

# explorations



Explorations: A Journal of Language and Literature

## INTERVIEW

### Hannah Arendt's Lessons

*Lyndsey Stonebridge interviewed by Jacek Gutorow*

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On the cover of Lyndsey Stonebridge's 2021 *Writing and Righting. Literature in the Age of Human Rights* we find a symptomatic note: "Historically, literature has been an important co-creator in establishing human rights. Every rights revolution owes something to writers creating new terms for being human. ... The writers we need now ... are the political truth-tellers, the bold callers out of easy empathy and comfortable platitudes. If there is to be a future for humanity, we need to learn from those literary thinkers for whom modern rightlessness is not simply regrettable, but intolerable."

These words apply almost perfectly to the work of Hannah Arendt. Arendt has always been perceived as a philosopher and political writer, someone dealing primarily with collective/political ideas in their historical and social development. Yet she was also a "literary thinker" (to use Stonebridge's term) who never got away from literature and literary preoccupations. One could think here of her style of writing and reasoning: deftly ambiguous, elusive, metaphorical, poetic. One could also refer to Arendt's great and canonical essays on such writers as Franz Kafka, Karen Blixen, Bertolt Brecht or Wystan Hugh Auden. And then there are amazing poems by Arendt herself, collected and published recently (2025) as *What Remains. The Collected Poems of Hannah Arendt* (translated and edited by Samantha Rose Hill with Genese Grill). Finally, Arendt's *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, her *opus magnum* and one of her most popular books, has just been published in the prestigious *Library of America* series. Arendt the literary thinker is a fascinating figure and we can learn a lot from her also in this respect.

Lyndsey Stonebridge's *We Are Free to Change the World. Hannah Arendt's Lessons in Love and Disobedience* (Jonathan Cape 2024) shows us how. It is a *tour de force* of criticism which blends human rights activism, philosophical investigations and interpretative passages. It cuts through disciplines and conventions, and does so in a splendid way, combining social with political and literary thinking. It is also a personal book. As Stonebridge remarks in "A Note on Imagination," a surprising intro and a

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compelling readerly manifesto: “I have tried to think my own thoughts in the place of Hannah Arendt ... there may be moments in what follows when Arendt also thinks her thoughts in my place.” It is this sense of reciprocity and “being-with” (Heidegger's *Mitsein*) which adds an idiosyncratic feel to the views and readings that we find in Stonebridge's book.



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**JACEK GUTOROW:** *We Are Free to Change the World. Hannah Arendt's Lessons in Love and Disobedience* was greeted with enthusiastic reviews and responses. Rowan Williams called it a “tract for our times.” Why read and discuss Arendt now?

**LYNDSEY STONEBRIDGE:** We live in a time dominated by people who Arendt called the “image makers.” She was one of the first to understand how ideological lies worked both in totalitarian societies *and* capitalist consumer-based democracies. Arendt's lifework was based on finding ways to return human experience and to create a politics true to the human condition. She understood very early on that opposition to rightwing populism had to go beyond shouting “liars!” and hoping for the best. Instead she advocated a responsive politics – a politics rooted in the complex realities of plurality and change. The politics that began not with the imperative to grab power, to impose one way of thinking on the world, but with securing spaces for thought, judgement, love, privacy, collective action and, above all, imagination. She was also one of the first people to see clearly that technology, not an evil in itself, could create the conditions for new kinds of un-freedom. In her time, it was tribal-nationalism that attacked the institution of the nation state. In our time, we have tribal-nationalism *and* technological feudalism.

So, there are a lot of features of our moment than Arendt would say had their structural origins in her time. But perhaps more than what she wrote about, Arendt's method is what we need now? She was steadfastly opposed to dogma, group-think, social conformism, sterile academia and techno-bureaucracies, and this shows in her approach: always testing, curious, mobile, and for those reasons sometimes infuriating. She didn't believe in easy answers, so maybe it is her appetite for complexity – her capacity for *not* knowing – that we need now. For thinking. Remember her famous lines: "What I propose, therefore, is nothing more than to think what we are doing."

