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Hannah Arendt and Natives as Extras: Towards an Ontology of Palestinian Presence?

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Keywords

Jewish Philosophy, Zionism, Palestinians, Nationalism, Political Science, German Literature, Palestinian Art, German Philosophy, Social Control, the State

Hannah Arendt and Natives as Extras: Towards an Ontology of Palestinian Presence?

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“I have great confidence in Lessing’s *Selbstdenken*, for which, I think, no ideology, no public opinion and no ‘convictions’ can ever be a substitute.”

Hanna Arendt,
The Jewish Writings, p. 470¹

Abstract:

*The essay grew out of Hannah Arendt’s reflection on the roles and uses of the mask, a meditation on the ontology of the transient public figure or persona vs. one that restitutes the person to the unadulterated *Selbstdenken* dimension of the Epicurean philosopher-in-hiding. The author individuates in the resulting caesura between the donning and the taking off of the mask the primal source of that paradox in Hanna Arendt’s political behavior that alternately compelled her to confront the ontological presence of the Palestinian people, and made her withdraw into philosophical hiding without ever really coming to terms with it. In her writings, the Palestinians are never protagonists, rarely enjoy supporting roles, and most of the time remain unfortunate extras on a stage controlled by external actors who, sustained by the imperialist powers, suddenly donned their masks making themselves protagonists on a stage that was not theirs. To illuminate Arendt’s conceptual trajectory the author adopts as his guiding signposts W.G. Sebald’s *Austerlitz* (2003), Palestinian artist Larissa Mansour’s *Nation Estate* (2013), Emily Horne’s and Tim Maly’s work *The Inspection House* (2014), and Hermann Broch’s *The Death of Virgil*. The adverb ‘towards’ in the title points to a path that has remained, as a result, without destination in Hanna Arendt’s political activity and philosophical thought pivoting around the native people of Palestine.*

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1. Hanna Arendt and the Mask:

Responsibility and Judgment (2003) opens with the speech that Hannah Arendt delivered in Denmark in 1975 on the occasion of her acceptance of the Sonning Prize

and that now heads the collection as its *Prologue*. As Jerome Kohn notes in the introduction, here the Jewish philosopher “performed in public the rare and difficult act of self-judgment” by making the ability to judge dependent on “the self-understanding of the judge” (p. XXXII). How could Arendt, a “Jew *feminini generis*,” as she defined herself in the speech, whom the public nature of the event had implicated as a *person*, respond to public recognition? (pp. 4, 12). An honor thus bestowed, she said, implies that “we are not fit to judge our accomplishments as we judge those of others.” Then, how could she both judge herself and be capable of self-understanding?

She attacked the issue by reflecting that “I have always believed that no one can know himself, for no one appears to himself as he appears to others” (p. 7). Finally, she resolved her dilemma by first grounding judgment in the response Socrates received from the Delphic oracle; then she linked the Apollonian exhortation of “Know Thyself” to the metaphorical use the Romans made of the word *persona*. Thus, the *identifiable* mask (*persona*) that actors wore on the stage and through which they literally sounded (*per-sonare*) their “*somehow definable*” voice, she said, later passed into the lexicon of juridically defined concepts of Roman law. Having received its “specific weight” the Latin word now upgraded *personae* to persons who were identifiable by the civil rights they publicly wielded “in sharp distinction from the word *homo*, denoting someone who was nothing but a member of the human species” (p. 12).

As she reflected on the metaphorical process underlying the historical assumption on the part of the word *persona* of exclusively legal meaning, Arendt extended the metaphorical possibilities of the word *persona* even further: “metaphors being the daily bread of all conceptual thought” (p. 13). She could now compare the ambivalent mask of ancient times with the one which Arendt had to wear on that day—she, a reluctant public person by trade who was suddenly “transformed” by the decision of the Danish award committee into a public figure through “the rather startling news of your decision” (p. 3). She brought this logic to its terminus in her concluding remarks. She felt happy because “when the events for which the mask was designed are over, and I have finished using and abusing my individual right to sound through the mask, things will again snap back into place” (p. 14). What had begun with an apprehensive reluctance to betray Epicurus’ *lathe biosas* injunction to “live in hiding” had been salvaged now by a re-course to the ideal of the *bios theoretikos* that had informed her entire life as a philosopher. At last she felt “free not only to exchange the roles and masks that the great play of the world may offer, but free even to move through that play in my naked ‘thisness,’ identifiable, I hope, but not definable and not seduced by the great temptation of recognition which, in no matter what form, can only recognize us *as* such and such, that is, as something which we fundamentally are *not*” (p. 14). These remarkable words concluded her speech in 1975, the year she died.

That Hannah Arendt would look forward to the moment in which “things will again snap back into place” captures a reluctance that her biographers have long noticed. Disinclination to stand tall within the public space in order to take in at one glance the entire *polis* notoriously runs against Aristotle’s premises according to which the human being is *naturally* constituted as a political/social animal. This is, after all, the condition for philosophical *theoria* and political *praxis*. For beyond this fact lies a *caesura* at the opposite ends of which that configuration can only realize itself either as

a beast or as a god, “*who by nature and not by mere accident is without a state, is either a bad man or above humanity*” (Aristotle p. 1988).

One may be tempted to locate precisely between those two *finis* delimiting the caesura the two moments which Arendt terms *identifiable* and *definable*, a gap rendered more sibylline, as we saw above, by the addition of the adverb “somewhat.” As we go over the speech, something seems not to be happening in our transition from what we fundamentally are (which makes us *definable*) to what we fundamentally are not (but which makes us *identifiable*); in other words, between the non-public moment in which our voice is at rest but is philosophically active and with no need for masks, and the public moment in which we sound that very voice through the mask to echo our philosophical ‘thisness.’

What is then *definable* for Arendt? Jerome Kohn’s comment on the speech is illuminating: “It is hard to imagine how Arendt could have suggested more transparently that the judge cannot be severed from the self-less actor, whose uniqueness appears only to others, as his inner, invisible, audible other side” (p. XXXIII). It is only during the public moment, precisely when we don both the mask and the judge’s mantle, that something new and irreversible takes place and we finally raise ourselves to the point in which judging and self-judging become possible, something unknown, needless to say, to the philosopher-in-hiding. Elsewhere, in his introduction to *The Jewish Writings*—the collection he edited of Hanna Arendt’s ‘Jewish’ articles—Jerome Kohn adds post-mortem as one more dimension to the geometric flatland envisioned by our philosopher when he optimistically finds that “since her death, Arendt’s voice has become ever more identifiable” (p. XXIX). He can celebrate now the virtuosity she displayed as she sounded her voice through her many masks (p. XXIX). How does this virtuosity of donning and taking off the mask work politically vis-à-vis both Zionism and the Palestinians? For this we turn to *The Jewish Writings*.

