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Arendt and Blücher: Flourishing Together

As if one had always seen woods, but never a tree in its full majesty. A very strange growth pattern, as many trunks issue from one root, growing in a circle, and then coming together again at the treetops . . . The trunks like weathered rock.

AB, 257

Eros and philia

Martha Arendt – Arendt’s mother – was not entirely happy with her daughter’s choice of second husband. Arriving in New York in 1941, she lived with Arendt and Blücher until her death in 1948. Seven years is a long time for mother, daughter and son-in-law to live together in two cramped furnished rooms under the strain of the mother’s disapproval, particularly so when they were already coping with the strains of statelessness, becoming proficient in a foreign language and earning a living. For much of the time they must have felt they were skating on very thin ice. But none of them could risk the ice breaking. Too much was at stake: Arendt was deeply in love with Blücher but also felt an immense sense of duty to her mother; Blücher was deeply in love with Arendt and would not have wanted to force on her an impossible choice between her mother or him; and Martha needed a home and loved her only daughter and wanted the very best for her. So, in spite of the cramped conditions under which they lived, they somehow made it work. Moreover, Arendt – complex to the last – needed a partner who did not fit too comfortably into the norms of domesticity as understood by her mother, but who nevertheless provided the emotional security that she needed and that she associated with home.

The correspondence between Arendt and Blücher is necessarily intermittent because they corresponded only when apart. So, unlike Arendt's other correspondence, the letters between her and Blücher miss out on some of the big events in Arendt's life. However, the correspondence between them following Martha Arendt's death does survive and reveals some of the tensions that both of them had lived with since their arrival in New York. Arendt was in New Hampshire staying with a friend when she heard by telegram of the death of her mother who had been visiting her stepdaughter in London. Writing to Blücher, she acknowledges her mixed emotions, which were clearly tangled up with her sense of obligation towards her mother and guilt regarding her husband at having agreed to her mother's request to stay with them:

Naturally, I am both unhappy and relieved at the same time. It's quite possible that all this was the biggest mistake of my life. I couldn't have simply turned down her request, because it came from a love and a wholeheartedness that I always admired ... When I think about you in all this, my head starts spinning ... I was always resolute about one thing, mainly never to have mother move in. But then the gas ovens came ... world history.

AB, 92

The letter, with its twists and turns and sense of emotional turmoil, sounds like a *cri de coeur*, particularly when – immediately after the passage just quoted – Arendt asked Blücher to place a brief notice regarding her mother's death in a weekly German-Jewish newspaper ('Don't make it too big, but also not too small, and don't economize') and announces that she would like to wear black for a few months ('do you mind if I do? Please tell me') (AB, 92). She is at once demanding and vulnerable, self-justifying and self-reproaching, controlling and slightly out of control. It as if she were asking Blücher to steady her, ground her, stop her head from spinning.

Blücher does precisely that, but not in the way one might expect. How he steadied her tells us something important about their relationship, about why Arendt valued him, and about Blücher himself. Responding to her letter, he offered a clear appraisal of the predicament Arendt was in, introduced a little sardonic humour into the exchange, but did not entirely let her off the hook. He reminded her that from her mother's 'bourgeois standpoint' his own working-class origins were an inevitable cause of disapproval: 'She pointed out to me, a little too clearly, the limited but powerful justification of the bourgeois

standpoint, which I'd always been aware of'. But, he went on, it was not her mother's snobbery towards him that most infuriated him: '[W]hat really infuriated me was the way she constantly sucked your blood, and her total lack of respect for your incredible accomplishments'. Whatever 'powerful, genuine, and clear feeling' she had once possessed towards Arendt had completely 'dissolved in a flood of insipid sentimentalities' (AB, 93). The honesty and realism of Blücher's uncompromising response was no doubt indicative of those qualities in Blücher that attracted and enlivened Arendt, but that rubbed her mother up the wrong way.

Blücher's working-class origins were central to both his self-identity and the sense of natural authority that others perceived in him. Among the sophisticated leftist leaning intelligentsia of New York, Blücher had something of the genuine article about him: a working-class intellectual, largely self-taught and with strong activist credentials. A passionately articulate conversationalist with a kind of rugged charm spiced with wit, Blücher might have been seen as Arendt's 'bit of rough'. But unlike her mother, Arendt saw that implicit in the rough edges were great resources of consistency and reliability. When the chips were down, Blücher was the sort of man that one would like to have had on one's side: steady, unafraid and decisive. After the infantilising tendencies of Heidegger and the incompatibility of temperament she had experienced in her first marriage, Blücher was a good choice.

For Blücher, too, the choice was a good one. Given his own strong personality, he needed a strong and independent woman, just as Arendt needed a strong and independent man to pit against her own single-minded determination. Moreover, although they were both fierce and uncompromising thinkers, Arendt was a writer and Blücher was a talker. So, there was not the kind of competition between them that there might have been if Blücher had been writing and publishing in the same field. As it was, they were able to support and complement one another in their different intellectual activities. They were able to provide the continuity that each craved in a world that had for both of them been characterised by chronic discontinuity.

