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EPILOGUE

A Woman of the World

The main thing was to have no illusions and to accept no thoughts – no theoretical systems – that would blind you to reality.

RLC, 298

In his 1644 pamphlet *Areopagitica*, John Milton famously declared: 'I cannot praise a fugitive and cloister'd virtue, unexercis'd and unbreath'd, that never sallies out and sees her adversary, but slinks out of the race, where that immortall garland is to be run for, not without dust and heat' (Milton, 1999, 17). Arendt – a fellow republican – would undoubtedly have agreed. She herself had confronted her adversaries – experiencing considerable 'dust and heat' in the course of doing so – and had consistently argued that the virtues could only be acquired through human interaction and cooperation. For her, 'a fugitive and cloister'd virtue' would have been a contradiction in terms: to be 'fugitive and cloister'd' was to deny the ethical, and to deny the ethical was to renounce the political. The 'immortal garland' could only be gained in the mortal world of humankind.

So, Arendt became a woman of the world. But the world was – and is – a tough place. The long trek from Hanover – by way of Königsberg, Berlin, Marburg, Heidelberg, Paris, Prague and Geneva – to New York was not for the faint-hearted. Nor were the years of statelessness in France and the United States – and the long and demanding lecture tours that Arendt undertook throughout her life – for those who preferred to remain 'unexercis'd and unbreath'd'. Being a woman of the world was no easy option, insofar as it was an option. In some ways – and at certain crucial junctures in her life – it was the world that chose Arendt. In fleeing Germany and then France she was – given the extreme vulnerability of her position as a Jewish woman first in fascist Germany and then in Occupied France – responding to necessity rather

than exercising her own freedom of choice. However, even in these extreme situations she showed remarkable self-determination: the determination, that is, to survive as a person, to connect with others and to understand the world.

Arendt's friendships were crucial in maintaining that self-determination. They provided both refuge and hospitality in a world characterised by uncertainty and unpredictability. The ethic of hospitality had been developed within the Hebraic tradition in response to the dangers of exilic life as exemplified in the story of Israel's exodus from oppression in Egypt. The right to immunity and to hospitality was clearly defined in the Jewish Torah. In the fourth of its five books – the Book of Numbers – God ordered Moses to institute cities which would be places of refuge or asylum. Although a deeply secular Jew, Arendt carried forward this tradition of hospitality through her friendships and the emphasis she placed within friendship on continuity and duty. In a world of ineluctable uncertainty, friendships were both evidence of having survived the unpredictabilities of the past and an assurance of surviving the inevitable insecurities of the future.

Within the safe space of her many and varied friendships Arendt was able to gather her resources, re-establish a sense of continuity and connectedness and relax into well-known routines. Friendship was a halfway house between the public and the private, incorporating elements of both but in different combinations with different friends: robust argumentation and the sharing of intimacies; working together and holidaying together; cooking for others and being entertained. The point about such activities is that they are mundane, ordinary and commonplace. For those of Arendt's generation who had witnessed totalitarianism at first hand, managed to keep one step ahead of its ruthless advances and/or known those who had fallen victim to its deadly policies, the commonplace would always have a certain pathos – an awakening of the emotions – that those who have not had to bear witness in that way more usually associate with the exceptional. Its sheer ordinariness rendered it extraordinary.

Arendt's friendships also provided an opportunity for friends to move from what she called 'the two-in-one' of solitary thinking into the two-on-two of thinking together. Friendship became a space within which one's opinions can be tested and explored without being subject to public scrutiny and accountability. Arendt was able to work out her ideas in dialogue with friends because she felt able to express her opinions within the circumscribed context

of that dialogue. Although thinking begins in very early infancy through social interaction with the prime carer, it becomes internalised into the 'two-in-one' of solitary thinking as the infant gains a sense of personal identity. That process continues throughout our lives and is never straightforward or just one-way. We move between the 'two-in-one' and the two-on-two as we develop our sense of selfhood, thereby gaining on the way the capabilities necessary to operate discursively and thoughtfully within and across a wide range of contexts. Arendt was interested in the movement backward and forward between solitary thinking and thinking together – and the implications of that to-and-fro for what it means to enter the public domain.

She was, to the very end, struggling with a language and a conceptual framework with which to explain the full reach and depth of her intuitions regarding the nature of thinking. She was all too aware of how solitary thinking can lead to misjudgement, but she was also aware of how thinking is necessary for connecting us to a world of common sense through dialogue with both the living and the dead. At the heart of her thinking was the felt need to reach out, enlarge her own mind and the minds of others, and involve herself in the boundlessness of communication. She was, conceptually, playing with a huge jigsaw puzzle of an idea into which the conceptual pieces of the puzzle were never quite arranged into the final closure of a complete theoretical picture. The idea was that of 'plurality', but around that idea notions of 'thinking', 'willing' and 'judging' spun in their separate and interconnected spheres.