Here we soon run into the paradox of the natives as *extras*. Biographer Elisabeth Young-Bruehl recounts one of the events in which things seemed to have happily “snapped back” and which occurred in November 1948 when Arendt joined the Judah Magnes Foundation but “would not accept its leadership” (Young-Bruehl 1982, 233) Laconically Arendt wrote to Elliot Cohen, “I am not qualified for any direct political work.” She went further, “I do not enjoy to be confronted with the mob, am much too easily disgusted, have not enough patience for maneuvering, and not enough intelligence to maintain a certain necessary aloofness....” She concludes with a thought that signals total retreat but also denotes bourgeois largesse, “it would definitely spoil my work as a writer.” To be sure, when the moment had called for action she had promptly responded with some of the most prominent Jewish intellectuals of the time. Among these was a very vocal Albert Einstein who wrote a letter to the New York Times protesting the visit to America of “Jewish terrorist Menachem Begin.” The letter compared the Jewish Revisionists and their activities against Palestinians “to the Nazi and Fascist Parties, and repudiated the blend in their ideology of ‘ultra-nationalism, religious mysticism and racial superiority.’” Arendt had joined arms with them, but then she withdrew into her shell as she was finally shouted down by a hostile audience in Massachusetts.

This and other events epitomized for her, as she wrote in the same letter to Cohen, “the welter of superstition and mean savagery...plain stupidity and plain

wickedness” characteristic of Revisionist Jewish terror in Palestine (Young-Bruehl 1982, pp. 232-233, 513). In August of that same year, it is well to remember, she had refused “to be put forward as a possible chairman” to represent Magnes’ *Ihud* party as a negotiating group at the time when a possible UN trusteeship over Palestine was still on the table. Anticipating here what, exactly, Hannah Arendt truly wished for Palestine, it seems that every time she confronted what she saw as the “racist chauvinism” of Zionism she also kept coming closer to a recognition of the philosophical demands posed by the ontological existence of a Palestinian *persona*. She spoke of “the Jewish master race” doomed “not to conquest but suicide by its protagonists.” She had vitriolic words for Jewish leaders who “can threaten mass suicide to the applause of their audiences, and the terrible and irresponsible ‘or else we shall go down’ creeps into all official Jewish statements, however radical or moderate their sources” (p. 229). Yet, as soon as she seemed to approximate that recognition of a co-equal, Palestinian *persona* wielding at least as valid rights to appear on the stage as a protagonist of the drama that had been unfolding since Balfour, Arendt sounded an ominous and self-defacing retreat. If allowed on the movie set at all, it seems, Palestinians could only appear in the guise of multitudes of fast moving, vociferous but voiceless, mask-less “extras” with no civic rights. *Dura lex sed lex?*

Hannah Arendt, of course, was not alone in taking a paradoxical stance on Palestine. On the one hand, in fact, the courage shown by her and other liberal and leftist Jewish public figures in protesting and condemning Zionist excesses and crimes against the Palestinian population certainly foregrounds her deeply moral and intensely intellectual commitment. Her remarkable political position—and here we come to the crux of her paradoxical stance—appears all the more so, precisely when measured against her Western cultural prejudices which she saw virulently exacerbated in that “mystical, fascist, Jewish master race” brand of Zionism which was Jabotinsky’s and Begin’s Revisionist movement.

At bottom, though, in spite of all this open radical critique, Hannah Arendt did share with it fundamentally Western cultural prejudices against the people of the region without much philosophical self-introspection.¹ Because of these biases she never came to terms with the very nature of Zionist ideology as “typical settler consciousness and imagination” (Piterberg 2008, p. XII). Instead, she admired this settler colonialism describing those Jews just arrived in Palestine as “the most advanced and Westernized people of the region” (Arendt 2006, p. 424). As a corollary to these prejudices, Arendt and Zionism also routinely applied a vocabulary and analytical categories taken wholesale out of their foundational European experience and which *could not* describe the new historical conditions of Jews in Palestine.² Among these are the use of the word ‘pogrom’ to refer to Palestinian attacks against the Jewish *coloniae* and the labeling of the incumbent War of 1948 as “another catastrophe” (i.e., *another* Holocaust).

¹ For an in-depth treatment of Western ideological forms and imperialism see the classical statement on the subject formulated by Edward Said in his *opus* comprising *The Question of Palestine*, *Orientalism*, *Culture and Imperialism*, and *Blaming the Victims*.

² See G. Piterberg, *The Returns of Zionism* (2008).

No unprejudiced realization, of course, that this possible *catastrophe* could not possibly be another Nazi Holocaust would have diminished Jewish fears at the time. Its prejudiced assumption that allowed for that equation does, however, betray a deeply ingrained cultural mindset and approach that shifted the very real Jewish-Palestinian hostilities to a totally different historical and geo-political context with which Palestinians had (and *still* have) nothing to do. It seems that in her mind Palestinian reactions and motivations were totally assimilated to the very different history of Europe which, evidently, functions in her political imaginary as a universal standard. The danger here obviously is the maladroit equation between European oppression of Jews and Palestinians and Arabs' resistance against a foreign/Zionist takeover of their lands. Again, in her writings the war of 1948 lends itself to another comparison: "The last war showed all too clearly that no better pretext or greater help exist for would-be aggressors than petty national conflicts fought out in chauvinist violence." Here she condemns the peoples of the Middle East as "aggressors" comparing them to the small nations of Central and Eastern Europe "who show such a disturbing resemblance in psychology and political mentality" (p. 426).