In a letter written in 1950, and in which he outlined his approach to philosophy, Blücher explained to Arendt what he understood to be his particular strengths and limitations as a thinker: 'Yes, the good fairy proclaimed: "This boy shall have power of judgement," and the evil fairy interrupted her

and finished the sentence, “but nothing else.” And that seems to be that’ (AB, 131). The ‘nothing else’ referred to the written record of his own philosophising. His talent resided in his being able to think his way through to judgements that in turn led through to action. Doing philosophy was, for Blücher, not a matter of producing philosophical texts, but of engaging in a process of thinking that leads – by way of judgement – to active engagement in, and for, the world. Blücher published nothing. But, as his letters to Arendt and what remains of his lecture notes clearly show, he was a hugely energised and energising thinker whose thinking flowed into his conversation and his teaching.

It is the symbiotic relation between their thinking that defined their friendship. No doubt sexually charged – and far from ‘Platonic’ – their relationship fed off ideas, sparked off their reading of particular texts, and was sustained by their ongoing conversation between themselves and across their wide circle of friends. In that sense it was a deeply Socratic relationship in which each seems to have found both erotic fulfilment and the rewards of companionship: a friendship that combined both *eros* and *philia*, while retaining the necessary tension between the two. It was a relationship born not in heaven, but in the *realpolitik* of the mid-twentieth century. To understand that relationship, we have to understand how Blücher’s ideas and way of doing philosophy fed into Arendt’s own thinking. The point here is not to track influences – and their attendant anxieties – but to illuminate complementarities and show how these provided the conditions necessary for Arendt and Blücher to flourish both as human beings and as public figures.

Thinking together

Blücher was born into a working-class family in Berlin on 29 January 1899. After primary school he continued his education in Reichenbach/Oberlausitz, a town in eastern Saxony situated in the south-east corner of Germany close to the Polish border to the east and the Czech border to the south. In 1917 he was drafted into the army for active service before having graduated and, in the same year, joined the Spartacus League (or *Spartakusbund*), a Marxist revolutionary movement founded in Germany in 1915 by Karl Liebknecht,

Rosa Luxemburg, Clara Zetkin and others. Following the German Revolution of 1918 it formally renamed itself the Communist Party of Germany, and the following year became a member of the Communist International (or Third International). In 1928 Blücher left the Communist Party and joined the anti-Stalinist Communist Party Opposition, which was established that year initially to modify and later to replace the mainstream Communist Party. After Hitler rose to power in 1933, the Communist Party Opposition existed only as an illegal and underground organisation.

By his early thirties Blücher had become a seasoned political activist: a Marxist and anti-Stalinist at loggerheads with both mainstream communism and the fascism that Germany embraced in 1933. He had also been married twice: briefly to Lieselotte Ostwald, whom – according to Arendt's biographer – he had married 'when he was too young to know better and divorced her not long after'; and again in 1932 to Natasha Jefroikyn, a Lithuanian who gained German citizenship by her marriage to Blücher (Young-Bruehl, 1982, 133). In addition, between 1918 and 1920 he had sought to continue his education by taking evening courses at the University of Berlin, and throughout the 1920s and early 1930s had collaborated with Robert Gilbert, musician and fellow member of the Spartacus League, on cabaret shows, operettas and various film projects. He was in, in short, an imposing – and opposing – figure: twice married, an ex-soldier, politically engaged and active within the leftist counter-culture that flourished in Berlin in the years between the wars.

Blücher's second marriage – to Natasha Jefroikyn – was again short-lived. After their marriage they lived together only intermittently and by 1935 the marriage had, according to the later divorce papers, irretrievably broken down. This was perhaps inevitable in that Blücher had, the year after their marriage, escaped to Prague – a move no doubt necessitated by Hitler's rise to power and Blücher's membership of an organisation that had been designated as illegal under the Nazi regime (Young-Bruehl, 1982, 133). There is no available evidence as to why Jefroikyn did not accompany Blücher on his escape from Germany to Prague in 1933 and then to Paris where he arrived in 1934. All we know is that he was at considerable risk as a political dissident and she had gained German citizenship. The rest is open to surmise. What is clear is that Blücher's divorce from Jefroikyn was ratified in 1938, three years after their marriage had broken down and two years after he had met Arendt.

The recorded correspondence between Arendt and Blücher commenced in August 1936 – she was twenty-nine, he was thirty-seven. It was, as Lotte Kohler in her introduction to her edition of the letters remarked, characterised by ‘natural intimacy and unrestrained frankness’. Arendt and Blücher corresponded in German – their mother tongue – in an idiom that Kohler describes as one of ‘unconditional partnership’ (AB, ix). During her first post-World War II trip to Europe as director of Jewish Cultural Reconstruction – almost ten years into their marriage and shortly after the death of her mother – Arendt is clearly reliant on Blücher for emotional security and continuity. The trip must have stirred up complex memories and emotions, involving as it did a reunion with Jaspers and with Heidegger and his wife. In a letter sent from Heidelberg during that trip and dated early 1950, Arendt hurled at Blücher: ‘Have you really forgotten what we agreed, that you would write once a week?’ She continued:

I am very upset. I simply can't understand your complete lack of sense about the most primitive human responsibilities and obligations. I cannot believe that you have so little imagination that you can't imagine how I feel, careering about the world like a car wheel that has come off, without a single connection to home or to anything I can rely on. I write all this to you as bitterly and, if you will, as embittered as it looks to me, and as it has to look to me.

