

## Reading *Antigone*

### through Hannah Arendt's political philosophy

Peter Euben starts his work on *Greek Tragedy and Political Theory* by quoting Judit Shklar, who, on the occasion of Hannah Arendt's death, said: "Political philosophy is tragic thought".<sup>1</sup>

The sense of the Shklar's statement on the juxtaposition of Greek tragedy and political theory lies in the fact that a political theory, which is interpretation of everyday actions, cannot be just "theoretical". Since the Greek tragedy is an "imitative art", it offers a concrete means of interpretation of the human condition. This suggests that classical studies, literature and political philosophy do not belong to different fields, while they are complementary.

In Arendt, we find this interdisciplinary approach to Politics. The tragedy had a deep influence on Arendt's political philosophy, so that a comparative study between Greek tragedy and her political theory is promising in order to provide a new insight on her political thought.<sup>2</sup>

My intuition is that Arendt's reference Greek tragedy is continuous (not only *in passing*). Besides the explicit quotations of the tragedy, a dialogue with tragic texts seems to shape many passages of her writings, even when she does not cite Greek tragedy directly.<sup>3</sup>

This essay takes as its task the critical comparison between Sophocles' *Antigone* and Arendt's philosophy. While other tragedies (*Oedipus Tyrannos* and *Oedipus at Colonus* by Sophocles, *Persians* and *Agamemnon* by Aeschylus, and *Medea* by Euripides) also substantially affected Arendt's thought, in this paper I specifically focus on the relationship between the *Antigone*'s and the Arendtian view of the public and private space, the human desire for immortality, authority and action.

## **The tragic theatre as metaphor of the public space**

For Arendt the theatre is the metaphor of the public space, where people interact and speak to one another. This view is inspired directly by the political nature of the attic drama, where the polis played itself, debating on the problems of its time.

Several studies demonstrate that the theatre – like the agora, the assembly of the citizens (Ecclesia) and the tribunal (Eliea) – was one of the institutions of the Greek democracy, being founded by the polis to guarantee the process of self acknowledgment of the individuals as members of the community.<sup>4</sup>

by establishing [...] a performance open to all citizens, directed, played and judged by qualified representatives of the various tribes, the city makes itself into a theatre; in a way it becomes an object of representation and plays itself before the public.<sup>5</sup>

It [the tragedy] does not merely reflect that reality, but calls it into question.<sup>6</sup>

In these two brief but precise descriptions of the tragedy, Jean Pierre Vernant points out the close connection between theatre and political life in Athens. I claim that this connection inspired Arendt thought.

The institutional function – along with the artistic one – of the theatre in classical Greece, i.e. the transposition of the political debates of the city on the stage, is considered by Arendt as a precious pre-philosophical means (we agree here with Euben, quoted above) to express the articulations of politics. Some historical and literary notes can support this argument.

Theatre was one of the establishing elements of the political, moral and religious foundation of the polis during the years of Athenian democracy (V- IV century B.C.). Moreover, the tragic poets participated to the political and intellectual education of their audience.<sup>7</sup>

As Kottman articulates:

with the birth of the tragedy the community of spectators begins to find itself in, and in fact to constitute itself through, the work of a shared self-representation.<sup>8</sup>

Longo affirms that the Athenians in the theatre were spectators not only of the drama but also of a series of events (religious sacrifices, athletic competitions and celebrations of the winners) before, during and after the dramatic spectacles; by those rituals the polis intended to enforce the civic identity of the people.<sup>9</sup>

In this respect, the dramatic action and the political situation are similar: both represent the game of the human relationships. In Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannos*, for example, this continuity between reality and fiction is very well showed. Oedipus reconstructs his personal biography thanks to the dialogue with the characters that recall the events of his past, and, step by step, he becomes aware of his identity. When, at the end of the play, he discovers who he is, he comes onto the stage, in front of the audience, revealing the truth: this means that the process of self acknowledgment is considered by the polis a fact of public interest and the aim of tragedy is to represent this process.<sup>10</sup>

Hannah Arendt refers to this trait of the Greek theatre, especially when she deals with the concepts of plurality, identity and visibility. Nobody exists without the presence of the others, she says, merely because they are spectators of the subject's actions.

In the theatre the spectators see the play, they judge it and so they offer a key to interpret that action. The story takes its sense from the judgment of the spectators.

In the same way, the people in everyday life look at the actions of the other human beings. If those actions wouldn't appear, they were as if they never happened. Hence the presence of the others is guaranty of existence for the subject and its actions. By the point of view of the others, the actions of every subject make sense. The subject knows himself, who he is, thanks to the others. The others complete the self-acknowledgment process of the subject.

This is a political fact, since in this common world people talk and act, disclosing their reciprocal roles; the community becomes – in this way – essential, giving significance to the single lives and founding the individuality on a plural relationship.

This revelatory quality of speech and action comes to the fore where people are with others and neither for nor against them – that is, in sheer human togetherness.<sup>11</sup>

The realm of human affairs, strictly speaking, consists of the web of human relationships which exists wherever men live together. The disclosure of the “who” through speech, and the setting of a new beginning through action always fall into an already existing web where their immediate consequences can be felt.<sup>12</sup>

Action, the only activity that goes on directly between men without the intermediary of things or matter, corresponds to the human condition of plurality, to the fact that men, not Man, live on the earth and inhabit the world. [...] this plurality is specifically *the* condition – not only the *condicio sine qua non*, but the *condicio per quam* – of all political life.<sup>13</sup>

Finally, the theatre offers a place where people are visible. Tracing the etymology of the word theatre, we realise it comes from the Greek *theaomai* – to see and to be seen – exemplifying the conceptualisation of Greek political life and the contiguity between the Greek and the Arendtian position.

As Arendt avers:

“for what appears to all, this we call Being” (Aristotle, *Nichomachean Ethics*, 1172b3 ff), and whatever lacks this appearance comes and passes away like a dream.<sup>14</sup>

Besides the theatre portrays the “web”, the space in-between people, which, in Arendt’s view, is both political and narrative: political, because it consists of subjects, who express their humanity by living together, needing each other, as we already said; narrative, because the spectators of the play (i.e. the other human beings in the everyday life) say who the others are by telling their stories.

The power of the narration in Arendt is more important than the ability to act in front of the others: if there was nobody to tell the story of a deed (in poetries, in dramatic plays, in histories), the deed itself would perish and be forgotten.

[action] produces stories with or without intention as naturally as fabrication produces tangible things. These stories may then be recorded in documents and monuments, they may be visible in use objects or art works, they may be told and retold and worked into all kinds of material [...]

They tell us more about their subjects, the “hero” in the centre of each story, than any product of human hands ever tells us about the master who produced it.<sup>15</sup>

There are several studies on the importance of the narration in Arendt’s philosophy and we shall discuss this point later in this article. Here, it is noteworthy that to recount the action entails the rendering of the human beings immortal. In this sense, among the narrative forms that can be used to tell a story, the imitative one, which is peculiar of the tragedy, is the most appropriate to describe the human deeds.

According to the Aristotelian definition of tragedy, which is imitation of action or *mimesis*,<sup>16</sup> Arendt finds that the tragedy reproduces the human condition, because it is able to imitate human actions.

The specific content as well as the general meaning of action and speech may take various form of reification in art works which glorify a deed or an accomplishment and, by transformation and condensation, show some extraordinary event in its full significance. However, the specific revelatory quality of action and speech, the implicit manifestation of the agent and speaker, is so indissolubly tied to the living flux of acting and speaking that it can be represented and “reified” only through a kind of repetition, the imitation or *mimesis*.<sup>17</sup>

Hence, we can affirm with Arendt that:

The theatre was the political art par excellence; only there is the political sphere of human life transposed into art. By the same token, it is the only art whose sole subject is man in his relationship to others.<sup>18</sup>

## The conflict between Public and Private: Arendt and Sophocles

To undertake a rigorous analysis of Arendt's use of Sophocles, we consider specifically – besides Arendt's published works – one text found in her personal library, Sophoclis, *Fabulae*, Oxonii, e Typographeo clarendoniano, 1924.<sup>19</sup>

The book is a collection of Sophocles' seven surviving tragedies.<sup>20</sup>

Sophocles, and in particular his *Antigone*, affected Arendt more than most. Arendt kept several editions of *Antigone* in her library and she quotes *Antigone* more than any other Greek tragedy. Moreover, the topics covered by Sophocles closely mirrored the philosophy Arendt promotes: Authority, Democracy and Freedom are recurrent themes in both Arendt and Sophocles, especially in the Sophocles of *Antigone*.