Jerome Kohn synthesizes her approach when he comments that "Arendt recognizes that Arab policies were equally blind in not recognizing the needs and concrete achievements of the Zionists in Palestine" (p. LX).³ It is this very Euro-colonial approach that constantly pre-empted Arendt's very hopes in a Jewish-Palestinian collaboration on which, as we will see in a moment, she staked all her best hopes. For in spite of her repeated assertions in favor of it, her Western biases and colonialist Eurocentric frame of mind held her very political hopes back. On this cultural and political basis, one wonders, when leafing through Hannah Arendt's *Jewish Writings*, what chances she could have ever given the Yishuv, the Jewish *colonia* in Palestine, as the redemptive locus in which Jewish history would free itself of those long Euro-Christian centuries of colonial segregation, oppression, and outright murder. And yet, it was precisely because of these Euro-colonial biases that she could envision another people's non-Western land to play out the redemptive role for Jewish history, a stolen protagonism that turned the native Palestinian Arabs into extras.

At the same time, these same biases did not prevent the great Jewish philosopher and political scientist, the author of *The Human Condition* and *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, to put forth good, even ominously prophetic, *real Politik* arguments in favor of collaboration between Jews and Palestinians. Ron H. Feldman comments in his Introduction to *The Jewish Writings* that "the inalterable fact of the Near East was that the Arabs were the Jews' neighbors" (p. LX). This downgrading of Arabs to being "neighbors of" Jews brings home the very real political shift in historical protagonism that had taken place by then. Ironically, the new protagonist, Arendt warned, might not be able to stand on its own feet with its neighbors, now still duly kept at a safe distance when the British would pull out. Then what? Feldman rephrases Arendt's line of thought succinctly when he adds that "to preserve the Jewish homeland in Palestine the Jews had the choice of either working out an agreement with the Arabs or seeking

³ For an editorial discussion of Arendt's *Jewish Writings*, see G. Piterberg, *The Returns of Zionism* (2008).

protection of one of the great imperial powers.” This, however, he points out, Arendt rejects because in choosing the latter a Jewish state would become “farcical and even self-defeating in so far the state would be a bastion of imperial interests in an area striving to liberate itself from colonialism.”

Indeed *The Jewish Writings* show an Arendt deeply aware of the fact that “the Jews ignored the awakening of colonial peoples and the new nationalist solidarity in the Arab world from Iraq to French Morocco” (p. 424). In the end, would a Jewish homeland in Palestine survive as part and parcel of genuine concerted efforts with the active participation of the native people of the region as co-protagonists to establish a new post-colonial nation? This is precisely, as Gabriel Piterberg shows, what her Marxist new friend Heinrich Blücher had passionately advocated in a letter he wrote her in 1936:

Let us join forces with the Arab workers and labourers to liberate the land from the English plunderers and the Jewish bourgeoisie that is in alliance with them. Then you will receive your share, and the revolutionaries of the whole world will guarantee it to you. That is materialistic workers' politics. (Piterberg 2007, p. 43)

This, however, would never be her kind of politics, as Kohn shows, even as she recognized in her response to that letter that “Palestine is not at the centre of our national aspirations because 2,000 years ago some people lived there from whom in some sense or other we are supposed to be descended.” That land, in her thinking at the time, was “unavoidably bound with our past” on the wave of Herder’s mystical nationalist line which she cites in a larmoyant tone, ‘the ruins of Jerusalem are, as you could say, rooted in the heart of time.’ (Arendt 2007, p. XVIII). By the way, this was the same kind of German romantic nationalism, often racially defined, against which she later roared when she found it morphed into the Jewish Revisionists’ ideology.

Instead of a Jewish-Palestinian workers’ front, Arendt envisioned “local self-governing and mixed Jewish-Arab municipal and rural councils, on a small scale and as numerous as possible.” Were these “the only realistic political measures that can eventually lead to the political emancipation of Palestine”? Or, would the ‘preservation of the Jewish homeland in Palestine’ have to rely primarily on imperialism to impose on the ground a different, one-sided, farcical, self-defeating, inappropriate ‘nation-state’ solution as she had warned against? Clearly, for Arendt it was not a revolutionary Jewish-Arab collaboration at the grassroots level in the sense indicated by Blücher that held a possible common Jewish-Palestinian project together, but it was reliance on the two superpowers of the moment who graciously chose to play the role of prime movers in Palestine that would save the day:

The state of Israel owes its very existence to these two world powers....the great fortune of the Jews as well as Arabs at this moment is that America and Great Britain not only have no interest in further hostilities, but, on the contrary, are genuinely eager to bring

about an authentic pacification of the whole region. (p. 427)

And yet, she never supported a Jewish nation state for the whole of Palestine either—in fact, she never embraced the widespread Zionist slogan that defined Jews “a people without a land in search of a land without a people” and which she dubbed a “fairy-tale” (p. XXX). How do we understand this contradictory position?

Caught between Herderian mysticism and philosophical rationalism, Arendt dons the philosophical mask on the stage of history to sound through it both her fundamentally mystical acceptance of Jewish history as reconstructed *à la Herder* and her acceptance of Palestine as the mystical locale in which Jews can act as protagonists with the Palestinians as unavoidable extras. Her Western colonial and chauvinistic cultural prejudices together with her enthusiastic adhesion to imperialism as a way to enforce philosophical praxis on non-Western peoples made it possible for Arendt to steal for herself and “her” people a Palestinian stage that did not belong to either of them. As a result, the native Palestinian Arabs are kicked off their own stage and see themselves forcibly lowered to the status of mask-less, self-less extras. What, then, is—in Hannah Arendt’s mind—the philosophical substance of donning and the taking off of the mask? Isn’t this paradox the philosophical gap or interstice wherein she recasts nonchalantly the natives of Palestine as extras? Clearly, we need more perspective, and for this we turn to the creatures of the night.

2. Two constructions of the imagination to produce *unfalsch* perspectives:

In the first pages of the last novel of his life, *Austerlitz* (2003), W. G. Sebald describes the protagonist’s visit to the Nocturama of Antwerp during the 1960s during one of his various travels. As the reader’s eyes become word after word progressively attuned to the chiaroscuro of the place, the difference between author, narrator, and reader blur into one triadic *persona* without any warning. A Waschbär (literally, a *washing bear*), a raccoon really, suddenly takes up the philosophical stage, and it is then that a series of baffling reflections texture the printed page only once bluntly interrupted by four small rectangular black and white piercing photos sporting inquisitively penetrating eyes of two birds atop the page in perfect symmetry with the two pictures of four human equally penetrating eyes below them. Two of these belong to the well-known painter and a friend of Sebald’s, Jan Peter Tripp; the other two eyes clearly are Ludwig Wittgenstein’s. These pictures keep frozen in time the eyes of painters and philosophers “who strive to pierce the darkness around us by means of pure looking and thinking” (“vermittels der reinen Anschauung und des reinen Denkens”).