AB, 123

In his prompt response to Arendt's troubled letter, Blücher reminded her of his own physical condition: ‘Now that luckily a second, smaller stone, and some more kidney sludge, have wormed their way out, I can confess to you how hellish the whole thing has been . . . That you are very upset makes me upset too, particularly as I am supposed to have caused it’ (AB, 123). He also reminded Arendt that her friend Hilde Fränkel – the mistress of the Protestant theologian, Paul Tillich, who had fled Germany and was about to publish his highly influential (1952) *The Courage to Be* – was dying of cancer and provided a lengthy update on her mental and physical state. Characteristically, Blücher met implied criticism head-on, while at the same time providing reassurance. He reassured her that he was maintaining their home, fulfilling their duties towards their friends, while at the same time managing his own health problems: ‘Don't be unsettled and unhappy’, he concluded the letter, ‘Your home here is standing, waiting for you’ (AB, 126).

At the heart of their relationship was the security that – for both of them but perhaps in varying degrees – sprang from continuity: the continuity of language through their shared mother tongue; of being and living together in a shared place; and, increasingly, of thinking in harmony with one another through their shared concern with what constitutes ‘the political’. Their relationship – including as it did the necessary intimacy and privacy associated with marriage – incorporated also the core elements of friendship. Being lovers and being friends is different, but by no means mutually exclusive or even dichotomous. When – as in the case of Arendt and Blücher – their thinking becomes a kind of contrapuntal melody within which disagreements become deeply harmonised, then the categories of ‘lover’, ‘husband/wife’, ‘partner’, ‘friend’ become increasingly porous and blurred. The common and inescapable experience of thinking is the binding element that sustains our partnerships and friendships through a kind of ongoing – if nevertheless intermittent – conversation: a dialogue that sustains both the relationship and the individual identities of those involved in that relationship.

So, how Arendt and Blücher fell into step in their thinking is crucial to an understanding of how friendship interfused their relationship. Falling into step had, in their case, involved a long and risky trek across continents. It had also involved an understanding not only of how thinking works, but of what it is worth thinking about – and, crucially, of the relation between thinking and what bridges the gap between thinking and action. Blücher’s contribution to this ongoing dialogue is more difficult to track because he was a great talker and teacher, but was not a writer. As noted, he published nothing in his lifetime, and the records that remain are contained within the published letters he wrote to Arendt and the records held of his work within Bard College where he taught and where his archive is assiduously maintained.

The dialogue he maintained with Arendt was crucial to the development of her thinking. Together they worked through to a common position on the idea of citizenship, on what constitutes philosophy and on the nature of political action. To understand the importance of Arendt’s relationship with Blücher – and its profound impact upon her own work – we need to piece together, from the sparse resources available, Blücher’s own style of thinking and his own focus of thought.

Doing philosophy

During the first ten years of their marriage, Arendt was transforming herself from a philosopher into a political thinker. This transformation was accomplished in large part through the process of producing *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. Her dedication of this book to Blücher was much more than a token gesture. He had been instrumental in her transformation from philosopher to political thinker through both his continuing discussion of the major themes of the book as it developed and took shape, and through his deep respect for her as a writer and what he termed ‘the awkward beauty of true style’ as exemplified in that particular work (AB, 109).

Throughout that same period Blücher was, as it were, travelling in the opposite direction intellectually: transforming himself from a political thinker and activist into a philosopher. Each was gathering past resources and taking stock of them within their current context, so that her philosophical orientation to politics and his political orientation towards philosophy were carried forward into their future work: she as a writer on the international stage, and he as an increasingly influential teacher of art history and philosophy at the New School for Social Research (from 1950 to 1958) and as professor of philosophy at Bard College (from 1952 to 1968). Both institutions were located within New York, which, notwithstanding Arendt’s frequent visits to Europe, became the place they made their home.

By the early 1950s, then, their intellectual trajectories had interconnected. But their respective transitions had not been easy. While Arendt had been writing *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, he had been struggling to reposition himself intellectually with a view to gaining employment in New York. This was no easy task and took its toll emotionally. Writing to Arendt in 1950, during her first trip back to post-World War II Europe, he expressed his own sense of frustration and alienation:

Nothing works out, in spite of many interviews. You know, I think all these people find me highly suspect. The most restrained things I say frighten them . . . and they look down on me, even though I intimidate them. They have a bad conscience, and I seem to reinforce it by my mere presence . . . I’m cutting myself to pieces in the process.

The 'bad conscience' is no doubt a reference to the pervasive influence of McCarthyism – at its height between 1950 and 1956 – and to Blücher's vulnerability given the extreme anti-communist mood of the times and his own political backstory. At the time he also lacked US citizenship, which he gained a year after Arendt in August 1952.

If Blücher had been a sympathetic sounding board for Arendt in her turn towards politics, she was in turn a sounding board for him in his attempt to come to terms with the Western philosophical tradition. In 1948, in the letter in which he had responded to her news of her mother's death, he wrote: 'Something strange has happened to me: a sudden and crazed attack or, better still, an assault of productivity. Dutiful and unsuspecting ... And then came the "*brainstorm*" (AB, 93). Later in the letter he explained the significance of the brainstorm: 'In two days and a night I saw in clear progression the new conceptual whole, the consolidation of my objective. And now, finally, my doubts are resolved and I realize that I have found new territory. I know now the continent that I discovered. Now I want to set foot on it. Or, first, to chart it' (AB, 95) What he had grasped as a kind of *gestalt* ('the new conceptual whole') he could now comprehend in terms of its constituent parts and how those parts were causally related ('in clear progression'). He had, in short, perceived a history of thought implicit in which was an argument about the nature of traditional Western philosophy: 'Kant was a servant, Nietzsche a master, Marx a despot, and Kierkegaard a slave. I am a *prospective citizen*' (AB, 95). This was the new territory that Blücher set himself to chart.

