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Arendt and Heidegger: The Struggle for Recognition

I think that one day, when it comes to Arendt and Heidegger . . . we will need to talk openly, fittingly, philosophically, with due seriousness and at appropriate length, of the great shared passion that bound them together over what might be called 'a whole life', across or beyond continents, wars, the Holocaust.

Derrida, 11 January 1995, quoted in Peeters, 2013, 244

Unavoidable questions

Why did a Jewish woman – forced to flee Germany and then France in the face of Nazi persecution – choose to maintain a lifelong relationship with a man who had been actively and enthusiastically involved in pursuing anti-Semitic Nazi policies and who remained throughout his life unrepentant regarding that involvement? Any attempt to address this question is complicated by the fact that we cannot be sure when, or indeed whether, Arendt was aware of the *full* extent of Heidegger's active pursuit of those policies. Nevertheless, that involvement was sufficiently well known – and, indeed, a cause of scandal and outrage among academics and intellectuals not only in Germany but internationally – for the question to be unavoidable. We may quibble over the extent of Arendt's knowledge, but her awareness of Heidegger's complicity and culpability is beyond question. Nor was it something she ever sought to refute or deny. Indeed, there can be no denying that, as Richard Rorty (1990) puts it, 'Heidegger was a Nazi, a cowardly hypocrite, and the greatest European thinker of our time'.

However, there is a second complication which is more challenging. It is the concern expressed by Derrida, in the quotation at the head of this chapter,

regarding the need to find the right angle of approach in addressing the question of Arendt's relationship with Heidegger. Continuing this line of thought, Derrida claims that 'this lifelong passion deserves better than what generally enshrouds it – an embarrassed or discreet silence on the one side, or, on the other, vulgar rumour or whispering in the corridors of academia' (Derrida, quoted in Peeters, 2013, 244). The 'vulgar rumour or whispering' may have diminished in volume since Derrida reportedly spoke these words in a 1995 seminar, but the problem of finding a way of talking 'openly, fittingly, philosophically' about this relationship has not gone away.

The broad outline of the relationship between Arendt and Heidegger has been common knowledge since the publication in 1982 of Young-Bruehl's biography, *Hannah Arendt: For Love of the World*. However, the correspondence between Arendt and Heidegger was not published until 1998 and only published as an English translation in 2004. Moreover, the published correspondence is both partial and one-sided, with only a quarter of the published letters having been written by Arendt. As Benhabib (2003, 225) points out: 'We do not know what happened to the rest of her letters. Did Heidegger destroy them in his efforts to conceal the affair? Did Arendt get rid of her own correspondence? Whatever the circumstances, Heidegger's voice and presence dominate the volume.' Given the limitations of the archive, the relationship continues to generate speculation.

Is the relationship to be understood as the eruption of Arendt's female side (Ettinger, 1995; Sherratt, 2013)? Was it a case of exploitation to which Arendt's youth and ambivalence regarding her own Jewish identity rendered her particularly vulnerable (Wolin, 2001)? Is it an instantiation of the power of redemptive forgiveness over vengeance (Kristeva, 2001; Maier-Katkin, 2010)? The assumptions underlying each of these questions undoubtedly contain an element of truth. Arendt's early encounter with Heidegger may have been a kind of chaotic self-surrender; Heidegger was exploitative and Arendt did throughout her life have a complex relationship with Judaism and, perhaps, with her own Jewish identity; and there may be something to be said for her having 'forgiven' Heidegger. She may have been – and, like most of us, probably was – sometimes daft, often confused regarding her identity, and occasionally drawn towards simple and other-worldly solutions to complex and worldly problems: precisely the qualities that would have

rendered her, at eighteen years of age, susceptible to the predatory and exploitative practices of an older, authoritarian and charismatic character such as Heidegger.

Whatever interpretation we place on the relationship between Arendt and Heidegger should take account of a number of incontrovertible facts: the relationship was lifelong though intermittent; Arendt herself was instrumental in maintaining and ensuring its continuity; and the terms of the relationship changed significantly over time. Moreover, as Dana Villa (1996) has shown, they shared in their intellectual preoccupations 'something like a common problematic ... despite radical differences in emphasis and ultimate concern' (136). This was not a youthful indiscretion – or even a great lost love – that Arendt chose to expunge from her memory. Nor was it a passion that she occasionally dipped into as a diversionary stimulus. It was a relationship that she doggedly pursued – increasingly on her own terms – throughout her life. It was inextricable from the sense she had of herself. The irony is that Arendt's complex and troubled relationship with Heidegger – that prompts many commentators and critics to question or even challenge the esteem in which she is generally held as a public intellectual – was for Arendt herself a crucial element in her own self-esteem and sense of self-worth. Arendt, in maintaining lifelong contact with Heidegger, was not colluding in a chronic dependency relationship, but insisting upon and expressing her *independence*.

From the outset Arendt sought recognition from Heidegger: recognition of her full potential and of her achievements. Her insistence on a lasting friendship was above all a struggle for such recognition, since friendship was for Arendt conditional upon the mutual recognition by each friend of the equality and freedom of the other. To have given up on the possibility of a relationship based on friendship – through, for example, denial or incrimination – would have been to give up on that struggle. Arendt's insistence on holding open that possibility was neither an exercise in self-obedience nor a self-sacrificial act of forgiveness. On the contrary, it was both self-assertive and self-preserving. The struggle for recognition was hard fought and – in the end – hard won by Arendt. But it had less to do with heart-over-head, cultural self-questioning or the recourse to Christian forgiveness than with the need for recognition as a precondition for self-realisation.

Shared passion

Arendt was barely eighteen when, in 1924, she entered the University of Marburg, a year after Heidegger had been elected to an extraordinary professorship in philosophy. Seventeen years older than Arendt, Heidegger was yet to publish his ground-breaking *Sein und Zeit* (*Being and Time*) but was already a hugely influential and charismatic figure. Karl Lowith, a student of both Husserl and Heidegger, described Heidegger as ‘a small dark man who knew how to cast a spell in so far as he could make disappear what he had a moment before presented’. His lectures, Lowith added, ‘consisted in building up an edifice of ideas which he then proceeded to tear down, presenting his spellbound listeners with a riddle and then leaving them empty-handed’ (Lowith, 1994, 42–3, quoted in Sherratt, 2013, 194). Heidegger was also married – to Elfriede Petri – and had two sons: Jörg (born 1919) and Hermann (born 1920).