A nocturama, what better public place to host philosophy! The triadic *persona* keeps watching the Waschbär for a long time as it sits with a serious looking face near a rivulet intent on washing the same piece of an apple—after all, this is a little washing bear!—in the irrational hope (“weit über jede vernünftige Gründlichkeit”) that this act will sooner or later land it outside of the unreal (*falsch*) world into which it somehow has fallen through no fault of its own (“gewissermaßen ohne sein eigenes Zutun”). What would happen if, all of a sudden, the light went on in this place as the night fell in the world and then it arose again next day on this upside-down artificial mini-ocumene

and the creatures inside went to sleep: would they, could they, fall asleep with a *sense of peace at heart*? (“beruhigt in den Schlaf sinken”)? (p. 10 -12).

The whole Nocturama experience, with the raccoon yearning to wash away the *falsch* world in which it is somehow (“gewissermaßen”) stuck and the intellectual’s unrelenting eyes intent on piercing the darkness that envelopes the world, calls to mind another mechanical construction of the human imagination, one which intellectuals from another pained part of the world, occupied Palestine, have imagined. A young Palestinian woman born in Jerusalem in 1973, Larissa Sansour, uses photography, video, and installation “to reflect on the contemporary history and political situation of Palestine through the imaginative genre of science fiction” (Kana’an, *Home Ground* p. 34).

Intriguingly, I saw one of Sansour’s installations, *Nation Estate* (2012), at the Aga Khan Museum in Toronto. It is part of *Home Ground*, an art exhibition featuring the work of 11 other contemporary Arab artists. Unaware, there I stepped into my own Nocturama just as Austerlitz’s *persona* did into his. *Nation Estate* is a work in which Sansour imagines a futuristic high-tech skyscraper that lodges the entire Palestinian population. Each floor houses a different Palestinian city. An elevator connects all of them “making inter-city trips easy and convenient.” The project reflects on the shrinking of Palestinian territories caused by Israeli settlements and addresses “the growing lack of physical connections between Palestinian lands.” Exhibition curator Suheyla Takesh compares Sansour’s work to Camus’ actors in *The Myth of Sisyphus* who are “divorced from their settings,...alienated from their surroundings, and distanced from what feels natural.” The lobby of each floor in the skyscraper sports famous Palestinian landmarks “aiming to recreate a familiar environment and generate a sense of belonging in its residents.” This art project complete with digitally constructed images also shows a video in which a pregnant woman—interestingly, Sansour acting as herself—walks through the skyscraper back to her apartment. In the last scene, we see her looking at the actual city of Jerusalem outside the Estate with her hands on her belly and a worried look on her face. As with W. G. Sebald, to gain a *per*-spective based on “*vernünftige Gründlichkeit*” in today’s social world, so fundamentally *falsch*, one evidently needs more than one technical medium to pierce through it.

Both of these authors’ philosophical reflections are rooted in their respective personal and painful experience. In the case of Larissa Sansour, it is the wholesale occupation of Palestine in a world complicit with it; in G.W. Sebald’s, it is instead the equally surreal lifelong effort to lift the veil of silence spread over post-world war Germany around the *Shoah*, the Holocaust, and to come to terms in the land of his birth with the heinous Nazi atrocities perpetrated against millions of European Jews. Both narrative threads bring up for reflection several themes that structure a world that reveals itself to us through astonishingly complex and contradictory perspectives in which reality and un-reality mirror each other, subject and object mutually exchange place, outside and inside collapse into one another, with the vain chimera looming on the horizon of a final possible erasure of any dualism at the end of a mathematical series. All of these point to a fundamental Lukacsian disconnect, or *caesura*, between a world of reason and one that destroys it, or, more precisely, between a world that tends towards social liberation and one which imperialist interests endlessly reproduce as *falsch*.

A good modern example that illustrates how imperialism does this so ‘rationally’ an ‘innocently’ can be learned by taking another type of nocturnal tour, led this time around by Emily Horne and Tim Maly in their joint study titled *The Inspection House: an Impertinent Field Guide to Modern Surveillance* (2014). They trace modern surveillance systems to Jeremy Bentham’s mechanical *panopticon*: “a ring of cells observed by a central watchtower, as a labour-saving device. While his design was for a prison, he believed it would benefit other places: factories, poorhouses, hospitals, schools” (from the back cover). Michel Foucault, they argue, elevated this ingenious proto-type mechanism to “governing metaphor” in his *Discipline & Punish: the Birth of the Prison* (p. 17). Clary Shirky’s comments on the book sound as eerily, “Someone you can’t see is watching you.” She concludes tersely that it is this *panopticon*, “built in our name, that we all inhabit” (from the back cover). Still wondering about what it is like to be stuck in this kind of reality, “gewissermaßen ohne sein eigenes Zutun”? Although the Washbär and the Palestinian woman are actually aware of their alienated environment and react to it, large sections of our society are not. That is what makes Austerlitz’s hallucinating tour, Sansour’s mechanically reproduced self, and Hanna Arendt’s own ancient *persona*—sounding a strong *Selbstdenken*, or critical thinking—our liberating pathfinders. In fact, in all of them this *Selbstdenken* takes up the shape of a wedged opening, an in-between, an interstice, a mathematical interval that contains infinitely divisible quantities as yet un-thought and yet perfectly thinkable. Is this irreducible *caesura* a locus, really a non-locus, as *undecidable* as the Marx’s “specter” of Derrida’s invention? If so, doesn’t this moving locus of freedom also interpret Hannah Arendt’s definition of politics—the project of the *polis*—as freedom or, as Jerome Kohn puts it, as her *wanting to be free*?