He charted it through his work at the New School for Social Research and, crucially, through his leadership and development of what he termed 'the Common Course' that he instigated and developed as part of the liberal arts curriculum at Bard College. Writing to Arendt in 1952 while she was visiting Europe on a Guggenheim Fellowship, Blücher explained how he had been contracted to 'prepare a group of teachers for the project, to work out the plan.' He then went on to outline the nature of the course he hoped to develop: 'It will be a philosophical course for *freshmen*, which will aim to teach them the meaning of *ultimate questions*, at the same time introducing them naturally to their various field of study. I want to turn it into a completely modern educational plan, which will take over from

progressive education' (AB, 214). Originally contracted to advise on the planning of the course, prepare those who would be teaching on it and undertake some initial teaching during the first semester, Blücher in fact led it and taught on it for the next fifteen years. He thereby contributed significantly to the development of a liberal arts education tradition which remains a significant – if increasingly challenged – element within the North American higher education system (see Nussbaum, 1997).

In his final lecture for the Common Course delivered in 1967 (recorded on tape, transcribed and then edited by Blücher), he summarised what the course had tried to achieve, and outlined what he saw as two opposing approaches to philosophy. He characterised the first approach as 'no more than the general theory by which all present knowledge is organized, brought into a unity whose inherent tyranny, that is, the tyranny inherent in every system, will eventually bring it to fall' (AB, 393). We become acquainted with such systems, he argued, chiefly through ideologies which employ 'high words' to justify their 'inherent tyranny'. The second approach – the one he had tried to develop through the Common Course – sought to 'cleanse the political atmosphere from the pollution of all these high words' (AB, 394). It involves an endless process of critical thinking whereby what we think we know is constantly questioned and what we do not know is constantly acknowledged: '[P]hilosophy means nothing more than man's readiness to live in the presence of what he does not know' (AB, 393).

These two approaches presuppose very different pedagogies. In developing his own notion of philosophy, Blücher became increasingly dissatisfied with didactic modes of teaching that are premised on the notion of the student as the passive recipient of knowledge. He did not rely on pre-prepared lecture notes, but on his capacity to think through a topic as he addressed his students and sought to engage them in discussion. He modelled through his own discursive style of teaching what it was to be a philosopher: the idea was to *do* philosophy – to show it in action – rather than present it as a *fait accompli*. His own model here was, of course, Socrates, whose name he constantly evoked in the 1967 lecture. For Blücher, the Socratic legacy was not so much a method or style of philosophising as a democratic and democratising impulse: if to philosophise is to live in the presence of what we do not know, then we can all be philosophers; and if we can all be

philosophers, then philosophy is a deeply democratic enterprise. ‘Socrates,’ as Blücher put it, ‘is not the philosopher-king but the philosopher-citizen, telling everybody that every man can be a philosophizing being and that one can be a good citizen – that is, a political being – without being also a philosopher’ (AB, 398).

Socrates was a benign third presence in the relationship between Arendt and Blücher. In 1955 when Arendt was visiting Europe to participate in an international conference sponsored by the Congress for Cultural Freedom, Blücher wrote to her in Greece from New York: ‘Keep an eye out for Socrates, I’m sure he’s still lounging about somewhere there, and tell him how he amazes me’ (AB, 274). Later, in her last posthumously published work, she addresses the question ‘What makes us think?’ with reference to ‘The answer of Socrates’ (LM, I, 166–79). In that section of her final work – based on the first series of her 1973 Gifford Lectures – Arendt echoes Blücher’s final lecture as delivered at Bard College in 1967: ‘None of the *logoi*, the arguments, ever stays put; they move around. And because Socrates, asking questions to which he does *not* know the answers, sets them in motion, once the statements have come full circle, it is usually Socrates who cheerfully proposes to start all over again’ (AB, 169–70).

The footnote that she added to that statement is an even clearer tribute to her dead husband for whom any self-identification with the notion of the ‘clever professor’ would have been an anathema: ‘The frequent notion that Socrates tries to lead his interlocutor with his questions to certain results of which he is convinced in advance – like a clever professor with his students – seems to me entirely mistaken’ (LM, I, 236). Just as Arendt had become a thinker through her writing, so Blücher had become a thinker through his interaction with his students and his attempt to engage them in dialogue. Shortly after starting his work at the New School for Social Research, New York – and four years after the brainstorm – he wrote to Arendt regarding his course on art history and philosophy and his sense of fulfilment at having engaged and motivated his students: ‘Big and long discussions. They won’t let go of me ... They form small discussion groups. They go to art exhibits together, and then tell me how much better they are able to appreciate works of art. Friendships blossom’ (AB, 197).

