

There is no ghost sonata being staged here: A performance of reasoning in Heinrich Blücher & Hannah Arendt

Emily Hesse/Martyn Hudson

Re-enlivening, re-enacting, repeating the performative gesture.

Hannah: This is it, is what he said to me as I clasped his hand and he died, this is it.

He never wanted to leave New York and go back to the Europe from which we had fled. Even less would he return to Germany: he loathed its bourgeois civilisation and where this civilisation had led us all to. This was partly because he was a working class Berliner but also that all of his friends and comrades and even his mother were gone. The death camps had taken them all, the Gestapo cellars, the axe, the pistol, the virus, the world had been submerged by a mighty flood, one in which bodies floated amongst the debris.

We met in the early spring of 1936. Each of us was still married to another. As dear Lotte said of Heinrich: he was 'so illegal he didn't even know where he lived'.

Heinrich: we want to examine the strange situation of man in this new era that has been called the second Promethean age, and rightly so, because not since the pre-historic discovery of fire has anything so changed and endangered the life of man as has the discovery of atomic power. It has increased our performing and operational power to such a degree that we can now explode the innermost forces that hold nature together and we have exploded them.

Hannah: He was a communist but a communist who despise the ascendancy of Stalinist terror amongst his own ranks. If the Fascists didn't get him then the Communists would. He kept his friends from the times he had fought with Luxemburg and the Spartakists, so many of them dead, so many tortured, and still met them and drank and argued and then finally abandoned communism after September 1937. The trials and purges and mass killings were enough. He became a nihilist, an anarchist.

For ever after he saw the world in terms of republicans or Cossacks and the Cossacks were decimating the warriors of the republic in both the Moscow summer and Hanover winter.

Heinrich had no ambition except to argue. The only time I ever saw him dedicated to something, to some kind of ambition, was when he played ping pong. I found my homeland in him, my new world, my centre, if Mycenae could stand at the centre of the earth.

Mycenae. When I finally persuaded him to come with me to visit Jaspers and return to Europe he would go to only one place.

He felt that the maelstrom, the deluge had drowned his world, executed his friends so he found only in Homer the space in which to meet them again. He often told the story of Homer's Odysseus to his students:

Heinrich: I would have wished for more time to have another session on Homer but I will not be able to come back to him and I regret that, because I would have liked to help you to see Hades. Let me only say this much to you. If you approach Homer in a very very modern way then you will see that we are all living with Hades, because the idea of shadows which cannot speak or act any more, which cannot add anything more to their lives is very much with us today. We are all living with those shadows. Those are our dead ones and we all carry them within us and we can make them speak to us again in this memory which Hades is when we give them our blood just as Odysseus must spend his blood so that the shadows in Hades might be able to speak to him. We can make our shadows that live in our memories speak by giving them our blood, the blood of our interest and of our love for them, and as long as we live and carry them within us we can go back to Hades again as Odysseus went back and we can learn from it if only we are able to love the shadows enough, (1954:11).

Hannah: We met and became friends with Walter Benjamin in Paris in summer 1938 and when he took his own life at Portbou on 26 September 1940 it was we who had to carry the manuscript with us to the new world of America. Benjy had bequeathed it to us as his last testament. What was this manuscript?

Hannah reads Benjamin: A Klee painting named Angelus Novus shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. The storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress (1969: 249).

The Messiah comes not only as the redeemer, he comes as the subduer of Antichrist. Only that historian will have the gift of fanning the spark of hope in the past who is firmly convinced that even the dead will not be safe from the enemy if he wins. And this enemy has not ceased to be victorious (1969: 257).

Hannah: The enemy, the Cossacks, did win and our semi-republic was annihilated, never to be built again: the republic had left only us two standing so we became our own floating republic. Heinrich and I arrived in New York in May 1941. The dead were not safe but they were the only way we could find our way home. We offered our blood to them so that we

could encounter their ghosts again and the ghosts could somehow tell us the route. We knew that it could only lead through Mycenae.