Through her friendships Arendt sustained the virtuous dispositions that were fundamental to her world view. Duty was inseparable from her notion of friendship, as were the virtues of truthfulness, honesty and prudence. The continuity of friendship – particularly the idea of a continuing friendship between the living and the dead – was reliant on a sense of duty. Arendt was assiduous in honouring her dead friends. Without duty, continuity was unsustainable. Similarly, friendship presupposed truthfulness – if not the whole truth and nothing but the truth, then at least the truth regarding matters of mutual interest and concern. So, honesty is both a precondition and outcome of friendship – as is the prudence required to know when and how the truth should be spoken and under what circumstances. Within our friendships we nurture and develop the dispositions necessary for engaging with one another in the here and now and across the boundaries.

Friendship, for Arendt as for most of us, was an exercise in lifelong learning. It was – and is – how we learn to live together. She had few given relationships of kinship in her life, so chosen relationships of friendship played a particularly important part in her development as a person and as a public intellectual. She moved forward into the wider world through friendships that she adhered to tenaciously and with a taken-for-granted sense of duty. Some of those friendships were difficult – and some were fractured – but Arendt held onto them until the point of irreparable rupture. She willed her friendships into continuity and enlargement. Her friendships constituted a diasporic network of friends across her old Europe and her adopted United States.

They were in effect the *sine qua non* of collective action, which she saw as the source of human power and the basis of democratic politics. If the interconnectivity between human beings is the powerhouse of politics, then politics must be grounded in our existing interrelationships. Friendship – as one of the constituents of interrelationship – thereby becomes a necessary condition for the sustainability of a democratic body politic. All other forms of political regimes deny friendship or shape it to their own ends and purposes: theocracies subordinate it to belief in a supreme being; oligarchies twist it into a hierarchy of vested interests; and autocracies distort friendship through their demand for unconditional loyalty to the autocrat. Totalitarianism, as we have seen, is unique in its systematic eradication of all forms of friendship. Only a genuinely participative democracy respects and nourishes friendship as an element that both binds the citizenry and provides a context within which citizens can grow and develop.

Arendt was not only *of* the world, but *for* the world – not only moulded by her experience of the world in one of the most tumultuous periods in human history, but actively engaging with the uncertainty and contingency of the world in all its plurality. Her friendships were an expression of that engagement. She rarely generalised about friendship – hence the focus on the specificity of particular friendships in the central chapters of this book. But the concept of friendship was – as I have tried to show throughout – central to Arendt's view of the world as plural and yet, within the scope of that plurality, providing spaces for both individual freedom and the power implicit in human interchange. She was flawed like the rest of us – difficult and sometimes contrasuggestible, self-willed and occasionally demanding, a little self-dramatising – but she was

undoubtedly a woman of the world for whom friendship was of supreme and undeniable importance.

To imagine a politics of friendship is to recall that although none of us has a fixed abode, friendships provide some measure of albeit provisional stability and continuity. It is to remind ourselves, also, that through friendship we become more fully ourselves and thereby embrace one another not as an indistinguishable unity but as the one embracing the other. Friendship thereby becomes one of the ways in which we learn to live together and to acquire the dispositions necessary to do so: dispositions that we carry forward into the world. But to imagine a politics of friendship is also to acknowledge the fragility of what Arendt understood by politics: its vulnerability to the contingency of circumstance and the unpredictability of history. If friendship sustains and strengthens the body politic, then its diminution, distortion or manipulation sounds the death toll of a vibrant and healthy politics – which is no doubt one of the reasons why Arendt valued friendship and sought to maintain and sustain her many and varied friendships throughout her life.

But we must beware of over-systematising Arendt's thought. What she said about Auden might equally well be said of her: 'The main thing was to have no illusions and to accept no thoughts – no theoretical systems – that would blind you to reality' (RLC, 298). Her thinking was constantly evolving in response to world events and in conversation with herself and others. We need to read her work against her life, and her life against the other lives that made up her world. She developed no theory of friendship, but provided important and still highly relevant insights into the significance of friendship and into the dire consequences of losing the human bonds that are forged and sustained through friendship.

Above all, she reminds us of what it means to become *thoughtful*: what is taken, what is given, what is shared.