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# Narration and Understanding in “Eichmann in Jerusalem. A Report on the Banality of Evil” by Hannah Arendt

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## Abstract

Hannah Arendts Erzählweise in „Eichmann in Jerusalem. Ein Bericht von der Banalität des Bösen“ hat den Charakter eines Akts des Verstehens, da sie eine Übung in diskursivem Widerstand ist. Sie konfiguriert eine schmerzhaft und unberechenbare Realität, öffnet Raum, um Bedeutung zu schaffen, die Ereignisse, auf die sie sich bezieht, neu zu bewerten. In diesem Beitrag wird Arendts Bericht anhand der von der Erzähltheorie und Hannah Arendt selbst vorgeschlagenen Ideen über die Kunst des Erzählens und den Erzähler analysiert.

All accounts told by the actors themselves, though they may in rare cases give an entirely trustworthy statement of intentions, aims, and motives, become mere useful source material in the historian’s hands and can never match his story in significance and truthfulness. (...) Even though stories are the inevitable results of action, it is not the actor but the storyteller who perceives and “makes” the story.

Hannah Arendt

## I. Narrating and Understanding for Hannah Arendt

In a famous letter written to Gershom Scholem, Hannah Arendt reflects on evil, highlighting its superficial and banal character, in opposition to good, which can be perfectly approached by thought, since it alone is profound and

radical.<sup>1</sup> Much ink has flowed around this reflection, on which the thesis of the banality of evil is based, extensively glossed by the author of “Eichmann in Jerusalem. A Report on the Banality of Evil”. It is precisely this text that is the object of the present study, which will be approached based on the postulate that Hannah Arendt’s way of narrating acquires the quality of an act of understanding, since it constitutes an exercise of discursive action that configures and gives new meanings to the atrocious and obfuscating situation that was the Shoa, giving rise to comprehension, and allowing to come to terms with the fact.

Critics of Hannah Arendt’s work have explored the author’s way of narrating in her report on Eichmann from different points of view, reflecting mainly on the political consequences of this speech.<sup>2</sup> However, an analysis that focuses on the narratological aspects and its results as a philosophical-literary message focused on understanding a phenomenon like the Holocaust, abstruse due to its perverse and sinister nature, is still missing. The closest to the study that I intend to present in these pages, in methodological terms, are the works of Rita M. Novo,<sup>3</sup> who focuses on the narrative-political elements that interest Hannah Arendt and applies them mainly to the biography of Rahel Varnhagen, written by the German-Jewish philosopher herself. Unlike Novo, I intend to stop at the aspects with greater literary specificity and observe how these raise understanding and inherent reconciliation with the facts. Precisely, regarding understanding as a result of the act of narrating, Julia Kristeva’s essay<sup>4</sup> on Hannah Arendt has been very useful in thinking about the configuration of this dissertation.

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- 1 “I believe that evil is never ‘radical’, that it is only extreme, and that it lacks any depth and any demonic dimension. It can grow excessively and reduce the entire world to rubble precisely because it spreads like a fungus across the surface. It is a ‘challenge to thought’, as I said, because thought tries to reach a certain depth, to go to the roots, and at the very moment when it deals with evil, it feels disappointed because it finds nothing. That is ‘banality’. Only good has depth and can be radical.” Hannah Arendt, *Jewish Writings*, ed. by Jerome Kohn and Ron M. Feldman, Barcelona 2009, p. 575 [from now on, in quotes from Spanish texts, the translation is mine].
  - 2 Among various works, the following stand out: Seyla Benhabib, *Identity, Perspective and Narrative in Hannah Arendt’s Eichmann in Jerusalem*. In: *History and Memory*, 8 (1996) 2, pp. 35–59; as well as Peter Sinclair, *Drama and Narrative in Hannah Arendt’s Eichmann in Jerusalem*. In: *Journal of Narrative Theory*, 43 (2013) 1, pp. 41–63. In both texts, the authors highlight the unfortunate expressions and turns of language that Arendt could have incurred and gave rise to the controversy that the author later faced at that time.
  - 3 Rita M. Novo, *Narrar la acción: la responsabilidad política del narrador* ([https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Rita-Novo/publication/334232270\\_HANNAH\\_ARENDT\\_Narrar\\_la\\_accion\\_la\\_responsabilidad\\_politica\\_del\\_narrador/links/5d1e3071458515c11c126f18/HANNAH-ARENDT-Narrar-la-accion-la-responsabilidad-politica-del-narrador.pdf](https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Rita-Novo/publication/334232270_HANNAH_ARENDT_Narrar_la_accion_la_responsabilidad_politica_del_narrador/links/5d1e3071458515c11c126f18/HANNAH-ARENDT-Narrar-la-accion-la-responsabilidad-politica-del-narrador.pdf); 6.1.2024); cf. also: Rita M. Novo, *El relato de un comienzo: la filosofía política de Hannah Arendt*. In: *Revista de Filosofía y Teoría Política*, 37 (2006), pp. 69–81.
  - 4 Julia Kristeva, *El genio femenino: La vida, la locura, las palabras I. Hannah Arendt*, Buenos Aires 2000, pp. 19–102.