In *Specters of Marx*, Derrida makes a pun on *ontologie* and *hauntologie* (Derrida 1994, p. 51). Just as in his reflection Marxism haunts capitalism, so does, we evince from Sansour’s art, the Palestinian Resistance—irreducible as it is—unsettle Zionism. Derrida’s pun might have not surprised Hanna Arendt, whose disgust with the brand of Zionism she combated with all her passion and intelligence, clearly testimonies to how unsettling to her idea of freedom this version of rapacious Jewish nationalism had become by 1948.⁴ Jerome Kohn beautifully frames her vocal yearning as the voice of a Jewess, a Jewish woman, through whose imagination we see, so to speak, an X-ray of common human world, a world that is different from and, in every sense that matters, appears more real than the one in which we live today (p. XXIX). Here again returns the yearning of the Washbär, the painters, the philosophers, and the Palestinian woman clearly all stuck in the *panopticon* but all of whom this notwithstanding—just like Arendt—are protagonists on the stage of their respective dramas and all of them want to be free.

A particular caesural break, however, seems to stand in the way on the path to freedom. As human introspection transforms the nocturnal creatures into protagonists on the world stage, so human judges recede into the critical role of viewers and, as Hannah Arendt pointed out in her 1975 talk, with the ability to act as judges and induce

⁴ For an interesting discussion of Hanna Arendt and Arab political culture, see Jens Hanssen’s article *Translating Revolution*: at <http://www.hannaharendt.net/index.php/han/article/view/301/437>.

philosophical self-judgment into the person judged. Nocturama viewers may appear at first frozen into inaction, but, in truth, they are well in charge of their own intellectual faculties and discriminating powers, and are therefore not deprived of their public *personae*, which remain all along so irreducibly human. Isn't it therefore baffling that something altogether paradoxical should happen when Hannah Arendt's philosophical introspection, far from transforming the native population of Palestine, or Palestinians, into protagonists and judges, actually turns them into "extras" with no public *persona* to wield and no inalienable private self to return to? As we leaf through the pages of her 'Jewish' writings we see Palestinians rolling past our reading eyes, segment after segment, as voiceless, nameless, faceless, but active and rather raucous, "undecidable" and haunting, ontological extras each one of them in the background on the film set onto which they have somehow been thrown.

3. Hannah Arendt, viewer of the *Zionist* Nocturama-Panopticon:

Whenever imperialist powers did not happen to have interests, as she put it, in "authentic pacification" or were not "genuinely eager" to bring about a solution to the problems of the region, Hanna Arendt lashed out, as *The Jewish Writings* show, on the one hand, at Jewish chauvinism—with Begin's "fascist party" and his terrorist goal of establishing a "Fuehrer State" in Palestine—and, on the other hand, at Arab chauvinism, "blind" to the successes of Zionism. She has equally unkind words for the British who, during the Mandate, "prevented both a working agreement between Jews and Arabs, which might have resulted in a rebellion against British rule and an open conflict between them, which might have endangered the peace of the country" (p. 425).

She argues, ultimately exonerating both sides, that it is the British, as Feldman puts it, who caused Jews and Arabs to ignore "the permanent reality of the other's existence" (p. LXI). In singling out two opposite chauvinisms, both held equally culpable, Hannah Arendt was trying to tread a middle path. This path, however, was itself predicated on an entirely partisan, non-collaborative basis which was unable by its very nature to lead towards that common goal she had envisioned for a moment of "emancipating" both peoples from their common colonial shackles. Instead, her *tout-court* embrace both morally and politically of the Yishuv and her acceptance of its legitimate status and her unquestioned acceptance of British and later Israeli *faites accomplies* on the ground do not exactly trace a middle path. In her 1950 *Jewish Writings* essay "Peace or Armistice in the Near East?" all she could write after the 1948 war is, for example, that "it is remarkable how little the accomplished fact of a state of Israel and Jewish victories over Arab armies have influenced Arab politics."

The logic of this discursive thread leads her to voice the dubious statement: "It seems as though the *one* argument the Arabs are incapable of understanding is force" (p. 423). Particularly striking is her acceptance of British colonial law as binding international law, upon which all future settlements should legitimately be based. The United Nations itself, of course, followed the same logic as did and still do the major powers. That Arendt should find all of this congruous with her own philosophical views is perplexing. In this same essay she shows no qualms about inserting a Jewish homeland into an imperialist reconfiguration of the Middle East ("*so far, however, Palestine is tied to the British Empire*"), preferably worked out by the British and the

Americans. She envisions this sort of consortium with Jewish ‘active participation’ in the deal since, as she writes in another essay from the same collection, “Between Silence and Speechlessness,” “the Jewish people have the right and the duty to say in what kind of world they want to live” (p. 197). It is peculiar that it never dawns on Arendt’s independent mind at this stage that Jewish freedom should not be pitted against Palestinian un-freedom, that imperialist interests by definition cannot ever interpret Jewish best interests, that a colonial charter like the Balfour Declaration graciously but gratuitously bestowed with such imperialist largesse should not carry—again—by definition, any moral, philosophical, legal, or political authority, much less justify the establishment of a national home at the expense of the native people of the area.

Even though she obviously came to believe that “the status of its population, both Jewish and Arab, is clearly that of natives,” she also realized equally obviously that Jewish immigrants to Palestine had acquired their “native” status quite recently, under extraordinary circumstances unleashed against millions of Jews—once again—by Europeans, not by Palestinians or Arabs. In spite of this awareness she seems to be surprised by the telling fact that “the Arabs have been hostile to the building of a Jewish homeland almost from the beginning” (p. 423). She never completely and unconditionally allows Palestinians and Arabs in general to express any legitimate reactions, reactions which were grounded, not in the history of Europe, but in their very painful but all too recent Middle Eastern experience. Because of these Western political and cultural prejudices together with her tacit embrace for a time of the mythology of the overall Euro-Zionist project in Palestine, she seems to brush aside the fact that, in an extraordinarily very short lapse of time, the native people of Palestine and the Middle East in general had suffered the traumatic end of the Ottoman Empire—an end that still cuts deeply into the fabric of the societies of the region. They had endured direct foreign rule by the British and the French, who arbitrarily portioned their lands, giving them borders, names, and new identities and were overwhelmed by the forceful and rapid take-over of Palestinian lands by a mass of foreign refugees fleeing Europe and—adding more salt to wounds—were shocked to the core by the UN-sponsored partition of their land which they, the natives, naturally resisted and fought (and are still fighting).