Politics in action

If Blücher insisted on the distinction between two kinds of philosophy, then he was equally insistent on two kinds of politics: the politics of coercion and suppression versus the politics of deliberation and dialogue. Underlying this distinction is a particular view of what constitutes power and how power relates to politics. Both Arendt and Blücher viewed power as the human capacity for collective action. 'Power', as Arendt put it, 'corresponds to the human ability not just to act but to act in concert. Power is never the property of an individual; it belongs to a group and remains in existence only so long as the group keeps together' (OV, 44). The ability 'to act in concert' makes possible the development of a politics of deliberation and dialogue. Only by distinguishing the notion of 'power' from related terms such as 'strength', 'force', 'authority' and 'violence' can we begin to identify and define a genuinely democratic politics – a politics, that is, of participation and engagement; or, as Blücher put it, the politics of 'the philosopher citizen' (AB, 398).

Some of Arendt's conceptual distinctions – as McCarthy pointed out – played against common linguistic usage. Her insistence on restricting power to 'the human ability . . . to act in concert' and distinguishing it from force and violence may seem to fly in the face of how power is generally understood and experienced: hence Jonathan Schell's suggestion that the politically resonant distinction to be drawn from Arendt's work is between what he terms 'cooperative power' ('based on support') and 'coercive power' ('based on force'). 'Both kinds of power', as he puts it, 'are real' (Schell, 2004, 227). But what Arendt was highlighting was that one kind of power can all too easily be used to mask the other kind of power. Democratic leaders, for example, could pursue coercive policies under cover of their own cooperative rhetoric. Unless power was clearly defined it could all too easily become a metaphor for what Arendt maintained was its antithesis: namely, coercion and suppression. Therein lay the importance for Arendt of distinguishing and defining the parameters of power. Only by distinguishing the concept was it possible to ensure that it did not become an ideological tool.

Arendt's attempt to disentangle the notion of power from what she saw as its metaphorical usage echoed the insistence in Blücher's own teaching on developing a critical attitude towards words and the way in which they may be

used to mystify and entangle us in coercive ideologies. In his final 1967 lecture for the Common Course, he claimed that he and his colleagues at Bard College had sought to prepare students for the world in which they lived by focusing their critical attention on the relation between language and power. Evoking Socrates – ‘trying to interpret him anew, trying to use him for our own twentieth-century purposes’ – he provided a retrospect on the purpose of the course he had set up fifteen years before: ‘[W]e prepared ourselves for the time we live in, a century that has rightly been called an age of wars and revolution; moreover an age in which almost all words have turned into lies. Words and language are those instruments by which man can create both, lies *and* truth. ... [W]ords have become the tools of power’ (AB, 391).

It was, he argued, only through the process of becoming ‘examining and critical’ that we can release the collective power implicit in deliberation and dialogue:

Our political system will change only if citizens change ... So, let’s start the old discourse, the discussion again; let’s become examining and critical again, and raise all the old questions again – what is justice? what is truth? ... [T]he precondition for this activity is political freedom as it is for every kind of higher life; this very fact makes us all, or should make us all, philosopher-citizens.

AB, 399

If democracies are premised on citizenship, and citizenship is premised on a polity that is both ‘examining and critical’, then the practice of philosophising as exemplified in Blücher’s own teaching is fundamental to democratic politics. Put more bluntly – as was Blücher’s custom – philosophising requires what he called ‘gall’: ‘Even if I could talk with all the facts in the world but didn’t have the gall, I would be but a paper sword and a paper shield’ (AB, 86). It was the gall – the sheer bloody-mindedness of speaking truth to self-declared power – that made all the difference between paper swords and shields and those forged from more enduring material.

Throughout his life Blücher channelled his creative and analytical abilities into his voracious reading, his teaching and other collaborative ventures, and his friendships. The correspondence between Arendt and himself – and much of their conversation when together – was conducted in their shared mother tongue. Maintaining that line of linguistic continuity seems to have been

crucial. Without it neither might have had the courage to speak back to the world within which they found themselves. The correspondence between them was part of a complex process of translation – or mediation – from the relative comfort zone of their first language into the more complicated linguistic terrain of their adopted tongue. Their common language of German provided them with a space within which to flourish. From that space they were able to move out into the wider terrain within which professionally and socially they communicated and learned to express themselves in their adopted language. Without that space – the space of their love and friendship within which they were able to talk in their shared mother tongue – the conditions necessary for flourishing would have been severely constrained.

It is hardly surprising, therefore, that both Arendt and Blücher were preoccupied with how and why words matter – and, more specifically, with the relation between how words are used and how power is characterised and deployed. As a writer working in a third language – after German and French – Arendt could draft and redraft her texts, but as a lecturer working without a prepared script in a foreign language, Blücher had no such safety net. (PowerPoint, launched in 1990, was not then available as a safety net for lecturers who like to look as if they are doing the kind of thing Blücher was in fact doing.) Blücher's insistence on following his own instincts as a teacher and lecturer no doubt took additional gall. But he may well not have found those inner resources had it not been for the ongoing dialogue with Arendt: their support for one another, their testing of ideas against one another, their care for – and, yes, their nagging of – one another. Their love for one another took the form of a great friendship, just as their friendship was imbued with intense love and mutual care.

Root and branch

Implicit in Blücher's evolving ideas regarding the nature of philosophy and its relation to politics was a notion of human beings as necessarily relational, interconnective and interdependent. They are, as he put it in his 1967 lecture,

inveterate and incurable relationists, born to relate everything to everything in various manners and different forms. This is the most

human of man's passions, and a wonderful thing, perhaps even the source of all our creative abilities. The danger is only that once man believes he has found an absolute – the kosmos, or Being, or God – he can no longer stop relating everything to this One absolute. That is, instead of keeping his system of relations open and hence uncertain, he will invent a closed system where everything is once and for all related to everything else. Isn't it marvellous?