In this respect, Arendt is neither the first nor the only author to refer to the Greek drama to elaborate a political theory. As P. Euben makes clear, sometimes Greeks are like an “aid to clarify the character and contours of modern theory and society”.<sup>21</sup> Hence there are several studies where the mythical themes depicted in the most famous tragedies are used to introduce, develop or explain topics as justice (e.g. Euben, *Justice and Oresteia*<sup>22</sup>), political rationalism,<sup>23</sup> free speech as political freedom,<sup>24</sup> the conflict between private and public law.<sup>25</sup> In particular, *Antigone* has been largely used in political theory. Antigone has usually been associated with the image of the “civil disobedient” and the lonely heroine who fights against the absolute power; she has represented the principle of the natural law, which belongs to human beings simply for the fact that they *are*.<sup>26</sup>

She has been considered, moreover, the voice of the female claim against the rules of the patriarchal law,<sup>27</sup> or, like in a recent work of Bonnie Honig, the last claimant of “Homeric/elite objections to the classical city's democracy” about the question of burial.<sup>28</sup>

Arendt considered the dialectics of Sophocles' *Antigone* well suited for explaining the contradictions of the modern age and of the human condition in the modern age. In the

Sophoclean world, human beings realize they no longer possess a standard code of values which can regulate their choices. The divine laws of piety give Antigone the right to bury her brother; the polis' law gives Creon the right to condemn Antigone. Both rights are legitimate. This conflict proves that the public dimension of the human beings cannot remain totally separated from the private one.

Arendt dedicates an entire section of her *Human Condition* (II. *The public and the private realm*, *Human Condition*, cit., pp. 22-78) to the discussion of how the modern age has lost this condition of agreement-and-distinction between the public and private worlds. This happened – Arendt contends – because people had not been able to separate, since the end of the polis era, what belongs to the *oikos* and what, on the opposite, must be displayed in public.

The disappearance of the gulf that ancients had to cross daily to transcend the narrow realm of the household and “rise” onto the realm of politics is an essentially modern phenomenon.<sup>29</sup>

The mass society reigns, having displaced the polis, and men's doings – labouring and working – dominate over men's political acts. Yet political acts remain an important factor of the human condition. Here, the problem is that the boundaries of the public and private spheres vanish, which results in the “loneliness” of men in totalitarian regimes, and which, as Peg Birmingham claims, constitutes the reason why human beings may feel as superfluous, abandoned and banned from the public world.<sup>30</sup>

Sophocles deals with this topic in his *Antigone*, asking how a principle of private behaviour (the love of a sister who desires funeral honours for her brother's body) can be integrated in the public law.

At a first glance, following Arendt's theory, Creon should not give importance to Antigone's claim, because she is trying to confuse private and public, *idion* and *koinon*; her behaviour is

not political, since it regards blood ties, so it has to remain within the boundaries of the household.

This is the criticism to Arendt by Judith Butler in her book *Antigone's claim. Kinship between life and death*,<sup>31</sup> she disapproves the Arendt's theory, that all is human is to be public. Antigone's attention to the family, which leads her to oppose uncle's edict, is not a public matter, while it is human. The problem is with the positive law, because it does not account for a fundamental part of the human nature. Thus, in this case, Philippe Nonet, quoted above, would be right, in raising the question about natural and non-natural law. If natural law belongs to men *qua* men, Antigone's claim is legitimate and Creon is maintaining a non-natural principle, which imposes upon the dead to remain with living people, and living people to stay with the dead. And Arendt, in such an instance, would be wrong, because the question is not about the conflict between private and public law, but between natural and positive law, where the positive law is not allowed to contrast with the principles of the natural one, irrespective of whether it is private or public.

I believe that this is not Arendt's point: she describes several times Creon as a tyrant, as a man who governs without an acknowledged power, by using sheer violence.

She posits that Creon is responsible for the confusion between private and public law, while Antigone is not. Creon, indeed, governs the polis like a *pater familias ante litteram*. He considers the citizens like slaves or children incapable of making their own choices. He talks with violence, he behaves as a *basileus* (word used by Arendt in her *marginalia* to comment the character), i.e. as a political figure preceding the advent of democracy, where Arendt's conceptualization of the public sphere lies. We do have a conflict between private and public law, but this is not rooted in Antigone's claim, but rather in Creon's.



This fact clearly appears in the dialogue between Creon and his son Haemon, that Arendt quotes in a passage of the essay *What is authority*, where she points out the importance of having agreed actions in politics.

To the polis, absolute rule was known as tyranny, and the chief characteristics of the tyrant were that he ruled by sheer violence, had to be protected from the people by a bodyguard, and insisted that his subjects mind their own business and leave to him the care of the public realm. The last characteristic, in Greek public opinion, signified that he destroyed the public realm of the polis altogether – a polis belonging to one man is no polis [here Arendt reports on a footnote the Greek transcription of the verse 737 of *Antigone*]– and thereby deprived the citizens of that political faculty which they felt was the very essence of freedom.<sup>32</sup>

And here there are Sophocles' verses:

Αι. πόλις γὰρ οὐκ ἔσθ' ἥτις ἀνδρὸς ἐσθ' ἐνός.

Κρ. οὐ τοῦ κρατοῦντος ἡ πόλις νομίζεται.

Αι. Καλῶς ἐρήμης γ' ἂν σὺ γῆς ἄρχοις μόνος.<sup>33</sup>

Hae: That is no city, which belongs to one man.

Cr: Is not the city held to be the ruler's?

Hae: Thou wouldst make a good monarch of a desert.<sup>34</sup>

In correspondence with these verses Arendt writes, in the edition of *Antigone* found in her library: “Zeichen der Tyrannis”, which means the marks, or the features, of tyranny.

This argument leads us directly to the Arendtian concept of authority.

### **Power's nature and authority**

Arendt took the Greek polis as an historical ideal-type for her concept of public space: the polis was a political organization removing the distinction between ruler and ruled; the polis comprised a community of free citizens sharing the space in which they could act and speak, so that every individual concurrently exemplified his constitutional plurality.

The authoritarian relation between the one who commands and the one who obeys rests neither in common reason nor on the power of the one who commands; what they have in common is the hierarchy itself, whose rightness and legitimacy both recognize and where both have their predetermined stable place.<sup>35</sup>

In this way the polis was not only a physical space, but already a political situation.

The instrument of power in Greece was not to subdue people through violence (that Greeks used in governing foreign affairs), neither through persuasion, used in domestic affairs.<sup>36</sup>

Authority in the polis was not the principle to legitimate the duties of citizens, but rather represented the acknowledgment of the reciprocal roles that people had inside the polis itself.

The consequence of this free state of acknowledgement was the public dialogue in the agora, which inspired Arendt and that we find in the tragic *agon*.

Connections between people's speeches in the polis and the tragedy lie both in their structure and their contents. Not only the speeches of the people in the public realm are similar (in terms of their structure) to the *logoi* in the tragedy; but the plots of the tragedies also provide fertile material for their arguments.

In an interesting article, Josiah Ober and Barry Strauss<sup>37</sup> have drawn a comparison between the language used by the political rhetoric in the Athenian democracy and the contemporary drama, pointing out how both were just different forms of the public speech.

