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## 'Creative Culture(s): Finding Freedom in The Journey(s) of Writing

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**Abstract** This text seeks to explore the connections between and imagination and how it is applied in Hannah Arendt's work as she seeks to deconstruct barriers and expose the contours of human nature through mapping certain cultural phenomena and the human barriers it governs. It also seeks to identify and remedy hegemonic tendencies in the human-made world.

**Keywords** Hannah Arendt, hegemony, ideals, narrative fiction, imagination

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## Introduction

Imagination and its interpretation form an important part of this exercise and the construct of the form and purpose of imagination in general terms advanced by Hannah Arendt shall be employed in the development of this text. Theoretical as well as technological barriers also feature in the exploration of this broader theme in how it reveals and inspires contours and fissures in the wider cultural panorama which is anchored not only in memory and imagination, but also political pressures and commercial demands. This paper also seeks a moderate narrative to diagnose and ameliorate hegemonic tendencies in the material and practices it examines.

## Writing: form and function

The communion of humankind with his culture is often illusory, however earnestly desired by some. But how does one find the means to render an understanding of the world in which he resides and how can any lessons drawn from such an activity have any impact or legacy? Moreover, legacy is indicative of longevity, or long-term impact and only certain instruments may have this impact. The journey of the human life is relatively short and its legacy is dependent on more permanent signs of that life. One thinker postulate that:

(...) works of art are the most intensely worldly of all tangible things; their durability is almost untouched by the corroding effect of natural processes, since they are not subject to the use of living creatures, a use of which, indeed, far from actualizing their own inherent purpose-as the purpose of a chair is actualized when it is sat upon-can only destroy them. Thus, their durability is of a higher order than that which all things need in order to exist at all, it can attain permanence throughout the ages. In this permanence, the very stability of the human artifice, which, being and used by mortals, can never been absolute, achieves a representation of its own. (Gottlieb, 2007: 172-73)

Art thus becomes an instrument of prolonging the footprint of human life and a testament to human culture that frequently long-outlasts many generations of people. This exercise offers one of the only ways of achieving some semblance of immortality in the way mere flesh cannot possibly sustain. Emerging from this process of legacy-making is a form of encapsulation of stability of ideals where:

It is as though worldly stability had become transparent in the permanence of art, so that a premonition of immortality, not the immortality of the soul or of life but of something immortal achieved by mortal hands, has become tangibly present, to shine and to be seen, to sound and to be heard, to speak and to be read. (Gottlieb, 2007: 172-73)

A permanent definite form of the ideas and ideals of men and women alike is thus to be found through works of art, particular those created through the medium of writing manifested in the form of fiction and historical record. Ultimately, this is perhaps the only way humankind has found to transcend its own certain convictions and the inescapability of one's own body and mind (Gottlieb, 2007: 173).

As well as providing the means of creating a legacy beyond our mortal lifespan, writing is also part of cultural machinery that supplies and sculpts our ability to adopt required behaviours and a sense of aesthetic awareness for the cultural experiences and goods produced within that context since it "provides the mind with the right moral orientation, since it removes the inclinations that might obstruct the latter, while awakening those that are favourable to it" (Ankersmit, 1996: 22).

## 'Writing' and the narrative of thought(s)

Forming thoughts naturally involves the making of a series of judgments. A process of evaluation and selection must take place within this process. Much has been said on this by Hannah Arendt who viewed the act of thinking as a destructive rather than a creative process as for her it involved the demolition of obstacles so that judgement could be given free rein to work its faculties upon the phenomena to which it is exposed. Arendt identified three of what is referred as 'false generalities' which comprise of rules, concepts and values which are factors that are said to condition our ability to make judgements and furnish faulty safeguards of a passive life (Beiner and Nedelsky, 2001: 166). Such falsehoods must thus be erased from the panorama of a fossilized mentality by means of the "wind of thought" that creates the appropriate conditions for the capacity for judgement to rise above all other abilities beyond the restrictions of rules attached to the individual to a universal condition which bestows the ability "to tell right from wrong, beautiful from ugly." The familiar plane in which human beings reside together draws its logic from the *sensus communis* – or common sense, which manifests its true value on the seldom occasions when individual judgement pierces the veil of established opinion (Beiner and Nedelsky, 2001: 166). It is here that the power of reflective writing to encourage departures from existing doctrine to escape false paradigms becomes more evident.