Indeed, in the first part of her study, the Bulgarian-French author carries out an illuminating and didactic tour of Arendt's work to explain the concept of understanding, whose correspondence with that of narration is fundamental.<sup>5</sup>

The com-prehender listens, accepts, welcomes: opens space, allows herself to be inhabited, accompanies, is with (*cum*, *com*), matrix of the *laisser-aller*, serene "letting go" (*Gelassenheit*) insists Heidegger, who allows herself to be fertilised. However, the comprehender also catches: she chooses, plucks, models, transforms the elements, appropriates them and recreates them: With others, but armed with her own choice, the comprehender is the one who gives birth to a meaning in which one reads, transformed, the meaning of others. It is up to us to decipher that thought process in action, which is constructed-deconstructed.<sup>6</sup>

Kristeva also provides a detailed commentary on Rahel Varnhagen's text, appreciating it as a narrative designed to help Arendt understand herself as a Jew. She also stresses that Rahel's life is exemplary in the Kantian sense of the term:

The example is that which contains, or is supposed to contain, a concept or a general rule. (...) Almost all the concepts of historical and political sciences are of this restrictive nature: they have their origin in a particular historical event, to which "exemplary" character is conferred (see – in particular – that which is valid for more than one case).<sup>7</sup>

From this assertion it can be recovered, for the present study, that the report on the Eichmann trial could also acquire the aspect of an exemplary narrative exercise carried out by Arendt. Precisely, if she affirms that something that has happened once can happen again, it is enough to look at the current bureaucracies and the subjects that make them up to realise how many Eichmanns are repeated in those structures.

Of course, it is important to the political and social sciences that the essence of totalitarian government, and perhaps the nature of every bureaucracy, is to make functionaries and mere cogs in the administrative machinery out of men, and thus to dehumanise them. And one can debate long and profitably on the rule of Nobody, which is what the political form known as bureaucracy truly is.<sup>8</sup>

In a world that does not hesitate in its advance towards authoritarianism – and even more dangerous, towards totalitarianism – Arendt's reflections acquire great validity.

Additionally, to round out the concept of understanding, it is important to add that it is also explained in Arendt's essay "Understanding and Politics. (The

5 Regarding narration, Kristeva states that "there is only life (*bios*) in and by the narrative rebirth." *Ibid.*, p. 102.

6 Cf. *ibid.*, p. 37f.

7 Hannah Arendt, *Conferencias sobre la filosofía política de Kant*, Barcelona 2012, pp. 152f.

8 Cf. Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem. A Report on the Banality of Evil*, New York 2006, p. 289.

Difficulties of Understanding”);<sup>9</sup> there, she postulates that it is “(...) an endless activity, in constant change and variation, through which we accept reality and reconcile ourselves with it, that is, we try of being at home in the world”.<sup>10</sup> Reconciliation – she continues – is inherent to understanding, but it is not associated with forgiveness, since this corresponds to a unique act that culminates in a singular action. On the other hand, understanding has no end and does not produce definitive results, since it constitutes a specific way of being alive in the cosmos. “Every person needs to reconcile with a world to which they were born strange and due to its uniqueness, it will always be so”.<sup>11</sup>

In another vein, the notion of narrating is described in detail by Arendt in “The Human Condition”<sup>12</sup>. The narrative – she adds – is primarily action, which eclipses the author as a biographical character, whose importance is reduced to a minimum. Thus, the Hannover philosopher comes to fully coincide with the post-structuralist positions of literature that advocate the death of the author.