AB, 392

The openness of what Blücher here calls the 'system of relations' is crucial to Arendt's and Blücher's lifelong relationship, within which they shared intimacies, thoughts and ideas, information, worries (often in the earlier days about money) and concerns (increasingly about their health). When they were together, they talked, became absorbed in their separate projects, met friends and acquaintances, and settled into the familiar habits and customs of being together. When they were apart they corresponded by letter, occasionally spoke on the phone and maintained a running commentary on the progress, ailments and achievements of their mutual friends in the United States and across Europe. These routines formed the bases of a relationship that was deeply intimate yet orientated towards their wider circle of friends, acquaintances and professional associates.

During Arendt's various absences from New York, Blücher became a sympathetic listener to those of their friends who were for whatever reason passing through difficulties in their personal lives. He was particularly supportive of their mutual friend Hilde Fränkel, the mistress of the Paul Tillich, who felt deeply isolated given Tillich's intermittent contact with her during the final stages of her illness. Arendt and Fränkel had met in Frankfurt around 1930 and had rediscovered each other in New York during the war years. Theirs was a deep friendship lasting until Fränkel's death in 1950. Fränkel was, as Eleanor Honig Skoller (1993, 121) puts it, 'endowed with an overwhelming naturalness that was endlessly fascinating to Arendt'. The final stages of her illness coincided with Arendt's first post-World War II journey back to Europe since her emigration from Germany and her flight from France.

Throughout that period Blücher kept in close contact with Fränkel, providing Arendt with regular updates on her friend's physical and mental state. In early 1950 he wrote to her as she was travelling through Germany:

Hilde is in a bad way ... She is really being tormented. Her pain is so overwhelming that she has to take more and more morphine. And she says that as a result she can only live like an animal ... Most of the time she can't read anymore because she can't take anything in ... I still prevail on her, quietly and insistently, to stay alive ... She is thoroughly convinced that she will never see you again, which I dispute energetically, and I do believe she will live at least another six months. It is horribly sad, darling, to stand by and watch a person die slowly.

He concluded this section of his letter with the thought that 'she is like a dear little child that has come to harm' (AB, 125–6).

In a slightly later letter, Blücher made it clear that he saw this kind of human engagement and obligation as 'the origin of freedom'. While not alluding to Fränkel or other specific instances, he clearly had in mind the vital importance of an expansive – and expanding – relationality that was inclusive of their own relationship while recognising the wider networks of friendship that they both shared: 'That we are capable of intuiting ourselves in other human beings and intuiting them in us, to seek and to recognize, and that we are willing to do this – here lies the origin of freedom' (AB, 131). Freedom, in other words, had its origins in the human capacity for mutuality and reciprocity. It can never be simply *individual* freedom, since the freedom of any individual is dependent upon the freedom of myriad other individuals. Freedom is necessarily *collective*, in its sensitivity and responsiveness to the way in which our freedoms rely on interdependency and mutuality.

This notion of freedom was central to the deeply shared humanism that lay at the heart of their relationship and their sense of being at home together. In the final sentence of the letter in which he had outlined to Arendt what he saw as 'the origin of freedom', Blücher explained: '[T]hat is why I have established an eternal home here in this world, and not in the supernatural homeland of Zion, right in the middle of this world, with your help and that of friends, so that I too can say: "where one or some of you are gathered, there is my homeland, and where you are with me, there is my home"' (AB, 133). His home, he insisted, was not located in a 'supernatural' utopia, but 'here in this world ... right in the middle of this world'. Insofar as his home was – as he put it – 'eternal', it was because of their worldly continuities and interconnections that at once focused on and radiated out from his relationship with Arendt.

In her letters to Blücher, Arendt was constantly informing their shared worldliness through her sharp observations of places, people and events. On her 1949–50 trip to Europe she wrote to Blücher with a vivid description of war-torn Berlin: '[F]rom Spandau to Neukölln is one big field of rubble; nothing recognisable; only a few people in the streets, like an incredibly spread-out village ... In the Eastern Sector nothing has been rebuilt ... Great unemployment. People grim, dressed worse, starving, still carrying sacks on their back ... Furthermore no one has any money, unbelievable poverty. Everything problematic' (AB, 133–4). On this – her first emotionally gruelling – trip back to Europe, she began to place in perspective the extraordinary trajectory of her life up until that time. She wrote of Europe as a nightmare from which – with Blücher – she had escaped: 'I think of you and feel as if I have escaped from a nightmare, a nightmare of seeking but finding nothing' (AB, 134–5). Blücher remained for her – as she remained for him – her 'home-land'.

Five years later – in early 1955 – as visiting professor in the Department of Political Science at Berkely, she described for Blücher her first response to San Francisco Bay: '[I]t is as beautiful as a dream. The chain of mountains and hills look a little Japanese ... [A]ctually they are not chains, not a real mountain range, but round hills that seem to grow and curve independently out of each other or out of the plain. I know such landscapes only from Japanese or Chinese painting' (AB, 229). Towards the end of her teaching stint at Berkeley she described the giant redwood trees of California: '[T]hat was incredible. As if one had always seen woods, but never a tree in its full majesty. A very strange growth pattern, as many trees issue from one root, growing in a circle, and then coming together again at the treetops ... The trunks like weathered rock' (AB, 257). It was her experience not only of the human world but also of the natural world that Arendt wanted and needed to share with Blücher.