Like legal trials and Assembly speeches, Athenian theatrical performances and dramatic texts were closely bound up in the mediation of conflicting social values.<sup>38</sup>

The authors repeatedly argue that the orators, like the dramatists, had to hold the attention of the audience by performing their own show. And, on the other side, the poets used to compose their *logoi* like the speeches of the orators. A clear example is offered by Creon of Sophocles' *Antigone*, in particular his *agon* with Teiresias.<sup>39</sup>

Plays and orators' speeches are similar also in their structure:

The structural tactics of metaphors, analogies, images and *topoi* that were devised by elite authors, displayed in public speech, and judged by mass audiences, were integrated into a comprehensive, flexible, and functionally effective socio-political strategy.<sup>40</sup>

These considerations are important to our discussion because Arendt inherits this political sense of the language from the political foundation of the tragic art, whence she derived her concept of political power.

Jürgen Habermas, interpreting Arendt's concept of power, describes it as "communicative". There is a sort of transcendental community of speaking subjects (the word "transcendental" in Arendt is very problematic, since it refers to Arendt's interpretation of Kant), which discusses certain principles of political behaviour and by whose decisions the power is legitimated.<sup>41</sup>

Thus the importance of the speech in politics, belonging to Arendt's philosophy and pointed out by Habermas, is rooted in the "much talked reality of the polis", as Canfora affirms;<sup>42</sup> the speech for Arendt has a dominant role in politics, because the web of relationships, which constitutes the human condition, enacts the web itself in this narrative net, where people tell about the others by telling their stories.

Some significant comments on this topic, found as marginalia in Arendt's *Antigone*, seem to be particularly interesting. In the *argumentum* of the tragedy Arendt underlined "tes poleos" (genitive, "of the polis") and wrote "Creons" beside it.

Ἀντιγόνη παρὰ τὴν πρόσταξιν τῆς πόλεως θάψασα τὸν Πολυνείκην ..<sup>43</sup>

This implies that she is identifying the polis with the law, and the law with Creon's order not to bury the body of Polynices.

It is worth recalling that Creon was king because the dynasty of Oedipus became extinct after the death of Oedipus' two sons. Only Oedipus' daughters survived. However, women could

not govern in ancient Greece, and Creon was the closest relative, as he was the brother of Clytemnestra, Oedipus' mother-wife. In that moment, Creon identified himself with the polis and he established that Polynices, who waged war against Thebes to obtain the control of the polis, had to be considered a public enemy. Polynices could have had a place inside the polis neither while alive nor dead, and he had been sentenced to remain unburied, to be eaten by wild animals.

Antigone, against the edict of her uncle, buried her brother's corpse. She thought that to disobey human law would be better than to disobey divine law. Although Polynices was considered an enemy of the city, he was not only her brother, but a man. Human pity, Justice and the laws of the Gods establish that a man must be buried, whoever he is and regardless of his crimes.

In Creon's opinion, on the other hand, Antigone's choice to disobey him marks a rebellion against the law, which he represents. Thus, like her brother, Antigone became an enemy of the *polis*.

Considering why Arendt wrote "Creon" beside "tes poleos", we can infer that she intended to be ironic about the contradiction between the polis and Creon. As I mentioned, in the context of the *Antigone*, Creon is the polis. Nevertheless, it remains true that his law – the law of one ruler – cannot be the law of a democratic polis. The first reason for this, is that Creon has established this order without consultation with the people (and we already said how to be acknowledged via public speeches is important for the power). The second reason is that, according to Greek religious precepts, human law cannot contradict holy law. Moreover, the law must be universal, in a Kantian sense, i.e. it must always apply to everyone. What would happen, if every king of every state would establish who can be buried and who cannot? This demands a further ethical question: who claims the rights of the dead?

Because the polis is a plurality, a ruler cannot judge without considering the viewpoints of the ruled. Otherwise, the risk is to transform the community into a desert. Recalling Sophocles' verses quoted above, we find in Arendt one more passage where such are mentioned again. It is in *Human Condition*, where Arendt is discussing power's nature and the importance of a shared space in which people can act together. Arendt writes:

While strength is the natural quality of an individual seen in isolation, power springs up between men when they act together and vanishes the moment they disperse [...]

Popular revolt against materially strong rulers, on the other hand, may engender an almost irresistible power even if it foregoes the use of violence in the face of materially vastly superior forces. To call this "passive resistance" is certainly an ironic idea; it is one of the most active and efficient ways of action ever devised, because it cannot be countered by fighting, where there may be defeat or victory, but only by mass slaughter in which even the victor is defeated, cheated of his prize, since **nobody can rule over dead men**.<sup>44</sup>

(Note that here "nobody can rule over dead men" is clearly Sophocles' *Antigone* v. 739 – see page 8 of this article – but it is not quoted by Arendt. She quoted it only in *What is authority?* as reported in this paper on page 8).

A preliminary remark on understanding the concept of authority is about the idea of power itself: power for Arendt is *dynamis*, in the aristotelic sense of energy (*energheia*), which discloses its effects only if it finds the conditions to be enacted. The only way that people have to wield their power is to live together.<sup>45</sup>

A more precise conceptualization of power, violence and authority is emphasized by Arendt in her essay *On Violence*, where she points out the differences between those concepts, and demystifies the incorrect use of such terms.

*Power* 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 [...]

*Strength* unequivocally designates something in the singular, an individual entity [...]

*Force*, which we often use in daily speech as a synonym for violence, especially if violence serves as a means of coercion, should be reserved, in terminological language, for the “forces of nature” or the “force of circumstances”, that is, to indicate the Energy released by physical or social movements.

*Authority*, relating to the most elusive of these phenomena and therefore, as a term, most frequently abused [...] is unquestioning recognition by those who are asked to obey; neither coercion nor persuasion is needed. [...] the greatest enemy of authority, therefore, is contempt, and the surest way to under mine it is laughter.

*Violence*, finally, as I have said, is distinguished by its instrumental character.<sup>46</sup>

Analyzing her text of the tragedy, we find another interesting aspect of the law in the polis: in line 8 Arendt underlines the word “strategòs” and annotates “Creon als basileus” (a combination of German and Greek).

καὶ νῦν τί τοῦτ' αἶ φασι πανδήμῳ πόλει  
κήρυγμα θεῖναι τὸν **στρατηγὸν** ἀρτίως;<sup>47</sup>

And now what new edict is this of which they tell, that our **Captain** hath just published to all Thebes?<sup>48</sup>

Here it is useful to recall an argument discussed in the precedent paragraph. In Ancient Greece the “basileus”, that is, the king, had both political and military power (the English translation in fact is “Captain”). This also means that the *basileus* as a political figure precedes the advent of democracy in Greece. Calling Creon *basileus* means to judge him as antidemocratic. The nature of the polis requires instead that citizens participate to the politics; that the power of the ruler is limited by the public assembly, and that political roles are divided across the proper magistrates. In this way, Creon seems more like a tyrant than a king and, from what we can learn from the Arendt’s point of view, Creon represents power

founded on violence, in contraposition to the democratic nature of the power itself, which should be an acknowledged authority.

To refer to Creon as *basileus* also implies that the root of the power represented by Creon can be considered an undeveloped form of constitution, which, rather than being the democracy of the polis, represents the tribal, domestic power of the *oikos*. *Oikos* (that is at the base of the word “economy”) in its primitive sense, means household organization, in which people think mostly about the problems of surviving. Here we can find the foundation of the distinction between the private and public realms. Before the rise of the democracy – where people are citizens before being individuals – the laws used to establish a different kind of organization of power: there was a private world, inside the household, separated from the common, where nothing political held. In the *oikos* the only organization of roles was the division between men, women and slaves, and the objectives were procreation and subsistence. At the opposite extreme, in the public space, the attitudes of the people were different, because concerns in public life involved the organization of the public itself. Further, to put private behaviour in the public realm would have implied that politics had regressed to the governance of the household.

Creon thus moves back to a primitive and private form of power. He denies the plural dimension of the citizens. This phenomenon occurs both in tyrannies, during the ancient age, and in totalitarian regimes, during the modern age.