At the same time Arendt demonstrates great lucidity in pointing out the problems that might ensue by mishandling Jewish-Palestinian relationships, most of which have proved to have been on the mark. In hindsight, especially after Camp David and Oslo, it is hard to remain unaffected by the political clarity she showed time and again, insisting that “good relationships between Jews and Arabs will depend upon a changed attitude toward each other...not necessarily upon a formula” (p. 427). But, even these political stances are always predicated primarily on the more familiar Zionist terms (which she, as we have seen, accepted for awhile) dictated by the consolidation of the new Jewish homeland. They never really argue for an unconditional recognition of Palestinian native rights. These—deprived of their central role on the stage—are given no choice but to ‘be’ extras. And, such they were at the Eichmann trial, for instance, as we read in Letter 285 of her correspondence to Karl Jaspers.

In a metaphorical selfie of herself at the trial, Arendt ushers us onto the stage, describing without a shred of ambiguity the “human types” present in the crowd outside the courthouse on a descending scale that clearly remind us of the racist pseudo-science in pre-war Europe and America. Down this racial continuum, of course, no one is

spared: “On top, the judges, the best of German Jewry. Below them, the prosecuting attorneys, Galicians, but *still* Europeans.” (The italic is mine.) In this racialized view worthy of Lombroso, the police “looks Arabic.” “Some downright brutal types among them. They would obey any order.” This last comment is telling in the context of the Eichmann trial in which the Nazi criminal argued exactly this point in his defense. In her book *Eichmann in Jerusalem* Arendt showed her just contempt for how leniently the Israeli courts following this same line of reasoning had dealt with the Israeli soldiers who were brought to trial “for having massacred the civilian inhabitants of an Arab village,” Kfar Kassem (pp. 292). What is also noteworthy in those two lines quoted above is that now Arendt is implicating a proud Jewish institution, which because it “speaks only Hebrew and looks Arabic” reveals an ambivalence of character apparently unredeemed by the Zionist myth of Jewish regeneration in the ancient promised land. But this is only a prelude to the bottom line—pun intended. For, behind her and away from the protagonists’ lime-lights, she points out to us in that rare snapshot “the oriental mob, as if one were in Istanbul or some other half-Asiatic country” (Arendt 1989, p. 435).

Despite this Euro-supremacist mindset, Arendt does seem to come closer to espousing a more genuinely democratic view.⁵ This happens when she envisions with Judah Magnes, whom she refers to as “the Conscience of the Jewish People,” a binational Arab-Jewish state structured around local councils organized by both Jews and Palestinians. And, she underlines that the Yishuv has already accomplished its Zionist mandate by translating, as Feldman writes, the Jewish homeland into a political space, “a human world created by conscious human effort where a Jewish culture can come into being” (p. LX). As Feldman explains Arendt’s position on the matter, “This the Yishuv achieved, without political sovereignty and without being a majority in Palestine” (p. LX). These ideas, however, end up, again, being more tactical than anything because at bottom lies—during her entire interlude with Zionism—the unquestioned assumption that a Jewish national home should be established in Palestine, even at the cost of an imperialist fiat.

Her Western biases landed her time and again into a philosophical cul-de-sac. Whenever she allowed for this mindset to prevail over her rational analysis of political reality, she took her public mask off, happy to return to her favored and yearned-for status of a philosopher in hiding. This is exactly what happened after 1950. Piterberg says that “The building of a separate Jewish economy by the mainstream labor wing of Zionism— which had been its pride—she saw as the curse that made possible the expulsion of the Arabs (‘almost 50 percent of the country’s population’) without loss to the Jews.” He quotes her as saying, “A home that my neighbor does not recognize and respect is not a home” (Piterberg 2007, p. 52).

Interestingly historian of Jewish political thought, Noam Pianko, argues that “her work on totalitarianism shared [Hans] Kohn’s critique of ‘tribal nationalism’ and hailed the ‘decline of the nation-state.’” Here Pianko cites historian Amnon Raz Kotzkin, who explained that “She developed her binational views as she thought about and wrote *The*

⁵ For a view of Jewish thinkers on Jews as a race, see the book edited by Mitchell B. Hart, *Jews and Race* (2011).

Origins of Totalitarianism and should thus be considered as part of the same project, an attempt to implement the conclusions of her historical analysis in a concrete realm” (p. 175). This explains why the words ‘federation’ and ‘collaboration’ with the Palestinian natives of the land began to appear with greater frequency now.

After that date 1950, Arendt’s writing on Jewish subjects diminished and took on an erratic view. Hannah Arendt had given Zionism a good chance. Her interlude with the experiment was over, but her concern with Jewish matters continued, integral as it was to her continuous reflection on European culture and politics. Again, is the root problem of her ideological and emotional limitations vis-à-vis Palestine a certain *bourgeois largesse*? This largesse would point in the direction of class which might have, if true, enabled a gracious Arendt to afford political detachment whenever she came too close to unpleasant public clashes, enabled her to take her public mask off and run back to her longed-for Philosophy’s shelter. If so, was this largesse rooted in an at-first-sight proud and aloof *Selbstdenken* patronized by Ephraim Gottlieb Lessing? In this perspective, Lessing’s enlightened injunction and Arendt’s Epicurean philosophy-in-hiding seem to converge into that locus wherein no mask is necessary, wherein pure philosophy can freely emerge unbounded, and wherein the self can be reintegrated as ‘thisness.’ In this case, what kind of philosophical process needs to occur in the in-between, and, what is, in her mind, the responsibility of the intellectual who finds there the unlimited freedom of the spirit but is *per force* alienated from the living organism of society and the world? Isn’t this, after all, what she argued later on in *The Human Condition*?

In her famous *Prologue* to that work Arendt zeroes in on man’s rebellion against the human condition and identifies the trouble with it in the fact that “the ‘truths’ of the modern scientific world view, though they can be demonstrated in mathematical formulas and proved technologically, will no longer lend themselves to normal expression in speech and thought.” She finds a *caesura* between knowledge (as know-how) and thought which turns humans into “thoughtless creatures at the mercy of every gadget which is technically possible, no matter how murderous it is.” (p. 3). Reminiscent of Heidegger’s take on technology, humans are muted by it and this enslaves them. Her goal for the book is, therefore, to reconsider the human condition in these new unprecedented realities and in particular to “trace back modern world alienation, its twofold flight from the earth into the universe and from the world into the self, to its origins” (p. 6). In this view, speech matters because “wherever the relevance of speech is at stake, matters become political by definition, for speech is what makes man a political being.” (p. 3). This makes, therefore, one a public *persona*. Once this political being returns to a non-public fold after having “finished using and abusing my individual right to sound through the mask” and the public *persona* is taken off, it becomes free of having to sound speech.