JG: Do you remember your first encounter with Arendt's thought?

LS: The first book I came across was *The Human Condition* which I read when I was a graduate student in the late 1980s. Arendt wasn't popular in that period. We were reading psychoanalysis, feminism, post-structuralism, none of which particularly interested her, and none of which were particularly interested in her. I'd never read anything like it before in my life. Her words seemed to come from nowhere I knew of in my academic formation. Part poem, part philosophy; her stripped down prose opened up a new world of experience. It was intoxicating.

The second book that was really important for me was *Eichmann in Jerusalem* which I re-read as the Iraq war unfolded. The post-9/11 moment in the West was one of high hysteria, reckless violence, and saw the blatant return of the outrageous political lie into public discourse in both the UK and the US. I loved Arendt's bold repudiation of the weaponisation – and emotionalisation – of justice; her insistence on understanding the extent to which the Holocaust had torn up the moral and legal rule book; and her emphasis on moral responsibility. As a historian, I was also awe-struck by her ability to report on the trial and to synthesize so much historical and legal materials so deftly – she wrote the book in six weeks. You can disagree with her thesis in that book but I challenge anyone to read it and not to be struck by the presence of analysis of the horrific casualisation of violence that marks current affairs today.

JG: *Eichmann in Jerusalem* proved to be Arendt's most disputed and controversial book. In fact, it is still a highly debated text. What do you make of all the wars of words it provoked? Do you think Arendt might have regretted writing it? After all, she lost many close friends and was virtually excluded from her Jewish community.

LS: The thing to understand is that Arendt was one of the first to know that the concentration camps were in fact "corpse factories" (her words). She knew about the death camps in 1943, and if you look at *Origins of Totalitarianism* you can see that she's collecting reports, trying to piece it all together. So, twenty years later, when she published her reports on the 1961 trial, she was writing from a position of a person who had been living with the knowledge of that horror for quite a while. What she hadn't reckoned on was the traumatising effects of the trial on other people (particularly in the US but also elsewhere) who were, so to speak, being asked to grasp the immensity of

Nazi crime for the first time. Remember that generally there was a global silence around the Holocaust that lingered well into the late 1950s. So that was a misjudgement on her part, and it was largely a misjudgement of tone. People couldn't understand her cool irony, although that was, in my opinion, her response to the banality of evil: contempt.

So yes, I think she might have regretted her tone. It was certainly an event that blighted her late life. In her introduction to the new English translation of Arendt's poems, Samantha Rose Hill, points out that she wrote no more poems after the Eichmann affair, and I think that suggests quite a profound grief. I don't think, however, she would have regretted her argument, and nor should she. Thoughtlessness, she argued, as much as intent, is a modern evil. It's such an important argument, not least because Arendt forces us to consider our moral responsibilities under dictatorship – something that our generation are having to learn anew in Europe (and in the US).

JG: The title of your book includes five words that seem to define Arendt's philosophy of life: *love*, *disobedience*, *freedom*, *change*, and *world*. I suppose we could spend hours discussing each of them but let me focus on the corresponding imperatives of disobedience and change. What would you say is their place in Arendt's thinking? And how did she understand them?

LS: In an important article she wrote after the book on Eichmann, Arendt wrote: "Best of all will be those who know only one thing for certain: that whatever else happens, as long as we live we shall have to live together with ourselves." She was talking about our personal responsibility under dictatorships. This is another Arendt text that many of us would benefit from reading now. For Arendt it was never sufficient to claim that you could do nothing. Those who thought for themselves (who were rarely, in her view, either philosophers or politicians) understood the moral implications of obedience not just in abstract terms, but in profoundly human terms: how can I live with myself if I consent to this? If you read *Eichmann in Jerusalem* carefully, you'll find that as much as Eichmann's banality, in fact perhaps more than his radical thoughtlessness, Arendt was really interested in people who said "no, I cannot live with myself," and disobeyed. In other words, she refused the terms of the politics of the bullies and ideologues. "Those who chose the lesser evil, forget very quickly that they chose evil," she said. Her friend the novelist Mary McCarthy really put this well when she said that if a man points a gun at your head and tells you to kill your neighbour, he is not ordering you, he is *tempting* you.