On 10 February 1925, Heidegger wrote to Arendt. It is not clear whether this is the first written correspondence between them, but it clearly marks a significant shift in the relationship. Heidegger refers to a visit Arendt had already made to his ‘office hour’, a time Heidegger presumably scheduled for individual tutorials with his students. However, we do not know how many times or on what basis Arendt and Heidegger had met prior to this particular ‘office hour’ visit. What is clear from the letter is that Heidegger is already establishing the terms of the relationship. The letter opens with an urgent demand: ‘I must come see you this evening and speak to your heart’. While insisting that ‘Everything should be simple and clear and pure between us’ and that ‘I will never be able to call you mine’, he is clearly drawing her into a relationship that is far from ‘simple and clear and pure’ and over which he is assuming control. The subtext of the letter is not so much an invitation as a command to enter into a clandestine relationship with no strings attached: ‘I will never be able to call you mine, but from now on you will belong in my life, and it shall grow with you’ (AH, 3–4).

In none of the surviving letters from Heidegger in this earliest stage of the correspondence is there any sense of the particularity of the person with whom he is corresponding. Arendt is an ‘innermost, purest feminine essence’ (AH, 3), a ‘girlish essence’ (AH, 4), a ‘womanly existence’ (AH, 5). He is the protector: ‘I

can take care that nothing in you shatters; that any burden and pain you have had in the past is purified; that what is foreign to you and what has happened to you yields' (AH, 5). She is – or could be – the representative of 'womanly Being': 'May masculine inquiry learn what respect is from simple devotion; may one-sided activity learn breadth from the original unity of womanly Being' (AH, 5). He is intent upon defining her womanhood: 'Only when you are happy will you become a woman who can give happiness, and around whom all is happiness, security, repose, reverence, and gratitude to life' (AH, 4). Moreover, womanhood is to be found not in 'the forced academic activity of many of your sex', but in the 'preservation of one's innermost womanly essence' (AH, 4). Arendt is drawn close by being kept at a distance – 'distance that lets nothing blur' (AH, 5) – and in being kept at a distance gains the clarity of an abstraction.

By the end of February 1925 Heidegger has been shocked into the realisation that something had 'happened': 'The demonic struck me . . . Nothing like it has ever happened to me'. Admittedly, between those last two sentences is inserted the usual sublimatory prose – 'The silent prayer of your beloved hands and your shining brow enveloped it in womanly transfiguration' – but Heidegger acknowledges that he has been 'struck'. (AH, 6) A month later – in a letter dated 21 March 1925 – Arendt is still 'the young girl', but is no longer just a daydream: 'I daydream about the young girl who, in a raincoat, her hat low over her quiet large eyes, entered my office for the first time, and softly and shyly gave a brief answer to each question – and then I transpose the image to the last day of the semester – and only then do I know that life is history' (AH, 9). Heidegger signs off this letter with 'I love you still'. Arendt is no longer *just* the passive female object within Heidegger's field of vision. She has within six weeks of the correspondence commencing become a presence.

However, she is not as yet a voice. Three days after the previous letter, Heidegger – now on his semester break – writes to inform Arendt that his younger son has pulled a tendon as a result of a skiing accident and that their next planned rendezvous may not therefore be possible. He signs off this letter with 'Best' and as 'Your Martin' (AH, 10). Five days later, Heidegger sends a brief missive informing Arendt that their meeting is off. This letter is simply signed off 'Best, M' (AH, 10). A fortnight later – 12 April 1925 – he writes 'in a frenzy of joy at your impending arrival' and thanks her for a card she has sent

him. He is now simply 'Your M' (AH, 10–11). However, with the new semester about to start, Heidegger begins to turn his attention back to Arendt. He is anxious that she attends two days of lectures he is delivering as part of the Hessian Society for Art and Science at Kassel. On 17 April he writes to inform her of how they might meet at some point over the two days during which he will be delivering his lectures. He proposes to see her 'during the break on Monday evening'. He will be 'lodging near Wilhelmshohe Castle, very exclusive', while she can stay at the 'Stift' (i.e. a seminary or cathedral chapter). He does not know whether he will have time to pick her up when she arrives. However, after the Monday lecture he will, he informs her, 'take leave of my acquaintances and hosts and get on the No 1 tram to Wilhelmshohe, the last stop'. She will – 'discreetly' – take the next tram: 'Then I'll take you home'. He signs off this missive with 'See you soon' and, again, as 'Your Martin' (AH, 11–12).

While Heidegger was holidaying with his wife and two young sons during the spring semester break, Arendt was with her mother, stepfather and step-sisters in Königsberg. She spent some of her time writing a self-reflective – and self-dramatising – piece entitled 'Shadows', which she handed to Heidegger in Kassel. It is a relatively short piece of prose, but Arendt bound it as a booklet with a cover of thin blue-purple handmade cardboard (AH, 222). The contrast between Heidegger's situation and Arendt's is stark: he nested in a nuclear family and with the authority of a senior academic with an international reputation; she a first-year university student living in a house with her mother and a step-father and step-siblings with whom she had little in common. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that what she wrote evokes a sense of deep loneliness and longing. She writes about herself in the third person and characterises this self-as-another in terms that echo Heidegger's own characterisation of her as a 'girlish essence' emerging into 'womanly Being'. She writes of 'her quiet, barely awakened youth', of 'her helpless, betrayed youth' and of 'the shy austere morning of her young life' (AH, 12, 13, 14). 'Perhaps', she concludes, 'her youth will struggle free of the spell, perhaps her soul will realize what it is to speak out and to be released under a different sky' (AH, 16).