Because of Arendt’s emphasis on *Selbstdenken* as the metaphorical setting for unconditional freedom and, despite Jerome Kohn’s characterization of her statements in the collection of *The Jewish Writings* as “grounded in Hanna Arendt’s Jewish experience” (p. XXIX), Gabriel Piterberg argues that “in fact, one of the most striking features of the collection is that it brings home how little Arendt was interested in problems of ‘Jewishness,’ conceived in a stricter or more conventional terms.” According to him, her focus was political “through and through.” The subjects in the

book, he writes, “are not so much ‘the Jewish’ as: the historical bases of anti-Semitism in Europe; the illusions of bourgeois assimilation; the follies and the crimes of Zionism, from the 1890s to the 1960s.” After referencing both Gershom Scholem’s statement according to which Arendt did not particularly ‘love the Jewish People’ and Golda Meir’s belief not in god but in the Jewish people, he concludes that “Arendt lacked not only the conventional cultural patriotism that Scholem evokes, but any predilection for identity. In that sense, the Jewish question never ceased to bore her, she was too steeped in German high culture for it to mean very much.”

In the end, Piterberg concludes by saying that “viewed historically, Arendt’s writing on Zionism would seem to form a virtually self-contained episode in her career.” In his view, what terminated her concern with it were the “creation of a militarized and sectarian Zionist state of Israel, which leveled to the ground her hopes for a just solution in the region; and the petrification of the Stalinist state in Russia” (p. 55). Though Piterberg makes a good case for Arendt’s interlude with Zionism as a “self-contained episode,” his argument regarding Arendt’s Jewishness is less convincing. We know, in fact, that she questioned neither her own Jewishness nor the role Jews played in European history. True, Hannah Arendt’s stance is eminently political. It is the primacy of politics, indeed, that really mattered to her beyond any narrower ‘mystical,’ and therefore, nationalist, racist, and outright fascist affiliation.

During the oppressive fascist night that fell over Europe *die Zerstoerung der Vernunft*, as Georg Lukacs put it, the destruction of Reason became the focus of critical analysis on the part of European intellectuals. In 1944 Adorno and Horkheimer pondered in their *Dialectic of the Enlightenment* (2002) the causes for its “self-destruction” and proposed that “its relapse into mythology had to be sought ... in the fear of truth which petrifies enlightenment itself” (p. XVI). This leads to fascism and, we may add in Arendt’s view, the kind of Zionism tried out on Palestinian soil. *Selbstdenken* had put an end to her Zionist interlude. But, what of the creatures of the night now? How does the donning and the taking off of the mask work for them? Can the great poet Virgil perchance help them?

4. Arendt, Broch and the poetic articulation of Freedom:

Hermann Broch also revisited the human condition and he did it in a very literal *nocturama* in his *The Death of Virgil*, a work partly written—we should point out—in a Nazi concentration camp, the quintessential *panopticon* of our times. Here, the author, who imagines a Virgil on the last day of his life, meditates on the European catastrophe. Writing in 1946 for *The Nation* about the genesis of the book in an essay titled “No Longer and Not yet,” Hannah Arendt wrote that “The event which made Broch a poet seems to have coincided with the last stage of darkening in Europe. When the night arrived, Broch woke up.” What did the nationalist and, specifically, fascist reversal look like then in his poetic re-presentation? When the night fell, she went on, “He awoke to a reality which so overwhelmed him that he translated it immediately into a dream, as is fitting for a man rooted in the night. This dream is *The Death of Virgil*” (p. 160). Arendt seemed to have found in Broch’s work the same chiaroscuro texture and the same reversal of reality we found in Sebald’s *nocturama* and, which is the same, in Sansour’s Israeli-built *panopticon*. Writing of Broch and Virgil as creatures of the night, she

pondered similarly what nocturnal creatures would do once the overturning of that *falsch* reality suddenly occurs. Arendt individuated in the work of the Austrian writer a historical *caesura* that she describes as “this gap, this opening of an abyss of empty space and empty time” ushered in during 1914 and poetically refracted into the work of Proust and Kafka with a Broch inserted in-between as the missing link. In fact, “this book is by itself the kind of bridge with which Virgil tries to span the abyss of empty space between the no longer and the not yet.” These terms in turn extend the metaphor further as “no longer alive and not yet dead; and the task is the conscious achievement of judgment and truth” (p. 161).

As the Waschbär draws in philosophers’ and painters’ eyes, thereby enabling judgment and self-judgment, so does Sansour’s imposed *falsch* reality. This compels an external viewer to become a participant and see the *caesura* between *falsch* and *unfalsch* reality through the actors’ eyes themselves. In so doing these *personae* restore their own public historical agency through art and become protagonists—and not just in name. Virgil’s dilemma, which reaches its climax in the dialogue between the poet and Octavian Augustus, seems to parallel Arendt’s preoccupation with her paradoxical mask in the form of the *caesura* of the opening of an “abyss of empty space and empty time.” Arendt zooms onto Virgil as he is carried in his litter through the streets crowded with the Roman mob and artists “greedy with idolatry, caring only for themselves, and excluded from all true community, which is based on helpfulness.” (p. 161). Do these words hearken back to the clash she had with the Zionist mob in Massachusetts, supporters of Begin and his terrorist group? Both mob and artist in Broch’s narrative are, Arendt recalls, “intoxicated with loneliness.” She goes on to comment that they are treacherous and unconcerned with the truth, unreliable and “in need of forgetting reality” through circus games, and—recalling Broch’s words—both are intoxicated with “empty forms and empty words.” The Virgil *re-presented* by Hermann Broch walks the tightrope thrown upon the *caesura* of the ‘no longer and not yet,’ an abyss that cannot be bridged by beauty and is therefore doomed to vulgarity. Only a sacrifice, the burning of his *Aeneid*—subsequently averted by the realization that this act would be made, Arendt notes, only for the “salvation of the soul, out of anxiety about the self, for the sake of the symbol”—suddenly looms as the only escape through which “the poet may still perceive the promised land of reality and human fellowship” (p. 162). Art—Broch’s Virgil discovers—has a redeeming role to play and cannot serve the interests of nationalistic propaganda. Is this the same kind of relentless but apparently pointless meditative activity the Waschbär engages in, in the midst of piercing intelligent eyes of artists and philosophers, both human and non-, longing for the same rupture of *falsch* reality of which they desperately hope to be free? Is this the same message conveyed by the Palestinian woman walled-in in her Israeli skyscraper? Is it the same human condition we all experience in our *panopticon* of Western societies, ‘democratic’ and yet under surveillance?