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>13</sup>

Action is one of the three branches of the *vita activa*, which Arendt, recovering the philosophical tradition, opposes to the *vita contemplativa*. The *vita activa* consists of three elements: labour, work, and action. Labour corresponds to all the biological activities that the body demands to stay alive. Work, meanwhile, corresponds to artifice, that is, to the creation of things that become part of the world. This includes everything from the idea to the finished product. Action results from the human condition of plurality, which means equality in difference. This creates the condition for memory and history. Of the three constituents of the *vita activa*, action is the most relevant, because it consists of the fact of appearing in the world, of expressing each person’s own peculiarity of it. And it is precisely through speech that such expression crystallises, therefore, speech and action are inherent.

Thus, succinctly, it can be stated, with Arendt, that narration is the cement of the community. It is an action that allows the polis to order the events that occur within it and give an account of its place and meaning in the world.<sup>14</sup> In this way,

9 Cf. Hannah Arendt, *Ensayos de comprensión 1930–1954*. Escritos no reunidos e inéditos de Hannah Arendt, Madrid 2005, pp. 371–394.

10 *Ibid.*, p. 371.

11 *Ibid.*

12 Cf. Hannah Arendt, *La condición humana*, Buenos Aires 2009, pp. 354.

13 Cf. *ibid.*, p. 208.

14 Cf. Ángeles Ma. del Rosario Pérez Bernal/Adso Eduardo Gutiérrez Espinoza, *Narración, resistencia y sentido en Hannah Arendt y Gilles Deleuze*. In: *Valenciana*, 23 (2019) 1, pp. 171–186, here 177.

narration offers the possibility of uniting the past and the future, becoming the means to move meaningfully between these two points.

## II. On "Eichmann in Jerusalem"

As the reader knows, the book is a report on the trial against Adolf Eichmann, prepared by Hannah Arendt for the *New Yorker*. Otto Adolf Eichmann was a Nazi officer known for his role in designing the so-called Final Solution – that is, the mass extermination of the Jews in Europe during World War II. Such a trial took place in Jerusalem in 1961, when Israel emerged as a new State recognised by the nations of the world.

The book is divided into 15 chapters, with an introduction, a note to the reader, an epilogue and a postscript. Throughout the exposition, the reader learns about the biographical subject, as well as his story and actions as a Nazi officer, which, naturally, are linked to the history of the persecution, transportation, and extermination of the Jews in Europe of the World War II.

During the trial, we observe a defendant who never admits his guilt, but rather tries to convince everyone that he acted in accordance with his duty. He struggles to justify his actions; however, he ends up revealing two basic traits as a person: mediocrity and banality of evil. Reaching such conclusions requires keen observation on the part of the narrator, a product of her critical nature, capable of extracting and showing the underlying meaning of the character's discourse. To this end, by assuming the narrative voice, Arendt uses, among other strategies, irony towards the assertions of the accused, whom she describes as trivial and superficial.

Irony, for Pere Ballart,<sup>15</sup> is not just any trope, but a modality – or better, a figuration – that crosses the different dimensions of the sign, namely, the syntactic, the semantic, and the pragmatic, in such a way that it breaks the perceptual automatism of the sign. The recipient, through a subversion of codes, is induced to distrust, distance himself, and rethink the situation described.