Heidegger responds to 'Shadows' by reassuring Arendt of his 'belief in the genuine, rich impulses of your existence'. He affirms, that is, her need 'to be realised under a different sky'. He assumes that the different sky in question lies over Marburg where under his tutelage he sees her flourishing: 'You were so

happy when you arrived, sparkling and free, just as I hoped you would be on your return to Marburg. I was dazed by the splendour of this human essence' (AH, 17). Arendt, however, remains an 'essence': splendid but objectified. On that basis the relationship settles into a pattern of meetings, the erotic intensity of which were presumably heightened by the secrecy surrounding them. Arendt is in Heidegger's gaze. He notes her presence at his lectures, while also drawing her attention to his familial responsibilities regarding his sick children and Elfriede: 'I can't imagine how the household will be maintained. Surely some kind of help can still be found' (AH, 38). By the end of 1925 the relationship seems to have settled into what might be described as an 'extra-marital affair'. This settlement – managed with manipulative flair by Heidegger – seems to have been accepted by Arendt.

Arendt's side of this early stage of the correspondence has – as far as we know and for whatever reason – not survived. As Benhabib (2003, 225) points out: 'Whatever the circumstances, Heidegger's voice and presence dominate'. But Arendt's actions spoke louder than words. After a year and half of her secretive affair with Heidegger, Arendt moved to Heidelberg to study with Karl Jaspers. It is unclear whether in transferring her studies Arendt was pushed by Heidegger or pulled by her own desire for 'a different sky'. Possibly both. But in one of the few letters that survive from this early stage of correspondence, Arendt achieves authority – and voice – through her assessment of the situation: 'What I want to tell you now is nothing but, at heart, a very frank assessment of the situation. I love you as I did on the first day' (AH, 50). That is frank and straightforward. What follows is difficult and coded: 'But the desolation that fate kept in store . . . would have blocked my path, which is wide and not a leap, runs through the world'. What did fate keep in store? What blocked her path? Why is the path wide and not a leap? We do not have the evidential wherewithal to answer these questions, but we do know that Arendt left Marburg and that in doing so she distanced herself geographically from Heidegger.

She maintained her relationship with Heidegger during her time in Heidelberg. But the geographical distance between them provided her with some psychological space within which to gather her resources. Since entering into the relationship with Heidegger, her sense of self – and of self-worth – had been shaped and moulded by his perception of her. Notwithstanding the

complexities and tensions of conducting the affair at a distance, Arendt must have experienced a sense of freedom at Heidelberg. Their meetings became more sporadic and the relationship – although maintaining its emotional charge – seems to have become less relentless in its intensity. The final break in the relationship came when Arendt met Günther Stern in 1929 and married him later that year. Stern had been a student of Heidegger and had later been the victim of what in retrospect can be seen as Heidegger's characteristically unhelpful, ungenerous and self-important attitude towards fellow academics (AH, 37–8). The experience of having had to handle Heidegger's ego was one Arendt and Stern shared. Heidegger's treatment of Stern was sufficiently important to Arendt to warrant her alluding to it in a letter she wrote to Heidegger on the day of her wedding to Stern: '[A]s a way out of my restlessness, I have found a home and a sense of belonging with someone about whom you might understand it least of all' (AH, 51). (The dating of the letter is open to question, but if her use of 'today' in the letter is taken literally then it was indeed written on her wedding day.)

The fact that Arendt wrote to Heidegger on or even close to her wedding day hardly bode well for the marriage. Nor, indeed, was her characterisation of the marriage 'as a way out of my restlessness' a particularly promising start. Arendt's feelings towards Heidegger remained highly ambivalent. In the letter in question she writes: '[D]o not forget that our love has become the blessing of my life' (AH, 51). And she concludes the letter with what is clearly an invitation to maintain at least some communication between them: 'And I would indeed so like to know – almost tormentingly so, how you are doing, what you are working on ... I kiss your brow and eyes' (AH, 51). Arendt signs off as 'Your Hannah' (AH, 51). In a further letter that seems to have been written the day after her marriage, Arendt refers to having just bumped into Heidegger quite by accident that same day and neither having initially recognised the other. Putting to one side the bizarre coincidence of this chance encounter, one is struck by the emotional turmoil expressed in the letter: 'So many things that had left me utterly confused came together. Not just, as always, how the sight of you always rekindles awareness of my life's clearest and most urgent continuity, of the continuity of our – *please* let me say it – love' (AH, 51).

What sense are we to make of this troubled and deeply troubling relationship? It seems to have little if anything to do with what Arendt came to think of as

'friendship'. It was premised not only on multiple inequalities, but also on Arendt's willingness to adopt – and adapt herself to – Heidegger's idealisation of her. Even if we judge that idealisation not to have been distorting, there can be no denying that it was hugely controlling. In spite of his endless insistence on enabling her to flourish, Heidegger curtailed her freedom and ensnared her in a relationship that it is very difficult not to define as exploitative. Arendt no doubt benefited intellectually from her conversations with Heidegger – and the erotic charge between them was clearly transformative for them both. But judged from a perspective for which Arendt came to have huge respect – namely, that of common sense or *sensus communis* – her relationship with Heidegger was something from which, and for her own good, she needed to escape.

The strange – and strangely reported – encounter between Arendt and Heidegger on the day after her marriage is perhaps emblematic of this early phase of their lifelong relationship. That encounter was characterised by lack of *recognition*. Heidegger failed to recognise Arendt; and Arendt failed to recognise Heidegger. Being recognised is, of course, different from being seen, in that it involves an appreciation of that which is distinctive in the object of perception. In his *The Struggle for Recognition: The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts*, Axel Honneth (1995) wrote: 'Persons can feel themselves to be "valuable" only when they know themselves to be recognised for accomplishments that they precisely do not share in an undifferentiated manner with others' (125). Such recognition gives individuals the confidence to both articulate their needs and exercise their abilities: '[T]his sort of confidence, these unanxious ways of dealing with oneself, constitute aspects of a positive relation-to-self that can only be gained through the experience of recognition' (174). That experience, maintains Honneth, 'is dependent on prerequisites that human subjects do not have at their disposal, since they can only acquire this freedom with the help of their interaction partners' (174). If there is no one to recognise us we remain unrecognised, and – in remaining unrecognised – we lack the conditions necessary for individual freedom and self-realisation: we may be part of the visual field that constitutes the world of appearances, but remain undifferentiated within it. Our value – insofar as we are deemed to have any – is a function of the category that we are perceived to represent.