Arendt discusses this in *Human Condition*:

[The difference between the private and the public] has become even more confusing in modern usage and modern understanding of society. The distinction between a private and a public sphere of life corresponds to the household and the political realms, which have existed as distinct, separate entities at least since the rise of the ancient city-state.<sup>49</sup>

We therefore find it difficult to realize that according to ancient thought on these matters, the very term “political economy” would have been a contradiction in terms: whatever was “economic”, related to the life of the individual and the survival of the species, was a non-political, household affair by definition.<sup>50</sup>

The distinctive trait of the household sphere was that in it men lived together because they were driven by their wants and needs. The driving force was life itself which, for its individual maintenance and its survival as the life of the species needs the company of others. [...] The realm of the polis, on the contrary, was the sphere of freedom, and if there was a relationship between these two spheres, it was a matter of course that the mastering of the necessities of life in the household was the condition for freedom of the polis.<sup>51</sup>

Even more interesting is what Arendt writes in a footnote on page 32: she is discussing the difference between the public space – founded on equality – and private realm – where people experience strict inequalities –. When an authoritarian power deprives the citizens of their public sphere, the governor acts as the head of the household. Here are Arendt’s words:

According to Coulanges, all Greek and Latin words which express some rulership over others, such as *rex*, *pater*, *anax*, *basileus*, refer originally to household relationships and were names the slaves gave to their master.<sup>52</sup>

The word *basileus* comes again in *What is authority?*, in a passage which discusses the same topic:

[In Greece] the head of the household ruled as a “despot”, in uncontested mastery over the members of his family and the slaves of the household. The despot, unlike the king, the *basileus*, who had been the leader of the household heads and as such *primus inter pares*, was by definition vested with the power to coerce. Yet it was precisely this characteristic that made the despot unfit for political purposes; his power to coerce was incompatible not only with the freedom of others, but with his own freedom as well.<sup>53</sup>



The subject deprived of his plural condition, i.e. the subject who lives alone, is an “idiot” by definition, since, in the etymological sense of the word, the idiot is the lonely man, outside of the common world, a point which Arendt reiterates, again, in *Human condition*.<sup>54</sup> Unfortunately, this phenomenon, i.e. idiocy, plagued political power in ancient Greece, and also plagues the use and abuse of political power in the modern world.

In the essay *What is authority* we find that Creon echoes this kind of degeneration of power. Arendt claims that the foundation of authority rests in tradition, and, without this condition of self-acknowledged authority, the polis suffers and the society withers. Moreover, according to Plato, tradition is the power of rationality, and, after that, the power of myth and religion, for those, the majority, who cannot be persuaded by the evidence of the truth.

Belief is necessary for those who lack the eyes for what is at the same time self-evident, invisible and beyond argument. Platonically speaking, the few cannot persuade the multitude of truth because truth cannot be the object of persuasion, and persuasion is the only way to deal with the multitude. But the multitude carried away by the irresponsible tells of poets and storytellers can be persuaded to believe almost anything; the appropriate tales which carry the truth of the few to the multitude are tales about rewards and punishments after death; persuading the citizens of the existence of hell will make them behave as though they knew the truth.<sup>55</sup>

In this aristocratic mode of thinking, the few, the philosophers, should govern, because they do not need to be persuaded: they can see the truth and therefore understand the order that derives from it. But the multitude of men, who cannot judge according to Reason, requires persuasion deriving from a kind of courtship of their minds. Plato’s use of myth represents such attempt of persuasion, and in almost every religion we can observe stories about reward or punishment in the afterlife that act to persuade. In Arendt’s opinion the platonic solution is not either the philosophical foundation for the authority. This is the reason why she claims that the ancient Greeks did not have a theory of authority, since they had experience of it in

the concrete political life. On the opposite, they started to philosophize about authority when their democracy decayed.

This form of authority, where people acknowledge their roles in the public sphere, without needing a constitution of rules to uphold the hierarchy, is a form of authority that humanity will never have again. The Greeks experienced such authority for a short period, and they always tried to avoid tyranny. But the first step can allow a system to degenerate, as Creon's example demonstrates.

Creon's example (like several other characters of the tragedies) demonstrates that Greeks did not have a theory of authority but they had indeed the tragedy to think over it. This kind of pre-philosophical reflection has been considered by some scholars to constitute the background for the birth of the so called "tragic thought".<sup>56</sup> We shall return to this point during the conclusion of this essay.

The tyrant, believing that his will represents the will of the people, precludes public outcry in making his own decisions, and he thus substitutes his will for the will of the populace. The result is a denial of both the public sphere and of the (implicit) hierarchy. The loss of the public sphere implies then the decay of democracy. The loss of hierarchy demonstrates the impossibility of a different kind of organization of power, which Arendt brands the authoritarian state. This inchoate authority may be the most dangerous form of authority because it justifies absolute power, such as, for example, Creon in Thebes or, in the modern age, the absolute power of dictators in totalitarian regimes.

Arendt's theory of authority demonstrates that the loss of hierarchy corresponds to the loss of political freedom.<sup>57</sup> Structurally, in the political regimes, this means a variation of the power schema. She writes:

These structural differences become apparent the moment we leave the over-all theories behind and concentrate our attention on the apparatus of rule, the technical forms of administration, and the organization of the body politic. For brevity's sake, it may be

permitted to sum up the technical-structural differences between authoritarian, tyrannical and totalitarian government in the image of three different representative models.<sup>58</sup>

These models are pyramid for the authoritarian government, again pyramid but “as though all intervening layers between top and bottom were destroyed” (p. 99) for the tyranny, and the onion for the totalitarian state.<sup>59</sup> The significance of these images is that they represent the “evolution” or devolution of power from democracy to the totalitarian regime means a progressive disappearance of freedom, until the “total elimination of spontaneity itself”.<sup>60</sup>

Thus Creon’s edict sounds, from Arendt’s point of view, as going into the direction just described, like a sentence produced in a political context where the public speech is impossible. In this sense, another annotation that Arendt made in the text of Sophocles is noteworthy. In verse 44, in the dialogue between Antigone and Ismene, Ismene tries to convince her sister that to bury Polynices would be dangerous and illogical, because his burial is forbidden by the city.

ἦ γὰρ νοεῖς θάπτειν σφ', ἀπόρρητον πόλει; <sup>61</sup>

Thou wouldst bury him, when 'tis forbidden to Thebes?<sup>62</sup>

Ismene uses the phrase “aporreton polei”, which Arendt underlines. Arendt’s attention to it is – we believe – motivated by the fact that the verb *aporrein* entails both refusing something and refusing to discuss it. The impossibility of political speech in the polis ruled by Creon put the citizens (in this case represented by Ismene) in a condition of total submission to Creon and a condition of alienation from common sense, so that citizens believe that they no longer have the right to say something or to contradict the decisions of the king.

The theme reappears in verses 505-509. Here Antigone says to Creon that the citizens would oppose his rules, if they were given the opportunity to speak. But the terror, which his behaviour strikes into them, forces them to hold their tongues.

Αν. Λέγοιτ' ἄν, εἰ μὴ γλῶσσαν ἐγκλήῃσι φόβος.

Κρ. σὺ τοῦτο μούνη τῶνδε Καδμείων ὄρας.

Αν. ὀρώσι χροῦτοι· σοὶ δ' ὑπίλλουσι στομα.<sup>63</sup>

An: all here would own that they thought it well, were not their lips sealed by fear. But royalty, blest in so much besides, hat the power to do and say what it will.

Cr: Thou differest from all these Thebans in that view

An: These also share it; but they curb their tongues for thee.<sup>64</sup>

Arendt underlines these verses and writes in correspondence of “*upillein stoma*” (v. 509) “to check one’s tongue”. This is the English translation of the Greek, but it is also what Arendt means when she talks about the feeling of the citizens deprived of their public lives. We know that speech, together with action, forms one of the most important concepts of the *Vita Activa*.