As derived from a figure, the term is faithful to the origin of irony as a form of discourse that modifies the expression of thought – which appropriately distinguishes it from modalities such as satire or the grotesque, while at the same time the character of the word, more abstract and less modular than that of the figure, indicates the greater flexibility of the phenomenon, its license to go beyond the narrow boundaries of the trope. Furthermore, figuration has the connotations of simulation and pretence that irony actually possesses and designates both the action and the effect of producing statements with that value.<sup>16</sup>

Arendt masterfully manages to portray the modification of the expression of thought produced by irony, as Ballart states, at different moments in the story.

15 Pere Ballart, *Eironeia. La figuración irónica en el discurso literario moderno*, Barcelona 1994.

16 Cf. *ibid.*, p. 361.

For example, the undeniable and unintentionally comical situation in which Eichmann declares himself a Kantian:

[...] suddenly [he] declared with great emphasis that he had lived his whole life according to Kant's moral precepts, and especially according to a Kantian definition of duty. This was outrageous, on the face of it, and also incomprehensible, since Kant's moral philosophy is so closely bound up with man's faculty of judgment, which rules out blind obedience.<sup>17</sup>

Indeed, it is implausible that an ill-fated Nazi bureaucrat, responsible for so much death and destruction, would proclaim himself a Kantian in the process that would decide his death. The narrator surely paints the picture of the situation with a smile of derision as well as indignation when evoking it, knowing that this lack of intelligence and the ability to turn a philosophical theory into a cliché is what makes a subject so dangerous, even more so when he has to carry out actions as serious as those that were in the hands of Eichmann.

The examining officer did not press the point, but Judge Raveh, either out of curiosity or out of indignation at Eichmann's having dared to invoke Kant's name in connection with his crimes, decided to question the accused. And, to the surprise of everybody, Eichmann came up with an approximately correct definition of the categorical imperative: "I meant by my remark about Kant that the principle of my will must always be such that it can become the principle of general laws."<sup>18</sup>

Thus, with this type of descriptions, Arendt sketches a surprising moral portrait of the accused, going so far as to exclaim: "Despite all the efforts of the prosecution, everyone could see that this man was not a 'monster', but it was difficult indeed to suspect that he was a clown".<sup>19</sup>

Eichmann's lack of intelligence and mediocrity cause Arendt to conclude that an individual can commit evil actions on a gigantic scale without those actions being motivated by evil. Likewise, in totalitarian bureaucratic logic it is possible that someone can climb and reach the top even if that someone is a loser.

From a humdrum life without significance' and consequence the wind had blown him into History, as he understood it, namely, into a Movement that always kept moving and in which somebody like him – already a failure in the eyes of his social class, of his family, and hence in his own eyes as well – could start from scratch and still make a career.<sup>20</sup>

Another procedure used by Hannah Arendt in this work is a consistent dissonant speech. This procedure consists of the narrator letting his character's voice spread but using specific techniques so that the reader becomes aware of his disagreement, opening a gap that distances both, the narrator and the protago-

17 Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, p. 135 f.

18 *Ibid.*, p. 136.

19 *Ibid.*, p. 54.

20 *Ibid.*, p. 33.

nist, preventing any type of concordance. Indeed, dissonance is a concept that goes hand in hand with music and can be traced back to Aristotelian writings.<sup>21</sup> Regarding the dissonant discourse in the literary text, Beltrán, based on the proposal of structuralism, explains:

Among the effects produced by the specific position of the subject of enunciation in the narrative discourse, it is worth highlighting the dissociation of his role as enunciator from his cognitive function. For this reason, from now on we will speak of enunciator – or enunciative subject – and cognitive subject – or observer – to designate the two realizations of the subject of enunciation in narrative discourse. The enunciator – or enunciative subject – acts on the choice and organization of linguistic elements. The cognitive subject – or consciousness – acts on the thematic content of the discourse.<sup>22</sup>

It is plausible to observe these two modes in Hannah Arendt's speech in "Eichmann in Jerusalem". In effect, she assumes the role of witness and gives an account of what happens in the trial and specifically what the accused says. However, as a cognitive subject, her speech departs from the protagonist and from the rest of the characters involved in the litigation and allows herself to express, with different nuances and strategies, her feelings on the matter.