That is precisely the situation that Arendt found herself in when idealised as an 'innermost, purest feminine essence' (AH, 3), a 'girlish essence' (AH, 4), a

‘womanly existence’ (AH, 5). To be viewed in such a way may be immensely seductive, but is very different from being recognised. Recognition assumes differentiation. To be recognised is not only a matter of being seen, but of being seen as different; not only a matter of being heard, but of having one’s own distinctive voice attended to. Arendt was, as the saying goes, seen but not heard. ‘There is’, as Jonathan Rée (2000) makes abundantly clear, ‘nothing more personal than a voice’. Voices, he shows, are ‘destined for other people: you speak, primarily, in order to be heard. And the idea of being heard, of possessing a voice or having it ignored or suppressed, of demanding, validating, giving or offering a voice – the voice of the people, the voice of God – nearly coincides with that of human and civil rights’ (1).

Arendt failed to achieve that voice – that recognition – in the early stage of her relationship with Heidegger. But she craved it and struggled for it. Her carefully bound copy of ‘Shadows’, which she delivered to Heidegger while attending his lectures as his clandestine lover, bears testimony to that resolve. So, ‘to talk openly, fittingly, philosophically, with due seriousness’ of what Jacques Derrida calls ‘the great shared passion’ between Arendt and Heidegger is to speak of Arendt’s struggle for recognition within that relationship. To be recognised by Heidegger was, for Arendt, to be *recognised*. Eighteen years were to elapse before she resumed that struggle.

Nazi years

In what might be read as a coda to the first phase of their relationship, Heidegger wrote to Arendt a letter dated ‘Winter 1932/33’. Heidegger had by this time – in 1928 – been appointed as Husserl’s successor to the highly prestigious chair of philosophy at the University of Freiburg. Heidegger’s letter begins abruptly: ‘The rumours that are upsetting you are slanders’. The rumours in question related to his alleged anti-Semitic discrimination against Jewish students and colleagues. The purpose of the letter is to rebut the accusations implicit in these rumours. By way of clarifying how he had behaved towards Jews, Heidegger provides what he terms a number of ‘facts’. He justifies his alleged lack of availability on the grounds that ‘I am on sabbatical this winter semester and thus in the summer I announced, well in advance, that I wanted

to be left alone and would not be accepting projects and the like'. He then claims that, in spite of this, 'the man who comes anyway and urgently wants to write a dissertation is a Jew, while another man who comes to see me every month to report on a large work in progress (neither a dissertation nor a habilitation project) is also a Jew'. He has also been sent 'a substantial text for urgent reading' by a Jew. He has also, he claims, in the last three semesters, supported two applications for fellowships from Jews and supported a further fellowship for a Jew to study in Rome. 'Whoever', insists Heidegger, 'wants to call that "raging anti-Semitism" is welcome to do so' (AH, 52).

What is interesting about this response to the letter from Arendt – which for whatever reason does not as far as we know survive – is that Heidegger seems acutely aware of those of his academic associates who are Jewish. He has clearly identified them as such. This no doubt says a lot about the 'racially' defined context within which he was operating, but may also say something about Heidegger's own mind-set. It is also of interest that he interprets anti-Semitism entirely in terms of his interactions with individuals. There is no suggestion in his response that anti-Semitism may have its roots in ideology or history. If he were seriously rebutting the charge of 'raging anti-Semitism', then one might imagine he would have adopted a broader perspective. Instead he adopts an irritated and peremptory tone. 'This exchange', as Benhabib (2003, 226) puts it, 'remains one of the few instances in which Heidegger shows a temper and some anger'. Whatever letter Heidegger received from Arendt clearly rattled him.

Although the 'facts' contained in Heidegger's letter may have been accurate at the time of writing, they remain an extremely partial account of his dealings with fellow Jewish academics and his role as a senior academic during this period. Having been elected rector of the University of Freiberg on 21 April 1933, he became a member of the Nazi Party on 3 May. His inaugural address as rector at Freiberg was delivered on 27 May and began, after his Nazi salute, with the following homage to Hitler and the alignment of the German academy with the fascist state: 'The assumption of the office of rector is an obligation to the spiritual leadership of this university ... But this spirit achieves clarity, distinction and power only and above all when the leaders, Führer, are first led themselves – led by the relentlessness of the spiritual order that expresses its history through the fate of the German nation' (quoted in Sherratt, 2013, 116).

The anthem of the Nazi Party was printed on the back of the programme notes for the ceremony. The singing of the anthem was followed by the Nazi salute and the shouting of '*Sieg Heil*'.

Although Heidegger handed in his resignation as rector on 23 April 1934 – a point that is often made in mitigation of his support for Nazism – he remained a member of the Nazi Party to the end of the Third Reich (Benhabib, 2003, 227). During his tenure as rector he forbade a number of Jewish colleagues from entering the university or using its facilities, including his erstwhile teacher and mentor Edmund Husserl. During that tenure Heidegger clearly had the full confidence of the Nazi regime as is evidenced by a report of a meeting held in April 1933 between a small group of Nazi professors and the new Nazi secretary for higher education at the Ministry of Home Affairs in Karlsruhe. According to the report prepared by one of the professors present in these discussions, 'Heidegger ... enjoys our full confidence, and we would therefore ask you to regard him for the present as our spokesman here at the University of Freiberg' (Ott, 1993, 143–4). In 1945, partly as a result of a negative report from Jaspers regarding Heidegger's anti-Semitism, Heidegger was forced into retirement without licence to teach. Although the prohibition against his teaching was lifted in 1949 and Heidegger resumed his teaching at the University of Freiburg in 1951, it is difficult to find any grounds upon which to disagree with Benhabib (2003, 227) in her assessment of Heidegger during this period as 'a conniving opportunist'.