As Arendt writes:

A life without speech and without action [...] is literally dead to the world; it has ceased to be a human life because it is no longer lived among men.<sup>65</sup>

Action and speech are so closely related because the primordial and specifically human act must at the same time contain the answer to the question asked of every newcomer: “Who are you?”<sup>66</sup>

In acting and speaking, men show who they are, reveal actively their unique personal identities and thus make their appearance in the human world.<sup>67</sup>

So, if speech reveals the human identity, the individual deprived of the possibility to speak is also deprived of his or her faculty of judgment, i.e. humanity. In the case of Creon, who checks the tongue of the citizens, the tyrant destroys the human dimension of the politics in the city he governs. Later, Haemon says to his father (v. 737), as already quoted (by us and by Arendt): you cannot rule on a desert. What kind of power can a tyrant have, if he denies the community and transforms the citizens into dead men?

We can argue, therefore, that citizens can be deprived of their faculty of judgment in two respects: first, the loss of the ability to participate in the debate for what is good for the community, and second, their passive acceptance of rules that facilitates the loss of this

ability. The citizens become part of an indifferent mass. Arendt analyzes the loss of the autonomous judgment by people who live in a regime of political submission in her book *The origin of the totalitarianism* and again in her report on Eichmann's trial. We will not discuss this here, but we can infer now that totalitarianism is the logical and practical consequence of a crisis of authority and power.

### **The polis and the struggle for immortality**

Another topic, which is contemporaneously both Sophoclean and Arendtian, is the human being's fight against mortality, aiming to leaving a sign of human life in the world. The tragic sense of the human condition rests, in fact, upon the awareness of men that they are limited and conditioned by both a start and an end point, which is the parabola of the human existence.

Men are "the mortals", the only mortal things in existence, because unlike animals they do not exist only as members of a species whose immortal life is guaranteed through procreation. The mortality of men lies in the fact that individual life, with a recognizable life-story from birth to death, rises out of biological life. This individual life is distinguished from all other things by the rectilinear course of its movement, which, so to speak, cuts through the circular movement of biological life. This is mortality: to move along a rectilinear line in a universe where everything, if it moves at all, moves in a cyclical order.<sup>68</sup>

In this passage we find an important key to interpret the human condition, even if at a first glance it could seem that Arendt provides a pessimistic analysis of it. Men are mortals but their "linear" lives have much more power than the circular existences of the other living beings, because they own the ability to create something new and to initiate something unpredictable.

Men are not only mortal, since they were also born. Natality, not sheer mortality, is the main feature of the human condition and it is the redemption for men's limited existence. It follows

that action, with its ability to renew the world by creating in it something original, takes its power directly from natality. This means that human beings can reproduce the gesture of renewal every time they act, thanks to the fact that they were born.

All three activities [labor, work, action] and their corresponding conditions are intimately connected with the most general condition of human existence: birth and death, natality and mortality. Labor assures not only individual survival, but the life of the species. Work and its product, the human artefact, bestow a measure of permanence and durability upon the futility of moral life and the fleeting character of human time. Action, in so far as it engages in founding and preserving political bodies, creates the condition for remembrance, that is, for history [...]

action has the closest connection with the human condition of natality; the new beginning inherent in birth can make itself felt in the world only because the newcomer possesses the capacity of beginning something anew, that is, of acting. In this sense of initiative, an element of action, and therefore of natality, is inherent in all human activities.<sup>69</sup>

Hence, to leave a signal of their presence in the world means, for human beings, eventually to create political institutions and stories.

As noted at the beginning of the paragraph, this is a tragic topic. The awareness of human beings to live an ephemeral existence is tragic and the Greek thought (literature, poetry, theatre and philosophy) is full of considerations on this theme.

Sophocles talks about this concept in the famous second chorus of *Antigone*. Sophocles calls man *deinòs*, which means something great and terrible because it is sublime, and simultaneously awful because of its power. *Deinòs* is the human feature to dare to do everything, even at the cost of violating nature. Is it *hybris* or is it only desperation and wish to live forever?

Antigone, vv. 332-341:

Πολλὰ τὰ δεινὰ κοῦδὲν ἄν-  
θρώπου δεινότερον πέλει·

Τοῦτο καὶ πολιοῦ πέραν  
πόντου χειμερίῳ νότῳ  
χωρεῖ, περιβρυχίοισιν  
περῶν ὑπ' οἴδμασιν, θεῶν  
τε τὰν ὑπερτάταν, Γᾶν  
ἄφθιτον, ἀκαμάταν ἀποτρύεται,  
ἰλλομένων ἀρότρων ἔτος εἰς ἔτος  
ἰππεῖῳ γένει πολεύων.<sup>70</sup>

Wonders are many, and none is more wonderful than man;  
the power that crosses the white sea, driven by the stormy south-wind,  
making a path under surges that threaten to engulf him;  
and Earth, the eldest of the gods, the immortal, the unwearied, doth he wear,  
turning the soil with the offspring of horses,  
as the ploughs go to and fro from year to year.<sup>71</sup>

The echo of this chorus is evident in Arendt when she celebrates the human activities (work, labour, action) and the effort of men to create great works, which can outlive their creators, also imposing changes upon Nature.

The task and the potential greatness of mortals lies in their ability to produce things – works and deeds and words – which would deserve to be and, at least to a degree, are at home in everlastingness, so that through them mortals could find their place in a cosmos where everything is immortal except themselves. By their capacity for the immortal deed, by their ability to leave non perishable traces behind, men, their individual mortality notwithstanding, attain an immortality of their own and prove themselves to be of a “divine” nature.<sup>72</sup>

The chorus is directly quoted by Arendt in *The concept of History*, where again she talks about mortality (with almost the same words used in *Human Condition* quoted upon, page 17 of this paper):

This is mortality: to move along a rectilinear line in a universe where everything, if it moves at all, moves in a cyclical order. Whenever men pursue their purposes, **tilling the effortless earth, forcing the free-flowing wind into their sails, crossing the ever-rolling waves**, they cut across a movement which is purposeless and turning within itself. When Sophocles (in the famous chorus of *Antigone*) says that there is nothing more awe-inspiring than man, he goes on to exemplify this by evoking purposeful human activities which do violence to nature because they disturb what, in the absence of mortals, would be the eternal quiet of being-forever that rests or swings within itself.<sup>73</sup>

It is repeated on a further occasion, again in *Human Condition*, although in this case the quotation is attributed to Pericles (Thucydides); the words are the same used by Arendt quoting Sophocles in *The Concept of History* in the discussion of the same topic (immortality): this is the reason why we suppose that Arendt's dialogue with this tragedy is so intimate to be sometimes even unconscious. Here is the quotation from *Vita Activa*:

The polis – if we trust the famous words of Pericles in the Funeral Oration – gives a guaranty that **those who forced every sea and land** to become the scene of their daring will not remain without witness and will need neither Homer nor anyone else who knows how to turn words to praise them.<sup>74</sup>

This theme introduces a consideration on the importance of history and memory, which are the means to escape mortality, and the key to understand the relevance of narration in Arendt's philosophy.

Briefly, limiting our analysis to the main theme of this paper, it is important to consider that for Arendt the tragedy is the political art which allows the human condition to be transposed in narration, as we mentioned in the opening section of this paper. Tragedy is a mimetic representation of the human condition, and, amongst the other ways to tell a story, it is



certainly the more appropriate one to express human actions.<sup>75</sup> But why is narration so important?

To tell a story of a deed means to let it have a sense. If action, on the one hand, is always free and unpredictable, on the other hand the actor may become aware of the meaning of his actions – that means, he may know *who* he is – only by seeing or listening to the narration of those deeds. The narrative voice in fact sees the things at their conclusion and only for the listener the outcome is clear. The action process needs the narration to have a definitive significance.

Moreover, by acting, people insert themselves in a web of relationships, the world inhabited by their fellow human beings, which, with their stories, constitute the space where the subject appears. This circle of interaction between actors and storytellers corresponds to the human *worldly* condition of appearing and being perceived.