But what kind of person can engage in this kind of behaviour? Arendt pronounces on this issue and affirms this is where the role of the judging citizen takes on a vital role in these situations. As this engaged type of citizen partakes in the affairs of interaction within their community, they become aware that their actions – while this maybe

unintentional – have political repercussions and their judgment generates interpretative understandings to the realities of the stories they witness as they develop. As they navigate these experiences, they learn to attach explanations to these stories within the political context of their occurrence. Through this act of judging, they create a system of interpretation that populates the public sphere with those same meanings although this may not be entirely apparent to them at the time of their inception (Eric, 2005: 267). It is here we see a clearer manifestation of the above mentioned *sensus communis* that sustains the conditions of convergence for belief systems which makes common values possible and sustainable. Arendt herself opined that:

It is by virtue of this idea of mankind, present in every single man, that men are human, and they can be called civilized or humane to the extent that this idea becomes the principle not only of their judgments but of their actions. It is at this point that actor and spectator become united; the maxim of the actor and the maxim, the “standard,” according to which the spectator judges the spectacle of the world, become one. (cited in Eric, 2005: 267)

It is at this point of convergence that an accepted set of values and standard of behaviour becomes evident and expected, which in turn aids in engaged citizens in making intelligent judgments in respect of the happenings in the world they know (Eric, 2005: 268).

How then do these agreed values remain extant? Clark and Ivanic (1997) have asserted that it is the permanent form of the written form that gives it its power since it can be stored and returned to many times over at will on future occasions. This can be seen in how: ‘...writing is a very effective tool as in a ‘powerful piece of writing’, in terms of ability to move and explain. But ‘the power of writing’ also means that writing gives access to power over others in terms of being able to influence the ideas and lives of others’ (Clark and Ivanic, 1997: 25-26; 36). Writing as an activity has the ability to traverse both space and time and move from one socio-cultural context to another as it permeates all spheres of peoples’ lives (Clark and Ivanic, 1997: 63-64). Its potency as an instrument of reflection is so great that it can be said without the slightest tinge of irony that it: ‘serves a unique function in relation to meaning-making by holding thinking still for inspection, and allowing writers to take their time over shaping their ideas’ (Clark and Ivanic, 1997: 110).

At this juncture that we must qualify one of the most frequently-employed genres of writing involved in social reflection. In these contexts, it is commonly through the medium of fiction that schemes of reflection and debate are erected and sustained. We can also reject the mischaracterization of fiction as being antithetical to truth since it is through the medium of fiction that truth is frequently sought. This is evident from the fact that the term itself is derived from the Latin word *factio* which refers to something fabricated by man which in turn implies it denotes knowing something equates to knowing how it is created (Alvarez and Merchán, 1992: 30). Gaining an insight or an awareness into the nature of something can be acquired through simulations of their operations often garnered from the content of fictive works. Narrative fiction performs an important function in this respect and does so in two ways. The first concerns how readers of literary works are able to experience the feelings and reflections of the characters in a story consistent with the situation and contexts represented by the narrative of the work in question. This materializes when readers are given to experience comparably real emotions in instances whereby violent scenes unfold and the fear present in that situation is known to the person reading that segment of text. Stories in the realm of fiction also have another way of bestowing insight in that they provide models and permit the abstraction of the human world. This is possible because like other simulations (such as computer modelling), literary narratives sustain approaches that permit the prediction and explanation of events in addition to the revelation of the sub-structures of the systems that make such behaviour function. In this way: ‘Narrative fiction models life, comments on life and helps us to understand life in terms of how human intentions bear upon it’. Fictional stories have the power to transport us into imagined worlds which offer a form of cognitive simulation of the wider world and this in turn has counter effects on the readers themselves. In this sense it is logical to acknowledge how the human condition is so heavily influenced by cultural products and stories (Mar and Oatley, 2008: 173-74).