Heidegger's deeply conservative background and upbringing may go some way towards explaining his uncritical and indeed enthusiastic embrace of Nazism. He was born in 1889 – the same year as Hitler – in the small Bavarian town of Messkirch, which was dominated by its Roman Catholic heritage. The local peasant economy was based mainly on agriculture and crafts, although Heidegger himself was born into the lower middle class as a consequence of his father being a sexton at the local church. On leaving school, Heidegger entered a Jesuit seminary, served as a soldier during the last year of World War I, and in 1917 married Elfriede Petri. After the war he studied with Edmund Husserl and was employed as his assistant at the University of Freiberg. Husserl thereby became Heidegger's academic mentor and worked with him until 1923 when he obtained a post at the University of Marburg. It was there that from relatively humble origins and a rural background he achieved a reputation

across Germany as a compelling lecturer and philosopher. He was also on the point of completing what in retrospect is generally judged to be one of the great works of the Western philosophical canon. He was influential and was achieving power within the university sector, but he was also relatively young and inexperienced. He had always lived in closed and rule-bound societies – Messkirch, the Jesuit seminary, the army – and was arguably ill-prepared for the demands of the post of elected rector at the University of Marburg. None of this in any way excuses Heidegger, but it may go some way towards explaining his opportunistic acquiescence to the cult of charismatic leadership and nationalistic fervour that Nazism employed as key element in its totalitarian armoury.

‘Heidegger the fox’

In 1946 – some thirteen years after their last previously recorded correspondence and four years prior to the resumption of their correspondence – Arendt published an article entitled ‘What is existential philosophy?’ in which she adopted a critical position in relation to Heidegger’s work. She begins her critique by noting what she calls Heidegger’s ‘terminological façade’ and his ‘obvious verbal tricks and sophistries’ (EU, 176). She then identifies what she sees as Heidegger’s central insight; namely, that the self has no substance other than its own existence. She argues that ‘Heidegger claims to have found a being in whom essence and existence are identical, and that being is man. His essence is his existence ... Man has no substance; he consists in the fact *that* he is’ (177). This formulation, she adds, ‘puts man in the exact same place that God had occupied in traditional ontology’ (178). If the ‘essence’ of the self is its absence of ‘substance’, then being and nothingness are inextricably linked. Man – like the God of Heidegger’s Jesuit seminary – is the great ‘I am’ and nothing but the great ‘I am’.

Arendt then proceeds to draw out what she sees as some of the implications of this central insight. The first such implication is that Heidegger has clearly turned the theistic world of his Judeo-Christian upbringing upside-down: ‘Heidegger’s is the first absolutely and uncompromisingly this-world philosophy’ (179). This judgement regarding the unique and unprecedented

nature of Heidegger's philosophy seems exaggerated if not hyperbolic, but it does allow Arendt to draw out a second implication regarding the unavoidable alienation of the human condition as understood by Heidegger: "The crucial element of man's being is its being-in-the-world, and what is at stake for his being-in-the-world is quite simply survival in the world. That is the very thing that is denied man, and consequently the basic mode of being-in-the-world is alienation, which is felt as both homelessness and anxiety" (179). If man is the master of his own being, then the price he pays for that mastery is chronic and inescapable alienation: "The essential character of the Self is its absolute Self-ness, its radical separation from all its fellows" (181).

The third implication Arendt draws from what she sees as Heidegger's big idea is that it opens itself to 'mythologising and muddled concepts like "folk" and "earth" in an effort to supply his isolated Selves with a shared, common ground to stand on' (181). In retrospect this is a clear reference to Heidegger's Nazi affiliations, although at the time the reference to 'folk' and 'earth' may have been less obvious. In terms of the conceptual distinctions she was developing at the time, Heidegger's mode of thought is unpolitical and possibly even apolitical. Heidegger's philosophy, she concludes, leads to 'some kind of nature-oriented superstition,' whereby human beings are alienated from that which defines their humanity: 'If it does not belong to the concept of man that he inhabits the earth together with others of his kind, then all that remains for him is a mechanical reconciliation by which the atomized Selves are provided with a common ground that is essentially alien to their nature' (181). Heidegger has, as Arendt sees it, entrapped himself in an elegant system of thought from which there is, and can be, no escape: no recognition, that is, of human plurality and the power implicit in that plurality.

Six years after the publication of this piece – and shortly after she has resumed contact with Heidegger – Arendt enters into her diary what she calls 'the true story of Heidegger the fox' (AH, 304). It is a relatively short entry written as a fable in which Heidegger is depicted as a somewhat incompetent fox that fails to realise he is himself caught in a trap into which he is seeking to lure others. However, 'nobody could really fall into his trap, because he was sitting in it himself' (AH, 305). The fox then hits on the idea of making the trap as beautiful as possible in order to entice others into it. Many were enticed into the trap: 'If one wanted to visit him in the den where he was at home, one had

to go into his trap' (AH, 305). But, according to Arendt's fable, the sad irony was that everybody could walk out of the trap except the fox. The even sadder irony was that the fox failed to realise the extent of his own entrapment: '[T]he fox living in the trap said proudly: So many fall into my trap; I have become the best of all foxes' (AH, 305).

In these two pieces – one her public assessment of existentialism and the other a private diary entry – Arendt is clearly positioning herself not only in relation to but also *against* Heidegger's way of thinking. Neither critique is directly *ad hominem*: the 1946 article deals with Heidegger's thought and the 1952 diary entry deals with a metaphorical or mythical Heidegger. However, in both cases Arendt is undoubtedly and emphatically putting Heidegger in his place. Both pieces were written as Arendt was either about to resume or had recently resumed contact with Heidegger. Perhaps, in order to re-enter the trap and be assured of being able to walk out unscathed, Arendt had to get the measure of Heidegger. In both these very different pieces Arendt is intent upon establishing an intellectual and philosophical distance between herself and her former lover. In so doing she was perhaps – and perhaps unwittingly – fighting for the renewal of their relationship based, this time round, on the kind of mutual recognition that informs what she understood by friendship.