That every individual life between birth and death can eventually be told as a story with beginning and end is the prepolitical and prehistorical condition of history, the great story without beginning and end. But the reason why each human life tells its story and why history ultimately becomes the storybook of mankind, with many actors and speakers and yet without any tangible authors, is that both are the outcome of action.<sup>76</sup>

Thus the narration is much more important than the action itself. Scholarly literature on this theme, as I have said above, is huge. Prestigious interpreters of Arendt's philosophy have already pointed out the importance of this topic<sup>77</sup> and I am not going to discuss it here; it is indeed a starting point for further research. Nevertheless, I will try to answer this question: is there a substantial difference between the tragedy and the other various forms of narration, or drama is simply one of these forms? And, if tragedy is something different and “more” than the narration, how does the drama found the Arendtian theory of narration?

On the one hand, Arendt seems to consider the theatre better suited than any other form of art to express human action:

The specific revelatory quality of action and speech, the implicit manifestation of the agent and speaker, is so indissolubly tied to the living flux of acting and speaking that it can be represented and “reified” only through a kind of repetition, the imitation or *mimesis*, which according to Aristotle prevails in all arte but is actually appropriate only to the *drama*...<sup>78</sup>

But, on the other hand, a few pages later, Arendt also affirms:

Action reveals itself fully only to the storyteller, that is to the backward glance of the historian, who indeed always knows better what it was all about than the participants.<sup>79</sup>

In this second assertion, the supremacy of the mimetic art on the narration does not seem to be maintained anymore. At least it seems ambiguous whether story and drama are two different grades of the same narrative or different at all.

My intuition is that there is a difference between narration and drama, and that such difference lies in the difference between both acts of seeing and listening. Theatre and drama are bound up with their visibility. In the dramatic action people not only tell their stories but also perform them. In this way they respond to the human necessity to appear, i.e. to exist. The peculiar feature of the drama, which makes it representative of the human condition, is indeed the presence of the spectators. The narrative voice, at the opposite end of the spectrum, can evocate images which however remain out of the space of appearance. The demonstration of this claim is provided in the first part of *The Life of the Mind. Thinking*, where Arendt explains very clearly that what is real is what appears, and where, using the metaphor of the theatre, she talks about the importance of the spectators.

In this world which we enter, appearing from a nowhere, and from which we disappear into a nowhere, *Being and Appearing coincide*.<sup>80</sup>

Hence the dramatization is to be considered the evolution of the human way to tell a story, with a peculiar capacity to imitate what has been being related. This evolution derives from the increasing attention paid to the visibility.

History, since the Greek age – starting from Herodotus –, became a scientific discipline when the *histor* (historian) wanted to verify what he had to write (i.e. to see with his own eyes).

*Histor* is a word whose root comes from *idein*, which, as *theaomai*, means “to see”. Thus theatre and story belong to the same family, since they both narrate something which has been seen. The difference lies in the function of the spectators: in the theatre they see, while in the other narrations, they only listen. But the human existence, which is appearing and disappearing (*inter homines esse* and *inter hominess esse desinere*,<sup>81</sup> to live and to die) is well expressed only by drama, where the actors can be seen by the spectators:

their [of the spectators] place is in the world and their “nobility” is only that they do not participate in what is going on but look on it as a mere spectacle. From the Greek word for spectators, *theatai*, the later philosophical term “theory” was derived, and the word “theoretical” until a few hundred years ago meant “contemplating”, looking upon something from the outside, from a position implying a view that is hidden from those who take part in the spectacle and actualize it. [...] as a spectator you may understand the “truth” of what the spectacle is about.<sup>82</sup>

Hence we demonstrated that there is a strong resemblance between the theatre and the wider world, between people and actors, between human condition and drama. We shall now conclude with some considerations on action: this concept will result now clearly close to the attic tragedy.

### **Action: from the stage to the public realm**

Arendt depicts very precisely what action means, dedicating the central chapter of *Human Condition* to this theme.<sup>83</sup> Action for the human beings is the sign of their presence in the world; it is boundless and unpredictable, because it is free. By acting, men renew the world again and again and every time they reproduce the gesture of natality. Action is also the way to make one’s self visible to others and to take part in the common world.

Action is finally bound up with the narration, because, as we have said, storytelling fixes in memory what happened in the past, and it so gives a sense to the action. Coming back to what we were arguing in the first paragraph, we can know –Arendt says – “*who* one is” through his story, while “*what* one is” is already clear without the presence of a spectator. “*What* men are” is the system of qualities that men share with others. But to understand “*who* men are” in their uniqueness requires the presence of others, and it requires that we see men from outside so as to tell stories about them once they conclude their personal histories.<sup>84</sup> The actor cannot be the narrator of the part that he plays.

[subject: stories] they tell us more about their subjects, the “hero” in the centre of each story, than any product of human hands ever tells us about the master who produced it, and yet they are not products, properly speaking. Although everybody started his life by inserting himself into the human world through action and speech, nobody is the author or producer of his story.<sup>85</sup>

In the same paragraph, a few pages after, we find the Arendt’s argument about the theatre and its capability to narrate human actions (pp. 187-188). Moreover, in the copy of her *Antigone*, Arendt annotates line 155 and some of the following verses with a large inscription on the top of the page: she writes “the who of action” in correspondence with the moment in which Creon enters the scene.

ἀλλ' ὄδε γὰρ δὴ βασιλεὺς χώρας,  
Κρέων ὁ Μενουκέως, . . . νεοχμὸς<sup>86</sup>

Chorus: But look, the King of the land comes yonder, Kreon, son on Menoeceus, our new ruler...<sup>87</sup>

What Arendt is pointing out is that Creon is the crucial node of the discussion about justice and authority; she therefore claims that there is a direct connection between the scenic action and the human activity of Action.

Creon appears on the stage in front of the chorus and the spectators. While the dialogue between Antigone and Ismene had already introduced his figure in previous scenes, he had not yet directly appeared in the public space. Coming to the defence of his edict and fighting against Antigone and Haemon, he puts himself outside of his private existence and lets his actions be judged by the people around him. The theatre thus becomes the most important metaphor for describing and locating the dynamics of acting and speaking in a public sphere, where people build their personality in comparison and in opposition to others.

So, Arendt's commentary referring to Creon corresponds to her theory of action which takes place in *Human condition*. Several times, describing the concept of action, Arendt uses a language which evokes theatre or theatrical images:

Speechless action would no longer be action because there would no longer be an **actor**, and the **actor**, the doer of deeds, is possible only if he is at the same time the speaker of words. The action he begins is humanly disclosed by the world, and though his deed can be perceived in its brute physical appearance without verbal accompaniment, it becomes relevant only through the spoken word in which he identifies himself as the actor, announcing what he does, has done, and intends to do.<sup>88</sup>

Theatre and the human condition become almost synonymous, if we consider that action, speech, plurality and dialogue with the other are the peculiar features of both. “*Who one is*” is the result of what he shows to the others. On the opposite end of the spectrum, to come out of the scene means, for an individual, to be unable to integrate himself to the others (this is the *idiocy* of which we talked above). In this sense Creon and Antigone offer a clear example of alienation: they are not dissimilar in their one-sidedness<sup>89</sup> and their inability to compromise with the point of view of the other condemns both of them to be isolated from the community. This, in Arendtian terms, is akin to being dead.

The political suicide of Antigone and Creon is called madness several times in the tragedy: Sophocles uses the words *dysboulia* (v. 95); *aphrosyne* (v. 383); *mora* (v. 469); *phrenon*

dysphronon (1262) to describe Antigone's action and Creon's behaviour. The antonym of all these words is *phronesis*. Phronesis means wisdom, i.e. the ability to choose through the use of the moral law in the concrete situations. It follows that Antigone and Creon lack in phronesis.