So that's one side of disobedience. The other, and this is the change part, is to think about how moral responsibility connects to the political contract. For Arendt, the very fact that collectively we *consent* to laws, implies the possibility, indeed the necessity, of *dissent*. In other words, civil disobedience is written into the political contract at its origin. That's what she saw in the activism she loved: not the attempt to impose a new ideology but a collective response to conditions of impunity and political violence. And that responsiveness is at the heart of change. For Arendt, each new generation brings with it the possibility of the new – of change. That can be very scary (part of the more reactionary right understands the threat of the new) but it really is our salvation: the fact

of natality, of the new, of change. That, and what Arendt calls thinking. At least, for our times of denialism and destruction, I very much hope so.

JG: I was struck by the opening statement of your book, a brief and somewhat surprising “Note on Imagination.” You refer to Kant’s idea of “enlarged mentality” (or “critical imagination”) and then write: “I have tried to think my own thoughts in the place of Hannah Arendt.” I find this a great beginning, so clearly in the spirit of Arendt, yet at the same time I can imagine many readers asking you: “But what do you mean?”

LS: Arendt was a skilled biographer in her own right – take a look at her collection *Men in Dark Times*. The question that haunts life writing is the same that haunts our moral lives: how can I respect the dignity of my subject? (See Lea Ypi’s wonderful new book on just this, *Indignity*). Kant, and then Arendt, had answer to that: you must train yourself to go visiting the minds, lives, and imaginations of others. And that’s what I ended up doing. In a way it was quite easy as I was so immersed in Arendt’s writing, and her words were constantly in my head. The more difficult challenges came when I didn’t agree with her – for example on the question of race in America, or when I bristled against some of the historical carelessness of the *Eichmann* book. Then I did have a dissonance: my thoughts with and against Arendt’s, but also always, because this is Arendt, in a dialogue.

JG: In 2021 you went to the Athens National Archaeological Museum to “retrace Arendt’s steps” (she had visited the museum in 1955). Your description of the place and of the marble stelae that Arendt so admired is one of my favourite fragments of your book. Have you perhaps visited other places associated with Arendt? Are there any Arendtian places you’d like to see? Isn’t it a pity that she didn’t write much (even in her letters) about her impressions of the Mediterranean area, southern France or America?

LS: Thank you! That was my favourite chapter to write. Something about being in the museum allowed things to click in my imagination – as Arendt, I hope, would have wanted. But the place Arendt loved best was her own mind, I think! That said, you do get much more sense of the importance of her environment in her poems, which are indebted to late romanticism (and Heidegger), so again I’d really recommend looking there.

For myself, the place I most regret not visiting, for many reasons and not all to do with the past, was Königsberg – now Kaliningrad. This is where Arendt grew up, as well as, of course, the birthplace of Kant, and it was taken over by the USSR at the end of the war, as your readers will well know. When I got the contract for my book, one of the first things I did was start planning my journey (by the way, this would also have meant coming to Warsaw which I was also excited about as I’ve never visited, and I thought the train journey to the coast would have been wonderful). I wanted to walk the famous bridges of the city, but also to think about its multi-directional history, about Arendt’s debt to Kant – and to see the pine forests, the wide beaches, and the amber mines. Then Covid happened, and then just as travel restrictions were lifting, Russia invaded Ukraine, and that was it for Kaliningrad. I found that cancelled visit really sad and disappointing,

not least because it confirmed that we're still very much in the history – a history of racism, imperialism, violence – that Arendt spent her life understanding and resisting.



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