Troubled reunions

In 1950, then, a second phase in Arendt's and Heidegger's relationship begins. During a trip to Europe she met with Heidegger in February of that year and also visited him and his wife, Elfriede, at their home in Freiburg. This would seem to have been a difficult meeting. Elfriede by now knew of her husband's earlier relationship with Arendt. Writing to Arendt in the immediate aftermath of this meeting, Heidegger feels it necessary to interpret and to some extent justify his wife's attitude. He claims that the purpose of what he calls 'the exchange' was to 'enter the pure element of conscious trust among us three'. He insists that Elfriede's words 'were aimed *only* at *that*; they were not meant as a demand for you to make any confession of guilt to her'. While not acknowledging his own guilt, he does admit to 'the taint that had necessarily marked it because of *my* silence'. However, he immediately exonerates himself by means of a

tortuous argument that his silence was not an abuse of Elfriede's trust, but an affirmation of the trust between himself and his wife: 'In fact, it was because I knew that my wife would not just understand but also affirm the joyousness and the richness of our [i.e. Arendt's and his] love as a gift of fate that I pushed her trust aside' (AH, 58). In other words, it was simply because Heidegger was so sure that Elfriede would be understanding of his infidelity that he did not bother to tell her about it!

Arendt responded immediately by letter from the hotel where she was staying in Freiburg. She wrote that she had come to Heidegger's home 'without knowing what your wife expected of me'. She had been 'shaken by the honesty and urgency of the reproach', but had chosen to remain silent not just 'as a matter of discretion, but also as a matter of pride'. She then adds that her refusal to respond to whatever reproach had been levelled against her by Elfriede was also 'a matter of love for you – not to make anything more difficult than it must be'. Finally, in an allusion to her transfer of studies from Marburg to Heidelberg, she declares: 'I left Marburg exclusively for you' (AH, 60). Shortly after sending this letter to Heidegger she wrote to Elfriede addressing her as 'Mrs Heidegger'. She briefly puts her side of the story, but without any attempt at self-justification. She offers no excuses: 'You did not expect one, after all, and I could not provide one, either'. She claims not to have realised that any explanation was required, 'because I did things later in connection with this affair that were so much worse that I did not remember the early things at all'. Explaining these later 'things', she writes: 'You see, when I left Marburg, I was quite firmly determined never to love a man again, and then later I married, somehow indifferent as to whom I was remarrying, without being in love. All this changed only when I met my current husband' (AH, 61).

The letter from Arendt to Elfriede also contains a forthright reference to the latter's Nazi sympathies and anti-Semitic convictions: 'You never made a secret of your convictions, after all, nor do you today, not even to me. Now, as a result of those convictions, a conversation is almost impossible, because what the other might say is, after all, already characterized and (forgive me) categorized in advance – Jewish, German, Chinese' (AH, 61–2). This issue is raised by Arendt not in an accusatory fashion, but by way of an invitation to talk about the matter further on condition that any such talk would be undertaken on Arendt's terms: 'I am ready at any time, and I said as much to Martin, to

talk about such issues in an objective, political way – I like to think I know a few things about them – but only on the conviction that personal, human issues are kept out of it’ (AH, 62). Arendt seems to be saying that she is willing to discuss racism and nationalism, but not if the assumption of racist and nationalist categories constitutes a precondition of discussion. Such a discussion would, therefore, be ‘almost impossible’ (as she put it) with those for whom such categories are non-negotiable. Nevertheless, Arendt closes this letter with the statement that ‘We will see each other again soon’ and with the request that Elfriede accepts the letter ‘as a greeting and as thanks’ (AH, 62).

This is a remarkable letter. We need to recall that Arendt had, at the age of eighteen, entered into a romantic and presumably sexual relationship with a married man who was considerably older than her and who, as her academic supervisor, exercised a position of power over her. She was also a German Jew who had been forced to flee her homeland as a result of a fascist regime that had been supported both by the woman whom she was addressing and the husband of that woman. Yet, it is Arendt who undoubtedly takes control of this complex situation. She clarifies the issues and keeps open the possibility of future dialogue. She also enters and exits Freiburg on her own terms in a hired car and stays at a hotel of her own choice. Heidegger, on the other hand, is entrapped in Freiburg having been granted retirement from the university and been ostracised from the wider community of scholars within and beyond Europe as a result of his support of and collaboration with the Nazi regime. Arendt’s letter seems to suggest that she realises the significance of the shift in the power relation between herself and Heidegger. There is no record of Elfriede’s response, and beyond this initial interchange in the second phase of their correspondence the vast majority of letters that have survived are those written by Heidegger. His subsequent correspondence suggests that he chose to ignore that subtle but irreversible shift.

In the ensuing correspondence Heidegger is intent upon establishing a sense of accord between Arendt, Elfriede and himself. Just a few days after Arendt had sent her letter to Elfriede, Heidegger informs Arendt that ‘the spontaneous harmony between my wife and you is something that will last’. Given the tenor of Arendt’s letter, ‘spontaneous harmony’ seems somewhat optimistic, as does Heidegger’s following comment that ‘all that remains is a minor resolution of a misunderstanding whose real root may be in the

superficial talk of others' (AH, 65). If the 'misunderstanding' in question relates to Elfriede's 'convictions' as alluded to in Arendt's earlier letter, then something more than 'a minor resolution' would surely have been required. Heidegger seems intent upon disregarding these differences and creating a sense of comfortable unity in which Arendt and Elfriede will both love him while remaining in harmony with each other. A month later he implores Arendt to 'stay close to Elfriede' and again fails to acknowledge the complication of the situation and the complex emotions of all those involved: 'I need her love, which bore everything in silence through the years and still has room to grow. I need your love, which, mysteriously maintained in its early seeds, brings hers from its depths.' He even wants to draw Arendt's second husband, Heinrich Blücher, into this harmonious fantasy world: 'In the same way, I also want to nurture in my heart a silent friendship with your husband, who became your companion in those years of suffering' (AH, 71).