Thus, in the text there are two main stories: the one told and believed by the protagonist and the one perceived by the narrator, who, as such, presents a critical perspective from which Eichmann cannot hide. Distrustful of appearances and cautious of falling into easy interpretations, Arendt is skeptical about the various actors and events that prefigure and shape the trial, whether they be called Ben Gurion, the court, the judge, the defence, the prosecutor, or the Zionists. The German-Jewish thinker argues that reason does not absolutely assist any of the parties and, throughout her presentation, she challenges readers to go beyond the self-congratulatory story of the accused or the reductionist version of the prosecution.

Hannah Arendt necessarily – and perhaps involuntarily – uses the literary techniques of characterisation of an individual. For structuralist literary theory there are three main mechanisms to account for the features of a figural entity: the environment, the portrait, and the discourse. The environment, "(...) if it does not pre-destinate the character's being and doing, it does constitute an indication of his possible destiny".<sup>23</sup> The portrait provides data about physical and

21 See the genealogy of the concept that Lucía Díaz Marroquín exposes in her article: *La disonancia y otras desviaciones del discurso en la poética literaria, musical y gestual del culto a la razón (de la norma de zarlino a la gestualidad de la zarabanda)*. In: *Revista de Literatura*, 71 (2009) 141, pp. 57–84.

22 Luis Beltrán Almería, *La enunciación narrativa: el narrador y la voz dual*. In: *Tropelias*, (1990) 1, p. 9 (<https://papiro.unizar.es/ojs/index.php/tropelias/article/view/2715/2422>).

23 Luz Aurora Pimentel, *El relato en perspectiva. Estudio de teoría narrativa*, Mexico/Buenos Aires 1998, p. 79.

moral identity. The character's speech gives an account of his perspective and position towards the world, as well as his ideological stance.<sup>24</sup>

### III. On the Environment or the *Theatrum Mundi*

The author chooses to begin the work with a kind of zoom in from the immediate environment to the narrative present, which is the scene of the trial itself.<sup>25</sup> Thus, the first chapter of the book, entitled "The House of Justice", focuses on the reflection on the true motives of the trial, which are symbolically supported in a sagacious way by the design of the court room, which Arendt describes as a theatre in which the spectacle of judgment will unfold:

Whoever planned this auditorium in the newly built Beth Ha'am, the House of the People (now surrounded by high fences, guarded from roof to cellar by heavily armed police, and with a row of wooden barracks in the front courtyard in which all comers are expertly frisked), had a theater in mind, complete with orchestra and gallery, with proscenium and stage, and with side doors for the actors' entrance.<sup>26</sup>

With this fragment, it is observed how this setting is the ideal place for the guiding purpose of the trial, which is to offer a spectacle in which the sufferings of the Jewish people at the hands of the Nazis are shown to the world, more than the acts committed by Eichmann.

"Beth Hamishpath" – the House of Justice: these words shouted by the court usher at the top of his voice make us jump to our feet as they announce the arrival of the three judges, who, bareheaded, in black robes, walk into the courtroom from a side entrance to take their seats on the highest tier of the raised platform. Their long table, soon to be covered with innumerable books and more than fifteen hundred documents, is flanked at each end by the court stenographers. Directly below the judges are the translators, whose services are needed for direct exchanges between the defendant or his counsel and the court.<sup>27</sup>

And the description continues:

One tier below the translators, facing each other and hence with their profiles turned to the audience, we see the glass booth of the accused and the witness box. Finally, on the bottom tier, with their backs to the audience, are the prosecutor with his staff of four assistant attorneys, and the counsel for the defense, who during the first weeks is accompanied by an assistant.<sup>28</sup>

Indeed, this room will serve, as Arendt states, to establish the spectacle that Ben-Gurion, the first Prime Minister of Israel, proposed to present to the world:

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24 Cf. *ibid.*, p. 86.

25 This technique is frequently used at the beginning of various chapters of the book.

26 Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, p. 4.

27 *Ibid.*, p. 3.