But the monster of the maelstrom and the deluge still followed us. I lost Heinrich so many times as he read Homer. He read it obsessively as if somehow he could find a clue to take back to the dead, or a route back into our lost republic. His students would watch him walk across campus enwrapped in thought. They would accompany him in silence knowing that he could not speak if his mind was in hell or Hades. He would come back to this one question: why did Odysseus blind the Cyclops and risk the wrath of Poseidon even when all Odysseus wanted was to get back home

Heinrich: 'He is crafty, wiley, and another thing, just. He has been fighting for just causes, fighting with Athena for the right to found a new state in Ithaca. He sees it through, but why at this moment, does he risk to raise the scorn of Poseidon? Because he cannot resist. He has become what all Greek heroes want to become which makes him immortal. A monster slayer. He has blinded a monster, and that is eternal glory. When he comes home they all will have to sing about him, and this glory he cannot resist. That, in a way, is what does him in', (1967:5).

'That is what Homer inherited. It is the material that he takes into his epics. It also has another side (which seems to contradict the idea of the development of humanity, or human consciousness), and that is the strange hatred that runs through all Greek (Hellenic) myths of monsters. The heroes of Greek myth are monster slayers. Here we have an early symbol of the fact that they wanted a world (a cosmic world) without monsters, and that slowly the human being (including the human body), was to become the model of that world', (1967:2).

'How do Homer's gods defeat the titans? They bind them and this binding of the Titans (including Prometheus) is what has made human life possible for us in the West. This notion that there are forces in life that man must bind comes initially out of Greek myth, the only myth in all the world that carried with it from its very beginnings a hatred of monsters. This is the real content of all early Greek myth. That man, by conquering the monsters within the world can make a place on earth for human beings and for humanity...', (1954:1).

Hannah: Heinrich knew that humans wanted a fully human cosmos, they wanted their myths centred around human beings not gods and monsters. Heinrich knew that if he too was to encounter the dead he would have to become a song and a story like Odysseus. But Heinrich was no Odysseus. He could muster enough energy to leave his conversation, his cigar and his sofa to get a whisky but little else would entice him out of the apartment except for his teaching. He had lost too much out there in the world to want to encounter it much again. If Odysseus went to Hades because he was lost and wanted to return home Heinrich returned there time and time again to try and fathom what to do now, to do next

and it may have been because he had come to an insight: that rather than constantly developing their control over nature humans should bind themselves like Odysseus and in that self-binding surrender the world back to other forces. I remember those wonderful lines from our friend Broch: 'Only at the edge of his fields had he walked, only at the edge of his life had he lived' (Broch 1983: 5). They remind me of Heinrich.

We argued often over that compelling picture of Rembrandt: Bathsheba at Her Bath. I think Heinrich was obsessed with the woman's body and I with her face.

Heinrich: When Homer created Olympus as both an artistic and religious concept what he really did was to create a place we can all enter and within which we all can live in order to be free from all of the shackles and fetters of the human condition. To build a world completely in the imagination is easy in a way, and that is because the world shown to us by art and built by art is a world entirely free of contradictions...

Art sets possible human relations in such a deep metaphor that the essential truth of those relations remains forever alive, forever able to blossom out again in new ages amidst new experiences, and those new experiences are our own which when added to the eternal experience of art leaves us unsure as to whether or not it is even we who have added them, because the essence of both was already present in the very beginning. And it is always present, always there...

Art is myth we can live but in which we cannot live.

The inherent wonder of art, the greatness of art, is that it is the only power of man that is beyond good and evil.....it has to do only with the experience of this child with that thing, and this performance of volunteering an answer, even before any question has been raised, this childish mind that will remain childish, even into old age, is the artist's mind. Never being able to ask a real question, because he is never hit by a real question, never seeking for answers because always he sees the world full of answers. Wherever he looks an answer is given to him, wherever he stands he hears an answer. He sees a relation, a metaphor gets hold of him and there he is in inspiration, and inspiration does not allow for questions or answers. Suddenly he is beyond reason as well as beyond good and evil, because the artistic state of inspiration in the sense I am using it begins where the inner eye starts to lead and all of the outer senses come under the command of the inner eye so the world is sensed in all of its meaning and then this meaning is put into the work of art

Myth is art obeyed and art is myth consumed for man. It is the eternal possibility of creating myth again and again

The eyes of man are sun-like, because art comes and makes them more sun-like. Art is so mighty because it changes our perception of the world. It is almost as mighty as philosophy and not nearly so harmful, because it does not ask anything of us. Art makes no request except one - to be loved - but no other request will a work of art ever make. If

we love art and participate in the experience given there then our entire being will be changed, so mighty is this experience and yet so harmless...

In art there is magic, something unexplainable, and in art alone there will always remain magic, because magic has its origin in ritual and myth (before man discovered the magic of science which has become even more superstitious and harmful). The only place where magic is never harmful is in art and in art magic remains alive.