The concept of Phronesis is deeply rooted in the philosophical tradition and Arendt here is using it according to the Aristotelian meaning of practical reason. Moreover, Arendt uses this concept with a specific political connotation, which she inherits from the Kant's *sensus communis*.<sup>90</sup>

Phronesis is, in fact, for Arendt a political virtue and it means the ability to deliberate something, internalizing the point of view of the others. The political choice needs a common world and a constant dialogue with the members of the community. Only in the common world is a true politics possible. This is not the case of Thebes as described in *Antigone*: there is neither a common space (tyranny annihilates it) nor a plurality (people are isolated from each other). The polis has become a desert. Idiocy, meaning alienation from the political community, is lack of phronesis, thoughtlessness, and the main cause of the crisis of the modern man.

### **Conclusions.**

In this paper, we tried to depict the legacy of the Greek tragic thought in Hannah Arendt's thinking. The Greek tragedy offers indeed new insights which help us to understand Arendt's philosophy. In particular, we have discussed the relationship between Arendt's political thought and Sophocles' *Antigone*. This relationship is the most prominent ground on which Hannah Arendt and the Greek tragic thought dialogue.

We have argued that there are three main aspects which appear to be extremely relevant in this respect. First, the way through which Arendt explores the problem of the crisis of the authority and the nature of power in modern age retraces the conflict between private and

public law of the *Antigone*. Second, Arendt's concept of action as evidence of the human existence in the world, in spite of the oblivion following mortality, echoes the *deinà* features of the Sophoclean man. Third, more generally, Arendt's use of the theatrical metaphor is strictly tied to the meaning that she gives to the act of seeing. Theatre epitomizes the human condition of talking, which is based on the dialogue between actors (plurality) and on the dialectics between to appear and to be seen by the others - i.e. the spectators - (visibility). The whole first part of Arendt's *The life of the mind* is built on the analogy between appearance and being and on the relevance of the plurality of subjects in the common world.

Moreover we believe that to read Arendt's philosophy through the categories of the Greek classical theatre may introduce the following question: can we consider Hannah Arendt's philosophy a tragic thought? P. Szondi in an essay of the 1978 claims: "since Aristotle there has been a poetics of tragedy. Only since Schelling has there been a philosophy of the tragic".<sup>91</sup> This means that the idea of tragedy and what tragedy means is a modern philosophical problem, while the ancient philosophers dealt with tragedy as a literary form.

The tragic thought is indeed central in the idealistic and post-idealistic German philosophy and it has influenced a strand of Italian contemporary philosophy (L. Pareyson, E. Severino, S. Givone).

In general, the tragic thought examines the unsolvable conflicts that characterizes the tragic hero – i.e. the hero of the Greek tragedy – and takes inspiration by them to reflect on the human condition and on the nature of the Being.

The Greek tragedy, which celebrates the absolute paradox, the simultaneous presence of justice and injustice, of sin and redemption, of happiness and infelicity, of freedom and necessity, in the same situation and in the same character, demonstrates the ambiguity of the Being and the coexistence in it of its opposite. The tragedy thus offers the philosophical categories to analyze the contradictions of existence.

If we consider now that Arendt's philosophy is essentially an inquiry about the human condition, her reference to the tragic drama in the way we have discussed can justify the definition of her philosophy as tragic thought.

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<sup>1</sup> J. Peter Euben, *Greek Tragedy and political Theory*, University of California Press, Berkley and Los Angeles, 1986, p. ix

<sup>2</sup> Euben writes: "While Arendt only referred to Greek tragedies *in passing*, her overall emphasis on the prephilosophical articulation of politics and her substantive concerns (with action and speech, public and private life, heroism and immortality) stimulated others to do so". Ibidem, p. xiv.

<sup>3</sup> Arendt's personal library overflows with classical texts, physical proof of the influence of Classical culture on her thinking, embodied in the texts of the authors she most loved. Most of these texts are inscribed with marginalia Arendt wrote, providing evidence of a continuous dialogue between Arendt and authors like Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides.

The personal library of Hannah Arendt is a collection of the books found in her apartment in New York when she died. It is situated, for her will, in the Stevenson library at Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, New York.

<sup>4</sup> On the political essence of the theatre in the classical Athens see: Cambiano, Canfora, Lanza, *Lo spazio letterario della Grecia antica*, Salerno Editrice, Roma 1992; Canfora L., *La democrazia, storia di un'ideologia*, Laterza, Roma 2004; Lanza, D., *Il tiranno e il suo pubblico*, Einaudi, Torino 1977; Lanza, Vegetti, Caiani, Sircana, *L'ideologia della città*, Liguori Editore, Napoli 1977; Meier C., *The political art of Greek tragedy*, The John Hopkins University Press 1993; Meier C., *The Greek discovery of Politics*, Harvard University Press 1990; Saxonhouse A. W., *Free Speech and Democracy in Ancient Athens*, Cambridge University Press 2006; Vernant J.P., *Myth and society in ancient Greece*, Harvester Press, 1980; Vernat and Vidal Naquet, *Myth and tragedy in the ancient Greece*, Zone Books 1988;



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Peter J. Euben, *The Tragedy of Political Theory*, Princeton University Press, Princeton New Jersey, 1994.

<sup>5</sup> Jean-Pierre Vernant, “Tensions and ambiguities in Greek Tragedy”, in *Interpretations*, John Hopkins University Press, 1969, pp. 107-108.

<sup>6</sup> Jean-Pierre Vernant, “Myth and tragedy”, in *Essays on Aristotle’s Poetics*, ed. Amelie O. Rorty, Princeton University Press, 1992, p. 36.

<sup>7</sup> Cfr. Peter J. Euben, *The Tragedy of Political Theory*, cit., p. 107

<sup>8</sup> Paul A. Kottman, “Memory, Mimesis, Tragedy: the scene before philosophy”, *Theatre Journal*, Vol. 55, No. 1, Ancient Theatre (Mar., 2003), pp. 81-97

<sup>9</sup> Cfr. O. Longo, *The Theatre of the Polis*, in Winkler, Zeitlin, *Nothing to do with Dionysos? Athenian Drama in its Social Context*, Princeton University Press, New Jersey 1990, p. 6

<sup>10</sup> Cfr. Peter J. Euben, *The Tragedy of Political Theory*, cit., p. 109

<sup>11</sup> H. Arendt, *The human condition*, University of Chicago Press 1998, p. 180

<sup>12</sup> Ibidem, pp.183-184

<sup>13</sup> ibidem, p. 7.

<sup>14</sup> Ibidem, p. 199.

<sup>15</sup> Ibidem, p. 184

<sup>16</sup> “Tragedy, then, is an imitation of an action that is serious, complete and of a certain magnitude” Aristotle, *Poetics*, VI 2, translated by S.H. Butcher, M.P., McMillian and Co., Limited, St. Martins Street, London 1917, p. 23.

<sup>17</sup> H. Arendt, *Human condition*, cit, p. 187.

<sup>18</sup> Ibidem, p.188

<sup>19</sup> The format of the title is in Latin language.

<sup>20</sup> It is interesting to note that Arendt’s comments in the book are in two languages: English and German. I suppose, then, that the first time Arendt read the play was probably before she

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arrived in the United States, which implies that she read them already before 1933. In the preceding period she had no reason to write in a language other than German.

Then, while she was living in the United States, she might have read the play again when the use of English might have been more familiar to her, so that she could use both languages as mother tongue. Furthermore, the text is rich with underlining, notes and marginalia.

<sup>21</sup> P. J. Euben, *The tragedy of political theory. The road not taken*, Princeton University Press 1994, p. 24

<sup>22</sup> Ibidem, pp. 67-96

<sup>23</sup> P.J. Ahrens Dorf, *Greek tragedy and political philosophy*, Davidson College, N.C. 2009

<sup>24</sup> A. Saxonhouse, *Free speech and democracy in ancient Athens*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2006

<sup>25</sup> J. Butler, *Antigone's claim, kinship between life and death*, Columbia University Press 2000.