In these letters Heidegger is also constantly inviting Arendt into what she, in her 'true story of Heidegger the fox', termed his 'nature-oriented superstition'. Here his desire for a return to organic nature complements his need for harmony and symmetry in the triangular relationship between himself, his wife and Arendt. In the letter in which he tells her to 'stay close to Elfriede', he also writes: 'Hannah, when the city tears at you furiously, think of the straight firs towering up before us, into the light air of midday in the winter mountains' (HA, 72). In a later letter he asks: 'Hannah, have you seen the brown of a freshly ploughed field in the light of dusk?' (AH, 76). Arendt was by this time firmly established in New York as a cosmopolitan intellectual. Insisting upon this dichotomy between the city 'that tears at you furiously' and 'the straight firs towering up before us', Heidegger hopelessly misplaces Arendt. Of course, Arendt may have colluded in this fantasy. On the evidence available, she does not seem to have seriously challenged it. Nevertheless, Heidegger's constant allusions to Arendt as a child of nature are – as well as being mawkish – almost comically inappropriate.

While seeking to infantilise Arendt – 'the woman is hidden in the girl, the girl in the woman' (AH, 79) – Heidegger was also attempting to use her as means of re-establishing contact with former colleagues. An ongoing theme during this phase of the correspondence is his lack of contact with Jaspers, with whom Arendt is – as Heidegger knows – in regular contact. He complains

that Jaspers did not write to him during the war years, which is hardly surprising given that Jaspers' wife, Gertrud, was a Jew and that Jaspers was highly critical of Heidegger's support for the Nazi regime. He further complains that Jaspers did not refer to him by name in the relevant volume of his recently published three-volume *Philosophy* (AH, 83–5). A little later in the correspondence he writes: 'Jaspers writes you regularly . . . He has not answered my two letters from April'. He then complains about 'a rather unpleasant review' of his work that had been written by a former student of Jaspers and adds that 'it is generally assumed that Jaspers is behind it' (AH, 95–6).

In what can be seen as an instance of the self-entrapment alluded to by Arendt in her fox fable, Heidegger clearly required access to Arendt's international networks but could not bring himself to acknowledge the intellectual achievements that had established her as an influential figure across those networks. Responding to the announcement of the publication of her *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, he remarks: 'I wanted to ask about my writings in the previous letter, because I was surprised you had not mentioned any of them' (AH, 103). When, shortly after, he receives from her a copy of the book, his response is: 'We thank you for your book, which, with my poor English skills, I cannot read'. He then adds insult to injury by telling Arendt that 'Elfriede will be very interested in it, but at the moment we and the house are too agitated' (AH, 105). His obsessive regard for his own work and academic career are in stark contrast to his almost complete silence regarding her work and achievements. He is in such a state of denial regarding her public success that he cannot tolerate any evidence of it.

In May 1952 Arendt again visits Heidegger in Freiburg, attending one of his seminars and meeting with both him and Elfriede on several occasions. At one of the meetings Elfriede, far from displaying 'spontaneous harmony', erupted in a display of anger and jealousy. Following that meeting Heidegger wrote a brief letter to Arendt informing her that his cold was getting worse and that he felt tired. He added: 'It is best if you *do not write* now and do not *come visit* either. Everything is *painful and difficult*. But we must bear it' (AH, 112). After that the correspondence is much more sporadic. In 1954 Arendt provided advice and professional support in preparing an English edition of Heidegger's *Being and Time*, taking it upon herself to enter into a correspondence with the translator on points of detail. At the same time she informed Heidegger about

her ongoing work on *The Human Condition*, but he made no mention of this in the ensuing correspondence. In 1960 she sent him the German edition of the book (which she herself had translated), telling him that it 'owes practically everything to you in every respect' and that 'if things had worked out differently between us . . . I would have asked you if I might dedicate it to you' (AH, 124). There is no evidence in the surviving correspondence that he either acknowledged this gift or responded to her comments regarding the dedication. At this point the correspondence virtually dried up, although in April 1965 he sent her a belated thank-you card for 'greetings, good wishes, and gifts' sent to him on his seventy-fifth birthday (AH, 124).

If it was indeed recognition that Arendt was seeking, then her attempt to renew their relationship on the basis of a mature friendship was hardly a rip-roaring success: she had come to him on her own terms as a strong woman who was gaining fulfilment in both her private and public lives; he had refused to acknowledge the achievements that had contributed to her sense of self-fulfilment and, in addition, had sought to impose his own terms on the relationship. Those terms included a seemingly impossible rapprochement between his ex-lover (Arendt) and his wife (Elfriede) and the tacit assumption of harmonious accord between the three of them. Arendt's public presence was acknowledged only insofar as it was useful to Heidegger in his attempt at academic rehabilitation. In all other respects it lay entirely outside his field of vision.

Heidegger was adept at establishing no-go areas and protecting them by means of elaborate smokescreens of fantasy and romance. The jangling asymmetries that characterised the relationship between Arendt, Elfriede and himself were spirited away into an impossible 'harmonious symmetry'. Similarly, his own colossal failures of judgement and acts of disloyalty and betrayal towards former colleagues were shrouded in a thick fog of self-justification, self-pity and disingenuous claims regarding his own naivety: 'I am neither experienced nor talented in the domain of the political' (AH, 76). Far from resolving the question posed by Benhabib (2003, 225), Arendt's post-war reunion with Heidegger highlights its intractability: 'How could she justify to herself, as a persecuted Jewish émigré and public intellectual who reflected deeply and brilliantly about Jews, Germans, and the Holocaust, her continuing friendship, affection, and loyalty to this man?'

A kind of settlement

That, of course, is Benhabib's question – and *our* question as we struggle to understand this seemingly tangled relationship – but it was *not* Arendt's question. The moral problem as experienced by Arendt presented itself in very different terms. The question for her was not 'How can I justify to myself my continuing friendship, affection, and loyalty to this man?', but 'Given the irreversibility of my original encounter with this man, on what terms should I live out the consequences of that encounter?' Her answer to her own question would seem to have been something like: 'On the terms defined by friendship'. So, the struggle for *recognition* was unavoidable, since without it there could be no friendship as Arendt understood friendship. She achieved that recognition in what might be seen as the final phase of their relationship, but at considerable reputational cost. It is the final cost of that struggle for recognition that perhaps Benhabib – and we – question from our various retrospective positions. However, Arendt could – like the rest of us – only live life forward. She chose always to live with the unpredictable consequences of her own actions. Exit, for Arendt, was not an option.