Hannah: This is it he said as I held his hand and he returned to the lands of the dead.

Heinrich: There she was at the party staring at the floor as she listened as if the speaker was cretinous. In her hand a cigarette poised high above her breast.

Hannah: Everything will change, but only if that one little thing that is changed is in the centre and one can put another centre near the old one. Then this little thing that is done will cause the whole cosmic relationship to change position.

Heinrich: That evening we spoke and over the next few days we came to an understanding: that this communist, working class Berliner and she, a student of Heidegger, a Jew, a Zionist and a Bourgeois would remain together until the end. We made arrangements to end the marriages that we had hitherto found ourselves within and after being interned in separate camps managed to reach the United States in the middle of 1941. We carried with us Benjamin's manuscript, some clothes and books and her mother. I left behind all the dead, my faith in communism and Europe, I thought, forever. Derelict upon a raft we entered into New York, saved from the deluge. It would only be at the end of the war that we found that Karl Jaspers was still alive, having survived fascist persecution and believing that we too, the two of us, were long dead in the camps.

Karl, I often watch her as she writes, the clink of my glass does not disturb her, but her distress is present in her furrowed brow: the brow of Medea as she contemplates the two children that she is about to kill. We had no children because we were too poor when we were young and in exile and when we could perhaps have done something it was too late. So there we were stranded until our guests arrive on a Friday evening and Hannah tuts at me for being loud and argumentative with Hans and Lotte. This is the rough Berliner standing before the bourgeois, little wonder that her mother considered me uncouth and lazy. You know that she visited Heidegger that last time in Germany and I know she kept that from you, knowing your feelings towards him. Heidegger stands in his forest, peering into the depths, unable still to offer redress or even address his collaboration with the fascists. As the rest of us were thrown into the vortex, me as a communist, Hannah as a Zionist and Jew, so Heidegger stands there upon his plinth, his rector's uniform, his membership of the Nazi party and dedicates his new work to the ascendant fascism that would submerge us all, his friends, colleagues, Hannah and even you Karl.

What was it that scorched their souls so, that Heidegger and Hannah would meet and be unable to bear witness to their love. This is not a question for me to ask and certainly not answer. She left Heidegger, Europe. There were days on the crossing to New York, Benjy's manuscript with us, when we really did confront the angel of the storm of progress.

Hannah: Reads Heinrich and Homer:

They whipped the gruesome salt of the sea with their oars

Heinrich: There were many days where no birds were to be seen from our ship, little noise except the cries of children in odd languages, and then the New York islands and the Hudson river opened up to us. I knew no English, Hannah only a little. Far from immersing myself in our new home I read Kant in German and Homer in German translation. What would this nation meant to us after a drowning had already taken place: when the flood receded there was little left for us except our ideas, conversation, marriage.

Hannah: And the line that transports the land action is where the chariot comes drawn by the horses as the sun rises and sinks just as in the sea story, the sun rises and sinks regularly, and the whole of nature is brought into the story. The time here is cosmic time, which is eternal or infinite because it is circular, because it is always the same, because nothing new can ever happen within it

Heinrich: When I tried to write to my mother in Berlin I found that she had died two years previously. The war ended and we found each other again Karl. We thought you had been taken. I write you now as Hannah sits at her new typewriter. My copy of Homer is deeply scored and as I think of my dead I also think of you and are thankful that you and Gertrud are of the saved and not the drowned. Hannah is leaving for Jerusalem tomorrow. That city was once the centre of the world, and where is our centre now, there is no centre, or at least I cannot find it. Hannah leaves me a thread of Ariadne so that I might emerge from this labyrinth without a heart. See Hannah there writing, the needle hanging from the ceiling, the bricks upon the wall, the curtain opened, the smashed clay, the humans and monsters made out of the earth. Here is our centre Karl, here it is, where the dead still walk in Hades, there is no centre, this is it, this is it.

Hannah: Art negates the darkness of Hades, fear of collapse,

Heinrich: the artist herself must be the sens-ible human being, the sensing human being who senses beyond all others. That is what makes her such a helpless prey to over-sensibility that is what drives so many of them crazy and into despair. This having to live without a skin, this having to live with all senses constantly wide awake and continually open...

Heinrich: It all comes out clear, like statues.

Hannah:It all comes out clear like statues.