### **Fiction: simulated experience, real insight**

It has been shown that exposition representations still bestow insights into real situations although they may never have occurred, is frequently present in the case in works of fiction. The success of such strategies lies in the fact that depth and clarity of information offered in such accounts usually stand in stark contrast to the limited information available in nonnarrative expositions.

Literary narratives bestow the opportunity and occasion on readers to augment their sense of empathy. They also encourage the formation and honing of a sense of understanding toward others and to gain some ability to appreciate their perspective and understand the motivations for such positions, which in turn aids in self-understanding. As one account would have it: ‘Fictional literature brings close attention to distant worlds that would otherwise remain unknown’ and ‘allow us access to environments and situations that are difficult to experience firsthand, such as faraway countries and cultures, but it also takes us to places that are impossible to reach, such as past societies.’ Fictional constructs also permit the otherwise impossible facility of reviewing and repeating situations many times

over in addition to gaining the ability to experience feelings of solidarity with kinds of people with whom we have never had any actual contact (Mar and Oatley, 2008: 181).

As Martha Nussbaum observes in her book *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (1992), literature, particular fiction, permits us to make sense of the world particular because:

We live amid bewildering complexities. Obtuseness and refusal of vision are our besting vices. Responsible lucidity can be wrested from that darkness only by painful, vigilant effort, the intense scrutiny of particulars...the work of the moral imagination is in some manner like the work of the creative imagination, especially that of the novelist....

...there may be some views of the world and how one should live in it – views, especially, that emphasize the world's surprising variety, its complexity and mysteriousness, its flawed and imperfect beauty – that cannot be fully and adequately stated in the language of conventional philosophical prose, a style remarkably flat and lacking in wonder – but only in language and in forms themselves more complex, more allusive, more attentive to particulars. Not perhaps, either, in the expository structure conventional to philosophy, which sets out to establish something and then does so, without surprise, without incident – but only in a form that itself implies that life contains significant surprises, that our task, as agents, is to live as good characters in a good story do, caring about what happens, resourcefully confronting each new thing. (Nussbaum, 1992: 148)

While Nussbaum demonstrates disdain for the philosophical form, she does not deny that existential crises in many forms are treated in fiction and this genre has frequently been used to successfully render very complex experiences through sophisticated character development and well-conceived plots. As Henry James noted in his important work, *The Art of the Novel* (1907), the writer is in search of form of representation that seeks elevation to a higher plane of perception given 'the immense array of terms, perceptual and expressional' that are 'like winged creatures, perched on those diminished summits and aspired to a clearer air' (James, 1907: 339). Where are these winged creatures to be found, or do we really need them or just their wings or perhaps only the fresh air they supposedly breath at such dizzy heights?

In this sense, Nussbaum offers a justification for the superior qualities of narrative fiction to render experience and offer powerful insights. She observes that

certain truths about human life can only be fittingly and accurately stated in the language and forms characteristic of the narrative artist. With respect to certain elements of human life, the terms of the novelist's art are alert winged creatures, perceiving where the blunt terms of ordinary speech, or of abstract theoretical discourse, are blind, acute where they are obtuse, winged where they are dull and heavy. (...) (Nussbaum, 1992: 5).