“No Longer and Not yet,” now a piece in the collection titled *Essays in Understanding* (1994), conveys the same philosophical longing that Arendt shared publicly in 1975 in Denmark. There she makes the point she revisited in her Danish speech about judgment and self-judgment when she pointed out that the subject of Broch’s novel is death as “the ultimate achievement of man” either as moment of truth about one’s entire life or “in the sense that it is then one passes judgment upon one’s

own life.” She quickly added that “This judgment is not self-accusation, for it’s too late for that nor self-justification, for it is, in a way, too early for that.” Death, then, is “the ultimate effort to find the truth, the last definitive word for the whole story” (p. 161). This Arendt accomplished three decades later in Denmark, eerily the year of her death. At the end of the essay, in a lyrical passage evoking Broch’s last page of the novel, she recaptures Virgil’s approaching death on “the boat ride down to the depths of the elements when gently, one after another, the friends disappear, and man returns in peace from the long voyage of freedom into the quiet waiting of an inarticulate universe” (p. 162). In the words of her speech then, Virgil now turned Arendt, can finally take off his mask and *return* free into the quiet waiting and, in the words of W. G. Sebald, “beruhigt in den Schlaf sinken.”

Broch’s Virgil had already spoken early on in the book of the *name* in almost the same vein in which Arendt did with the mask. For him “the name is like a garment which does not belong to us; we are naked beneath our name, more naked than the child that the father has lifted from the ground in order to give him a name.” The *name* necessarily functions as a bridge over the abyss of the ‘no longer and not yet.’ Broch adds, “the more we imbue the name with being, the stranger it becomes to us, the more detached it becomes from us, the more forsaken we ourselves.” The dialectic between *name*—which imbues us, as Arendt would say, with a *public* persona or *mask* and which makes us *identifiable*—and private philosophizing-self which makes us, in her view, *definable*, yields the “word beyond speech,” and it is this dialectic that engenders freedom. Broch brings this to a climax, “The name we bear is borrowed, borrowed the bread we eat, borrowed we ourselves, held naked into the unknown, and only he who puts off from him all borrowed furbelows, only he will glimpse the goal, he will be summoned to the goal so that he may ultimately join himself to his name” (p. 61).

In this manner Virgil is able to escape from an imperially imposed *unfalsch* reality mindful of the fact that “your path is poetry, your goal is beyond that of poetry.’ The goal lay beyond the darkness,” beyond the chiaroscuro structure of our *nocturama/panopticon* world (p. 60). When death finally comes to Virgil, Arendt concludes, it is a happy one, because he has found the bridge spanning the abyss between the “no longer and the not yet’ of history,” the true promised land of reality and human fellowship. Arendt seems to capture here, in the “between the ‘no longer’ of the old laws and the ‘not yet’ of the new saving word,” the later role of speech in *The Human Condition*. Virgil had already argued against a stunned emperor that the Roman Empire, our modern imperial nation state, itself hung between the “no longer and not yet of history.” The empire itself was transitory and, writes Daniel Weidner, “like art it is a parable, pointing at a world yet to come. And just like art needs a sacrifice, namely the burning of the *Aeneis*, so does politics” (p. 169). How not read into this juxtaposition the fate of all nationalisms, including that of Zionism in Palestine? In the concluding paragraph of her review of *Death of Virgil*, Arendt’s saving word sounded through the mask is Broch’s “word beyond speech,” her *Selbstdenken*: “Not quite here but yet at hand; that is how it has sounded and how it would sound” (p. 162).

In conclusion, Sebald’s and Broch’s literary work, and Sansour’s art have offered the author of this essay a particular angle from which to illuminate Hanna Arendt’s political stance vis-à-vis the Palestinians. He has found a heuristic caesura throughout. Whereas all of these authors’ art belabors within definite geo-political and historical loci

of which they see themselves as intellectual and human products—Arendt exports a Western historical and ideological framework within which she roots both herself and her *Selbstdenken* to another completely different locus. Here, relying on the imperialist powers, she kicks the native protagonists off their own stage to sound an ideal of *Vernunft*, which she markets as universal disregarding its Western matrix. Thus, she hears the meditation Broch sounded through the mask of Virgil. As reworked by Broch, the ancient poet has found the bridge spanning the historical caesura over the Heideggerian *Abgrund*, or abyss. His work is really a gift to humanity, and no sacrifice has to be made to the nation or empire. Broch’s poetic achievement sheds light onto Arendt’s own meditation itself, converging towards a synthesis. As it turned out, however, in her mind, sacrifices had to be made to the Euro-Zionist *nation* and Western *empire*, and these sacrifices could only be the Palestinians, whom she ontologically demoted to the status of extras. Clearly, this was poetics for Europeans—not for Palestinians. Held back by her Western prejudices Arendt never found in herself enough *Selbstdenken* either to *re-present* the Palestinians in her choral *paean* to freedom or to meet their ontological *prae-sence* in her philosophical reflection. For every step forward she took in this direction, she sounded many more steps backwards through her own mask. Her interlude with Zionism ended when, on a closer look, she recoiled before the Zionist *nocturama*, a *panopticon* that she saw as dooming Jews, and concluded that Jewishness does not need a nation state but needs instead—through *Selbstdenken* and the Brochian Virgil’s newly found poetic solution—unbounded freedom in an *unfalsch* reality, a “*promised land of reality and human fellowship*.” Paraphrasing Jerome Kohn, Arendt’s voice may have become “ever more identifiable” after her death as a voice of freedom and *Selbstdenken* for all the creatures of the night striving to get out of the *panopticon*...the Palestinians excepted.

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