Her description of the redwood trees in their 'full majesty' might almost be taken as a metaphor for the specificity of her friendships. She had, as she put it, 'always seen woods' – always, to pursue the metaphor, seen friendship in the abstract – but to experience a particular friendship was 'incredible'. The 'growth pattern' of particular friendships, the issuing of many friendships from 'one root', the 'growing in a circle, and then coming together again': these detailed characteristics of the redwood trees evoke a sense of what friendships meant

to Arendt. Her enduring friendships were ‘trunks weathered like storm’, each providing a tentacular branchwork of wider friendships and associations. They were the means by which the branchwork of friendship flourished and became mutually sustaining.

Arendt’s friendship with Blücher was the ‘one root’ without which the branch-like structure was unsustainable. Blücher had neither financial resources nor an international reputation to match that of Arendt; he had no ambition to write for publication or to become a public figure; he intermittently suffered from ill health and was averse to travelling by air even on domestic flights. He was, on the other hand, generally acknowledged to be a great teacher in the Socratic tradition. He was also an inveterate reader and by all accounts a superb conversationalist who delighted in controversy and debate. He was also loyal to the two institutions that had supported him and provided him with employment following his move to New York. Notwithstanding his strange mixture of vulnerability and strength – or perhaps because of it – he was undoubtedly Arendt’s ‘weathered rock’.

Life after Blücher

Following Blücher’s death on 31 October 1970, Arendt was distraught. She had known him for thirty-four years and been married to him for thirty of those years. Although she still had a wide circle of friends and colleagues, the fallout from her reporting of the Eichmann trial had left her isolated from some of her oldest friends and acquaintances. Jaspers had died the previous year and, although Heidegger was still alive, his sense of duty towards Arendt was – as we have seen – extremely limited. McCarthy remained loyal and supportive, but she was partnered while Arendt was now widowed. W. H. Auden, whom Arendt had known quite well but not intimately since 1958, proposed marriage to her only a month after Blücher’s death. Arendt, of course, turned him down. (She nevertheless published a fine tribute to Auden in *The New Yorker* after his death three years later. See RLC, 294–302.) As she explained to McCarthy, she hated the sense of pity that Auden had aroused in her through what she saw as his inept and inappropriate proposal and his general state of dishevelment on the occasion that the proposal was made (AM, 269–70).

Blücher was unique. Unlike Heidegger, Jaspers and McCarthy, he wrote nothing for publication. Young-Bruehl (1982, 432) has suggested that, although opinion was divided as to whether this was the result of a writing block or a matter of Socratic principle, the most likely suggestion is ‘that the “cannot” and “will not” each had their weight in him’. He was also unlike Heidegger, Jaspers and McCarthy in that he was part of both the old world of Europe from which he and Arendt had fled and the new world of their adopted United States. Yet he was disinclined to return to Europe after the war, and – although he remained something of an outsider in his adopted country – was content to stay in New York while Arendt travelled the world. Perhaps, as Young-Bruehl (1982, 434) has suggested, ‘Blücher never really overcame his hatred of Europe’s bourgeois civilization and certainly not of Germany’s particular path’. He was equally dismissive of what he saw as the self-indulgence of some of his students in the United States, particularly as it related to the drug culture, which he saw as deeply anti-philosophical in its escapist tendencies: ‘[T]o ruin and destroy your perceptions [i.e. your senses] and then say you want to pursue the truth: are you crazy? The experiences you have you will not be able to communicate’ (quoted in Young-Bruehl, 1982, 434).

He was also – to a degree that set him apart from Heidegger, Jaspers and McCarthy – hugely gregarious, while having a rare ability to enjoy his own company. When Arendt was away, he would manage and maintain their network of friends in New York, often relaying messages to them from Arendt and relaying messages back. He was much sought after as a guest and was punctilious in his care for those of their mutual friends who were ill or passing through difficult personal or professional circumstances. But he was also happy to spend days reading and preparing in his own inimitable way for his unscripted seminars and lectures. One imagines him in a prolonged state of Socratic dialogue – with himself, with the books he was reading, with Arendt and with their mutual friends. His stream of thinking was constantly bursting its banks and flooding whatever situation he was in.

The uniqueness of the man lay in his argumentativeness, which was an expression of his passion for debate, his openness to opinion and his insistence on sustaining discussion beyond the point of disagreement. Writing shortly after Blücher’s death, Dwight Macdonald – radical writer and critic – wrote that there was one quality among all others that he had particularly liked in

Blücher: 'the ability to commit himself to a position, passionately, and damn the horses or the expense!' (quoted in Young-Bruehl, 1982, 432). If Blücher was competitive in argument, it was because he was committed to keeping the argumentative game going; if he was adversarial, it was because he refused to accept that the argumentative game was governed by reason alone; and if he was contradictory – and at times self-contradictory – in argument, it was because for him the game was the same game that had been played by Socrates on the street corners of ancient Athens. The game, in other words, was an exercise in truthfulness – and, as such, was deadly serious. What Dana Villa (2001, 28–9) wrote about Socrates seems a fitting epitaph for Blücher:

Socrates does not apply to the ignorant and recalcitrant many an expert knowledge available only to the few; rather, he attempts to open the philosophical vocation to everyone. This is not to say he harbors the unrealistic expectation that the majority will become philosophers. It is to say, however, that he thinks neither age nor civic status is a bar to the kind of self-examination he has in mind. What matters is not class, status, education, gender, or even freedom but the capacity to think.

