my reservations in "Ontologie linguistique et dialogue politique chez Bakhtine," *Bakhtine et la pensée dialogique*, ed. André Collinot and Clive Thomson (Atlanta/Amsterdam: Rodopi, forthcoming).

61. Halberstam phrases this Arendtian insight as follows: "Liberalism and totalitarianism share the idea that society is an artifact and that politics is a species of making." "Totalitarianism as a Problem for the Modern Conception of Politics," *Political Theory* 26 (1998): 463.

62. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 468–69.

63. Arendt, *Life of the Mind*, I: 49.
64. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 489.
65. Habermas, "Hannah Arendt's Communications Concept of Power," *Hannah Arendt: Critical Essays*, ed. Lewis Hinchman and Sandra Hinchman (Albany: SUNY, 1994), 225.
66. Ellison, *Shadow and Act*, 37.
67. Paul Lauter, "The Literatures of America – A Comparative Discipline," *Canons and Contexts* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991). Lauter urges that we "be aware not only of the varieties of artistic function but of their changing character over time" (67).
68. "Further Reflections on the Public Sphere," *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, ed. Craig Calhoun (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992), 442.
69. As Habermas says, "Everyone, even those not among Jefferson's heirs, should be able to recapitulate this impartial judgment. The presuppositions under which these parties make their agreements elucidates a moral point of view that goes deeper, in fact is ultimately anchored in the symmetries of the mutual recognition of communicatively acting subjects in general" (*Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy*, tr. William Rehg (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press 1996), 62). I discuss Habermas and history at length in ch. 1, "Habermas's Escape from History," *Hiding from History: Public Imagination and Political Dialogue* (forthcoming).
70. My sense of "background" is borrowed from Charles Taylor, who says that such historical, ontological reasoning works by transferring "what has sunk to the level of an organizing principle for present practices and hence beyond examination into a view for which there can be reasons either for or against" ("Philosophy and Its History," *Philosophy and Its History*, ed. Richard Rorty et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 28. This kind of historical argument can proceed genealogically or hermeneutically, depending on whether one wants to retrieve or undermine the practices in question. The limits of Foucauldian undermining are not established by Habermas's presuppositions of communication – which Foucauldians rightly criticize for ignoring their ontological critique that problematizes historical vocabularies – but by the demand for a hermeneutic reading of the histories that make these claims possible and desirable.
71. Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, tr. David Linge, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), 38.
72. David Hoy and Thomas McCarthy, *Critical Theory* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1994), 41.
73. Schott, "Whose Home Is It Anyway? A Feminist Response to Gadamer's Hermeneutics," *Gadamer and Hermeneutics*, ed. Hugh Silverman (New York: Routledge, 1991), 202–09. I discuss the political potential of Gadamer's understanding of language in "Three Problematics of Linguistic Vulnerability: Benhabib, Butler, and Gadamer," *Feminist Interpretations of Hans-Georg Gadamer*, ed. Lorraine Code (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, forthcoming).
74. Taylor discusses the similarity of hermeneutic and genealogical accounts. Both are interpretive and both rely on transitional arguments: "When Nietzsche wants to launch his out and out attack on morality, he does this by offering an account of the transition to it, the rise of slave morality. . . . Genealogy goes to the heart of practical reasoning" (*Sources of the Self*, 73).
75. Arendt, "On Hannah Arendt," *Hannah Arendt: The Recovery of the Public World*, ed. Melvyn A. Hill (New York: St. Martins, 1979), 333–36.
76. Arendt, *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, 5. Arendt claims both Hegel and Heidegger base their projects on an attack on common sense: "Hegel testifies to the intramural warfare between philosophy and common sense" (*Life of the Mind*, I: 90). Of Heidegger she says, "In other words, what for common sense is the obvious withdrawal of the mind from the world appears in the mind's own perspective as 'withdrawal of Being' or oblivion of Being. . . . And it is true, everyday life, the life of the 'They,' is present in a world from which all that is 'visible' to the mind is totally absent" (*Life of the Mind*, I: 88). Despite her criticisms of *Being in Time* in "What is Existenz Philosophy?," *Essays in Understanding*, and in *Men in Dark Times*, she appropriates the late Heidegger's idea of thinking as separate from knowing and willing.
77. Arendt, *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, 43.
78. Arendt, *Men in Dark Times*, 21.

79. See Vincent Descombes, *Les Institutions du sens* (Paris: Minuit, 1996), for an interesting clarification of the different understandings of holism in analytic and continental philosophy.

80. Ellison, *Shadow and Act*, 99, 100.

81. MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990), 214.

82. Ellison, *Going into the Territory* (New York: Vintage, 1986), 104.

83. Arendt, *Human Condition*, 22ff, 68ff. Benhabib writes: "There are two strains in Arendt's thought, one corresponding to the method of fragmentary historiography inspired by Walter Benjamin; the other, inspired by the phenomenology of Husserl and Heidegger, and according to which memory is the mimetic recollection of the lost origins of phenomena as contained in some fundamental human experience" (*Reluctant Modernism*, 95).

84. Arendt, *Men in Dark Times*, 200.

85. Benhabib, *Reluctant Modernism*, 91.

86. Arendt, *Life of the Mind*, I: 212.

87. If Gadamer notoriously underestimates the discontinuity, conflict, violence, and loss in modern cultural and political institutions, then Arendt so overestimates the break with the past that she ignores institutions of meaning.

88. Saul Friedlander, *Memory, History, and the Extermination of the Jews in Europe* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993); Dominique Lacapra, *Representing The Holocaust: History, Theory, and Trauma* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994); and Ellison, "Harlem Is Nowhere," *Shadow and Act*.