Few would doubt the depth and potency offered by narrative fiction in representing the human condition, but it would be foolhardy to deposit all hope and trust in this single medium. A number of great poets have also illustrated the great utility of poetry as an equally moving means to render imaginative accounts of human life – whether real or imagined. Art, quite evidently in the form of the written word, is thus entrusted with a sacred role that transcends both writer and context in its considerable energy since as Gore Vidal once affirmed, 'What is art? Art is energy shaped by intelligence' (Parini, 2007: 132). But what form can and should this intelligence take? Nobel laureate Seamus Heaney opined on this matter in his collection of essays *The Government of the Tongue* in which he observed:

(...) the order of art becomes an achievement intimating a possible order beyond itself, although its relation to that further order remains promissory rather than obligatory. Art is not an inferior reflection of some ordained heavenly system but a rehearsal of it in earthly terms; art does not trace the given map of a better reality but improvises an inspired sketch of it. (...) (Heaney, 1989: 94)

Heaney's contribution to this vexing question was conceived in an era in which highly advanced Artificial Intelligence capable of writing text driven by only the slightest prompt was only a distance possibility. However, we are now faced with much more than 'an inspired sketch' of the order of art beyond itself.

Technologies of all kinds have come to shape our ways of being and threaten the ways we wish to represent ourselves and the life we wish to live. Modern technology in the form of ChatGPT, to name just one form, offers many opportunities, but perhaps many more threats, but it cannot replace old-fashioned reasoning. Works of fiction, if read correctly, are capable of 'prescribing imaginings about their content' and it is the act of imagination that makes their existence and their believability possible (Stock and Thomson-Jones, 2008: 152).

For lessons on the wise use of the intellect, we need look no further than the work of Sir Francis Bacon in the form of his 1612 work, *The Advancement of Learning*, Book Two in which he extolls the durability and value of learning against attempts to hamstring active minds. Bacon asserted that.

And as for the disgraces which learning receiveth from politiques, they be of this nature; that learning doth soften men's minds, and makes them more unapt for the honour and exercise of arms, that is doth mar and pervert men's dispositions for matter of government and policy, in making them too curious and irresolute by variety of reading, or too preemptory or positive by strictness of rules and axioms, or too immoderate and overweening by reason of the greatness of examples, or too incompatible and differing from the times by reason of the dissimilitude of

examples, or at least that it doth divert men's travails from action and business, and bringeth them to a love of leisure and privateness, and that it doth bring into states a relaxation of discipline, whilst every man is more read to argue than to obey and execute. (Vickers, 2008: 126)

We can see that an alert mind will always been seen as something radical by those exercising political power and any attempt to limit critical thinking must be resisted, lest this vital faculty of free humanity be extinguished. If anything we should seek to encourage these qualities of the 'curious and irresolute' that encourage and sustain the ability to argue.

Bacon further opined that:

(...) And as for those particular seducements or indispositions of the mind for policy and government, which learning is pretended: insinuate; if it be granted that any such thing be, it must be remembered withal, that learning ministereth in every of them greater strength of medicine or remedy, than it offereth cause of indisposition or infirmity. For if by a secret operation it make men perplexed and irresolute, on the other side by plain receipt it teacheth then when and upon what ground to resolve, yea, and how to carry things in suspense without prejudice till they resolve. If it make men positive and regular, it teacheth them what things are in their nature demonstrative, and what are conjectural; and as well the use of distinctions and exceptions, as the latitude of principles and rules. If it misleads by disproportion of dissimilitude of examples, it teacheth men the force of circumstances, the errors of comparisons, and all the cautions of application, so that in all these it doth rectify more effectually than it can pervert. (...) (Vickers, 2008: 128-9)

As evidenced by Bacon's affirmations above, 'seducements or indispositions' against the mind that seek to limit autonomy or curiosity is not a new phenomenon. Bacon's own writings provide adequate warning and possible vaccination against such hegemonic tendencies and this enterprise of free-thinking has drawn a great deal of momentum from the many works of fiction that have been published in the interim. Are we to allow ourselves to be 'mislead by disproportion of dissimilitude of examples' as Bacon would have it or strike the necessary balance where we apply 'the cautions of application'? We need not rely entirely upon Bacon and other writers for this answer as the duty to confront this dilemma has fallen to the current generation with renewed urgency. This task can neither be delayed nor ignored.

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