<sup>26</sup> See P. Nonet, "Antigone's law", in *Law, Culture and the Humanities* 2, No. 3 (2006), pp. 314-335

<sup>27</sup> See L. Irigaray, *Speculum of the other woman*, Cornell University Press, New York 1985.

<sup>28</sup> B. Honig, "Antigone's laments, Creon's Grief. Mourning, membership and the politics of exception", in *Political Theory*, vol. 37, no. 1, Feb. 2009, pp. 5-43

<sup>29</sup> Ibidem, p. 33

<sup>30</sup> Peg Birmingham, *Holes of oblivion*, in *Hypatia* vol. 18, no. 1 (winter 2003), pp. 80-103.

<sup>31</sup> Columbia University Press 2000

<sup>32</sup> H. Arendt, *Between past and future*, Penguin books, New York 1983, pp. 104-105; the footnote with the quotation from *Antigone* is on p. 289 of this edition.

<sup>33</sup> *The Antigone of Sophocles*, of Sir Richard C. Jebb, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1987, vv. 737-739

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<sup>34</sup> Sophocles, *Antigone*, in Richard C. Jebb, *The tragedies of Sophocles translated into English prose*, op. cit., vv. 737-739

<sup>35</sup> H. Arendt, *What is authority?*, cit., p. 93

<sup>36</sup> See *ibidem*.

<sup>37</sup> J. Ober and B. Strauss, *Drama, Political Rhetoric, and the Discourse of Athenian Democracy*, in J. Winkler, N. Zeitlin, *Nothing to do with Dionysos? Athenian Drama in its Social Context*, Princeton University Press, Princeton NJ 1992, pp. 237-270.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 238

<sup>39</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 261-262

<sup>40</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 270

<sup>41</sup> J. Habermas, "Hannah Arendt's communications concept of power", in *Social Research*, vol. 44 no. 1, Spring 1977.

<sup>42</sup> L. Canfora, *Prima lezione di storia greca*, Laterza, Roma-Bari 2008, p. 58

<sup>43</sup> Sophoclis, *Fabulae*, Oxonii, e Typographeo clarendoniano, 1924

<sup>44</sup> H. Arendt, *Human condition*, cit., pp. 200-201

<sup>45</sup> In *Human Condition*, cit., the analogy to her concept of power and the aristotelian "energheia" is clearly remarked by Arendt: "it is this insistence on the living deed and the spoken word as the greatest achievements of which human beings are capable that was conceptualized in Aristotle's notion of *energheia* ("actuality"), with which he designated all activities that do not pursue an end (are *ateleis*) and leave no work behind, but exhaust their full meaning in the performance itself" (p. 206)

<sup>46</sup> H. Arendt, *On Violence*, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Publishers, New York 1970, pp- 44-46

<sup>47</sup> *The Antigone of Sophocles*, of Sir Richard C. Jebb, op. cit., vv. 7-8

<sup>48</sup> Sophocles, *Antigone*, in Richard C. Jebb, *The tragedies of Sophocles translated into English prose*, op. cit., vv. 7-8

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- <sup>49</sup> H. Arendt, *The human condition*, op. cit., p. 28.
- <sup>50</sup> Ibidem, p. 29.
- <sup>51</sup> Ibidem, pp. 30-31.
- <sup>52</sup> Ibidem, p. 32, footnote 22.
- <sup>53</sup> H. Arendt, *Between past and future*, Penguin Books, New York 1977, p. 105
- <sup>54</sup> H. Arendt, *Human condition*, cit., p. 38.
- <sup>55</sup> H. Arendt, *Between past and future*, cit., p. 132.
- <sup>56</sup> I refer especially to S. Givone, *Disincanto del mondo e pensiero tragico*, Il Saggiatore, Milano, 1988; S. Givone, *Storia del nulla*, Laterza, Roma-Bari 2008; C. Gentili, G. Garelli, *Il Tragico*, Il Mulino, Bologna 2010.
- <sup>57</sup> See H. Arendt, *Between past and future*, cit., p. 96
- <sup>58</sup> Ibidem, p. 98
- <sup>59</sup> Ibidem, pp. 98-99.
- <sup>60</sup> Ibidem, p. 96
- <sup>61</sup> *The Antigone of Sophocles*, of Sir Richard C. Jebb, op. cit., v. 44
- <sup>62</sup> Sophocles, *Antigone*, in Richard C. Jebb, *The tragedies of Sophocles translated into English prose*, op. cit., v. 44
- <sup>63</sup> *The Antigone of Sophocles*, of Sir Richard C. Jebb, op. cit., vv. 505-509
- <sup>64</sup> Sophocles, *Antigone*, in Richard C. Jebb, *The tragedies of Sophocles translated into English prose*, op. cit., vv. 505-509
- <sup>65</sup> H. Arendt, *Human Condition*, cit., p. 176
- <sup>66</sup> Ibidem, p. 178
- <sup>67</sup> Ibidem, p. 179
- <sup>68</sup> Ibidem, pp. 18-19
- <sup>69</sup> Ibidem, pp. 8-9

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<sup>70</sup> *The Antigone of Sophocles*, of Sir Richard C. Jebb, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1987, vv.332-341

<sup>71</sup> Sophocles, *Antigone*, in Richard C. Jebb, *The tragedies of Sophocles translated into English prose*, Cambridge University Press, 1957, vv. 332-341

<sup>72</sup> H. Arendt, *Human Condition*, cit., p. 19

<sup>73</sup> H. Arendt, *Between past and future*, cit., p. 42

<sup>74</sup> H. Arendt, *Human Condition*, cit., p. 197

<sup>75</sup> See ibidem p. 188

<sup>76</sup> Ibidem, p. 184

<sup>77</sup> Just to quote some examples, see J. Kristeva, *Hannah Arendt. Life is a narrative*, University of Toronto Press, Toronto 2001; N. Curthoys, “Hannah Arendt and the Politics of Narrative”, in *Journal of Narrative Theory*, Vol. 32 No. 3 (Fall 2002), pp. 348-370; Allen Speight, “Arendt on Narrative Theory and Practice”, in *College Literature*, Vol. 38, No. 1, Winter 2011, pp. 115-130; S. Benhabib, *The reluctant modernism of Hannah Arendt*, Rowman and LittlefiendPublishers, Maryland 2003.

<sup>78</sup> H. Arendt, *Human Condition*, cit., p. 187

<sup>79</sup> Ibidem, p. 192

<sup>80</sup> H. Arendt, *The life of the mind*, Harcourt Brace & Company, San Diego 1978, p. 19

<sup>81</sup> See H. Arendt, *Human Condition*, cit., pp. 7-8

<sup>82</sup> H. Arendt, *The life of the mind*, cit., p. 93

<sup>83</sup> H. Arendt, *Human Condition*, cit., pp. 175-247

<sup>84</sup> See ibidem, pp. 181-182

<sup>85</sup> Ibidem, p. 184

<sup>86</sup> *The Antigone of Sophocles*, of Sir Richard C. Jebb, op. cit, vv. 155-156

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<sup>87</sup> Sophocles, *Antigone*, in Richard C. Jebb, *The tragedies of Sophocles translated into English prose*, op. cit., vv. 155-156

<sup>88</sup> H. Arendt, *Human Condition*, cit., p. 179

<sup>89</sup> On this point see Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Oxford Clarendon Press 1978, VI; G. Steiner, *Antigones*, Yale University Press, New Heaven, 1986; C. Gentili, G. Garelli, *Il tragico*, cit.

<sup>90</sup> The discussion on this topic has interested Arendt's scholars for the last thirty years. I can't discuss the problem in this paper, but I am taking the liberty of referring you to D. Marshall, The origin and character of Hannah Arendt's theory of Judgement, in *Political Theory*, vol. 38, No. 3, (June 2010), pp. 367-393. In this paper the author examines some very authoritative interpretations (and criticisms) of Arendt's theory of judgement and tries to give a new key to read it.

<sup>91</sup> P. Szondi, *An essay on the Tragic*, Stanford University Press, Stanford CA 2002, p. 1.