Although a staunch secularist, Blücher would no doubt have shared with Dante a profound contempt for the cowardly and pusillanimous who live without blame and without shame – being neither hot nor cold – and are assigned after death to Limbo. Heaven, according to Dante, excludes them – and yet they are not even in Hell. They are neither one thing nor the other. In Dante's vision, they are running about noisily in circles and constantly stung by insects. They never lived because they never exercised their willpower or their capacity to reason. In Dante's schema they are inferior to the lowest category of sinners, who at least exercised their agency on behalf of evil. Their inability to commit themselves to a position would – for Blücher – have been as great a cause of contempt as it was for Dante.

Among the papers collected in the Blücher Archive at Bard College is one in which Blücher was formulating a scale of human relationships and the human capabilities associated with that scale: 'Accepting the whole human being from within – love; accepting the whole personality from without – friendship; accepting an independent person – political relationship; accepting an individual as a member of society; accepting strangers as co-workers'

(quoted in Young-Bruehl, 1982, 433). In his relationship with Arendt he had found the integration of the categories that comprise this schema. Their relationship – over the span of its years – embodied love, friendship, the political, the social and the experience of being co-workers. Their friendship was inextricably entangled with each of these other categories.

The Bard College archive includes a lecture Blücher delivered in 1968 – a year after his final lecture to the Common Course – in which he focuses specifically on the meaning of friendship:

[F]riendship means love without *eros*. The *eros* is overcome. It was there in the beginning, but it had been overcome and it doesn't count any more. What counts is the mutual insight of two personalities who recognize each other as such; who in effect can say to each other 'I guarantee you the development of your personality and you guarantee me the development of mine.' That is the basis of all real community thinking, and such a community can only start with friends.

Quoted in Young-Bruehl, 1982, 433

This feels like a personal statement. But its meaning is open to interpretation. Is Blücher saying that friendship is a compensation for the loss of *eros*? Or is he saying that friendships may evolve beyond *eros*? Or that a relationship that has its source in *eros* may nevertheless grow into friendship? What Blücher is clearly not doing is forcing a dichotomy between *eros* and friendship. He is simply affirming that our human capacity for love cannot be restricted to the confines of *eros*. Unravelling his argument back to its unstated premise, he might be saying that without friends there can be no community and that without the acknowledgement that some friendships have their origins in *eros* ('it was there in the beginning') we necessarily limit the potential of friendship. It would then follow that our erotic desires, passions and attractions cannot simply be siphoned off or left behind, but are a necessary part of our human flourishing.

That we leave Blücher with more questions than answers – and that the questions suggest an undertow of personal self-reflection – seems appropriate. From his radical activism in pre-World War II Germany to his development of critical modes of inquiry and pedagogy at Bard College and the New School for Social Research, Blücher was a relentless questioner who persistently challenged others to formulate their own questions. He was a challenger: a

chatterbox to some, no doubt a gadfly to others, and a wonderfully sensitive and responsive listener to a small number of close friends. His life – like that of Socrates – was a demonstration not of the power of reason but of the impossibility of total rationality. Philosophy was in the doing of it, just as politics was always in and of the action.

Life after Blücher was, for Arendt, a consolidation of much of what she had learnt in and through their relationship. Thinking, willing and judgement were to be the great unifying themes of her final work, *The Life of the Mind*. She had learnt to think with Blücher, she had received confirmation of her own will through their relationship, and she had trusted him as a man of judgement. During the five and a half years between his death and hers she endeavoured to gather the past, to do her duty by her friends, and to bring her own thinking – which was inextricably interwoven with his – into a systematic synthesis. That she failed in the last of those tasks again seems wholly appropriate. Whatever system might be derived from Arendt's work is as open and permeable as her own way of thinking. *The Life of the Mind* – dutifully and lovingly edited by McCarthy – is one of those texts that precisely because it is unfinished remains open to the future.

Blücher's legacy lives on – not only as the husband of Arendt – but as an educator who contributed hugely to the development of the tradition of liberal arts education and to the critical pedagogies that have supported and carried forward that tradition. His, too, was an unfinished text. It was unfinished because for him philosophy took the form of a particular kind of dialogue characterised by a refusal of foreclosure and an insistence on the need to follow through into action. For Blücher – as for Arendt – philosophy was inextricably entwined with the politics of the here and now.

There can be no doubt that the marriage between Arendt and Blücher was deeply loving and erotically charged. But it was not – and Arendt would have utterly rejected the idea that it might have been – a marriage made in heaven. It was a marriage made on earth and based on an enduring friendship that was deeply caring and mutually supportive. It was also a passionately intellectual friendship, a world of words and ideas that they were forever elaborating and into which their wider circle of friends were frequently invited to help in that task of exploration and elaboration. It was a world characterised by the plurality

of endless discourse through which Arendt tested and refined the core concepts of her thinking. What she understood by friendship – and what we might learn about friendship from her life and work – are all derived from that shared world. The following chapter returns to that world as she sought to formulate it in her last great unfinished work, the architectonics of which are constructed around the three pillars of thinking, willing and judging.