The final phase of their relationship commenced in July 1967 when Arendt delivered a lecture on Walter Benjamin at the University of Freiburg. Heidegger knew about the lecture in advance and was present. This, as far as we know, was the first time they had met since 1952. The lecture – delivered in the main lecture hall of the university by a leading public intellectual – was a reversal of the circumstances under which they had first met: then, the young Arendt caught the attention of the renowned philosopher as he stood at the podium; now the elderly Heidegger not only caught the attention of, but was addressed directly by Arendt as she began her lecture (AH, 129). Arendt and Heidegger had kept in intermittent contact over the years and he had sent her a sixtieth birthday greeting the previous year (AH, 127–8). Also, by this time, Arendt was sixty and Heidegger was seventy-seven. Both were established but highly controversial figures: he a great philosopher who had actively supported the Nazi regime during World War II, and she a Jewish public intellectual who was considered by many to have betrayed the Jewish people through her coverage of the Eichmann trial in 1961.

The correspondence then resumed with many more of Arendt's letters surviving during this final phase and with a fairly regular flow of letters

between them. The correspondence is much more relaxed, focusing largely on Heidegger's work but also on areas of mutual philosophical interest. Heidegger also acknowledges, at the beginning of this final phase of their correspondence, Arendt's achievements: '[F]or the insightful, your lecture was effective simply because of its level and its structure. Such work is increasingly vanishing from our universities, along with even the courage to describe things as they are' (AH, 129). This was hardly a eulogy, but it was at least an acknowledgement – and an endorsement – of her intellectual accomplishments. His ensuing letters lack the mawkish tone of some of his earlier correspondence and her side of the exchange is much more confident. Insofar as Elfriede is mentioned, it is by way of mutual 'regard' rather than any attempt to fictionalise their triangular relationship into a non-existent loving harmony.

In 1969 Arendt and her husband visited Heidegger and his wife. The visit seems to have been amicable on all sides. Later the same year Arendt delivered a radio broadcast in tribute to Heidegger on his eightieth birthday. In it she paid tribute to Heidegger's mode of thought: 'Heidegger never thinks "about" something; he thinks something' (AH, 152). Such thinking, she claimed, may set itself tasks and address problems: '[I]t always has some specific issue, of course, that it is currently occupied with or, more precisely, excited about – but one cannot say it has a goal. It is constantly active, and even the marking out of paths is more a matter of opening up a dimension than of reaching a goal that is first sighted and then aimed at' (AH, 152). In contrast to 'the old oppositions of reason and passion, of mind and life', Heidegger embodied 'the idea of a *passionate* thinking, in which thinking and being alive become one' (AH, 153). Heidegger in other words was, for Arendt, the supreme teacher, who modelled what thinking is and how – at best – thinking works.

Towards the end of her broadcast script she touched on the issue of Heidegger's wartime record. She appeared to switch tack, no longer arguing for the unity of thinking and being, but for their disunity. Heidegger, she argued, briefly – 'ten short, hectic months 35 years ago', as she put it – changed 'residence' from the world of thought in which he was at home to the world of human affairs in which he was a stranger. She claimed that Heidegger recognised his 'mistake' and that, having done so, he 'risked considerably more than was common at German universities back then'. He then, she claimed, 'let what he had experienced take deep root in his thinking' (HA, 160–1). This is a clear

reference to Heidegger's own self-justification based on the fact that he had resigned as rector of the University of Freiburg after one year.

Arendt chose to overlook Heidegger's continuing membership of the Nazi Party, the anti-Semitic discrimination he had practised against Jewish colleagues, and his continuing failure to account for his convictions and behaviour during this period: either she was being highly selective regarding the facts of the case or she had allowed herself to remain in ignorance of those facts. This later endorsement of Heidegger is – in comparison to her 1946 essay, 'What is existential philosophy?' – remarkable in its lack of critical engagement with Heidegger's legacy. In a briefer statement published after Heidegger's death, Arendt's vindication of him is if anything even more explicit: 'May those who come after us, when they recall our century and its people and try to keep faith with them, not forget the devastating sandstorms that swept us up, each in his own way, and in which something like this man and his work were still possible' (AH, 163).

Arendt's friendship with Heidegger was hard-won and complex. Perhaps until the end it entailed elements of the erotic. It was dutiful – on her behalf – and in its final phase would seem to have provided each of them with the pleasure of talking together about the ideas that each of them had struggled with for a lifetime. The friendship managed – rightly or wrongly – to survive the huge differences that divided them. It finally provided Arendt with the recognition she had craved. Had Arendt been able to read the letter that Heidegger addressed to Hans Jonas after her death she might well have felt that at last she had won the struggle for recognition. In what was hardly a ringing endorsement, but at least an acknowledgement of Arendt's public presence, Heidegger wrote: 'Hannah was the center of a large, diverse circle'. On the highly restrictive scale of Heideggerian magnanimity, this faint praise amounted to an endorsement *cum laude*.

If we learn anything from this relationship about the nature of friendship, it is that friendship is a complex compound. Arendt's friendship with Heidegger grew out of an intensely erotic and troubled relationship. It was not a complete and perfect friendship as idealised by Montaigne, but in many ways an incomplete and imperfect friendship: a muddle in which anger, disappointment, resentment, but also an intuitive and undeniable affinity played their part. It

built on that residue of erotic passion and its accompanying guilt and hurt. It is a relationship that could be categorised in very many ways. That it developed into friendship was largely as a result of Arendt's perseverance and sheer stubbornness. Insofar as it was a friendship, it was not one based on political solidarity. On the contrary, it endured radical political difference. Throughout their lifelong relationship Arendt displayed a sense of almost dogged duty towards Heidegger, but her overriding need was to gain his recognition. She needed him to recognise her as she recognised him. In the end she gained a begrudging recognition, but at a huge cost.