28 *Ibid.*

Clearly, this courtroom is not a bad place for the show trial David Ben-Gurion, Prime Minister of Israel, had in mind when he decided to have Eichmann kidnaped in Argentina and brought to the District Court of Jerusalem to stand trial for his role in the "final solution of the Jewish question". And Ben-Gurion, rightly called the "architect of the state", remains the invisible stage manager of the proceedings.<sup>29</sup>

In fact, from the spatial distribution of the room, the pre-eminence of the judges can be observed as they are – as usual – on a bench, which emblematically establishes that they possess the truth. The fact that Eichmann is in a glass cube symbolically alludes, among other things, to his untouchability as a scapegoat, he is a *Homo sacer* who can be killed, as he once did with the Jews, themselves also a kind of *Homo sacer* for the Nazis.

*Homo sacer* is defined by Giorgio Agamben as the excluded, both from the religious community and from all legal or political activity. Furthermore – he adds – he is exposed to being killed without committing homicide, since "his entire existence is reduced to a bare life stripped of any rights, which he can only save by perpetual flight or by finding refuge in a foreign country".<sup>30</sup>

On the other hand, Arendt affirms that judges try to avoid the theatricalization of the trial, a circumstance that escapes their control, perhaps because the environment itself and the spatial arrangement conditioned it.

There is no doubt from the very beginning that it is Judge Landau who sets the tone, and that he is doing his best, his very best, to prevent this trial from becoming a show trial under the influence of the prosecutor's love of showmanship. Among the reasons he cannot always succeed is the simple fact that the proceedings happen on a stage before an audience, with the usher's marvelous shout at the beginning of each session producing the effect of the rising curtain.<sup>31</sup>

Undoubtedly, spaces define the individuals who inhabit them, both in reality and in dramatic fiction. In this regard, Goutman states: "Forms of meaning enter into a relationship with architectural expression, forms decomposable into elements whose combination is susceptible to commutation and meaning."<sup>32</sup>

#### IV. Eichmann, a Banal Character

Narrative theory explains that there are two basic descriptive modes to construct a portrait of an individual: direct and indirect characterisation. The direct method consists of the narrator giving an explicit account of the physical and moral traits of the subject, while the indirect method consists of letting another character define it or allowing the reader to construct the image of the subject in ques-

29 *Ibid.*, p. 4f.

30 Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer. El poder soberano y la nuda vida*, Barcelona 2010, p. 233.

31 Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, p. 4.

32 Ana Goutman, *El espacio escénico. Significación y medios*, Mexico 2003, p. 83.

tion based on their own actions or their own speech. Arendt opts for both means, thus, especially the second and third chapters of the book, entitled, respectively, “The Accused” and “Specialist in Jewish Affairs”, are dedicated to exploring Eichmann’s biography and configuring his personality, while in the rest of the chapters the main events of his career as a Nazi officer are interspersed with the historical events that derived from his actions, alone or in combination with that of other officers involved in the Final Solution. Thus, the reader, with these two types of descriptions, direct and indirect, can form a detailed representation of Eichmann’s personality.

As for the physical description of the accused, it appears, very briefly, in the first pages of chapter 1, in which the author says:

Adolf Eichmann, son of Karl Eichmann, the man in the glass booth built for his protection: medium-sized, slender, middle-aged, with receding hair, ill-fitting teeth and nearsighted eyes, who throughout the trial keeps craning his scraggy neck toward the bench (not once does he face the audience), and who desperately and for the most part successfully maintains his self-control despite the nervous tic to which his mouth must have become subject long before this trial started.<sup>33</sup>

The second chapter provides a first moral sketch of Eichmann sitting in the dock. In brief, it is explained how this subject got there and the charges against him:

Otto Adolf, son of Karl Adolf Eichmann and Maria née Schefferling, caught in a suburb of Buenos Aires on the evening of May 11, 1960, flown to Israel nine days later, brought to trial in the District Court in Jerusalem on April 11, 1961, stood accused on fifteen counts: “together with others” he had committed crimes against the Jewish people, crimes against humanity, and war crimes during the whole period of the Nazi regime and especially during the period of the World War II. The Nazis and Nazi Collaborators (Punishment) Law of 1950, under which he was tried, provides that “a person who has committed one of these ... offenses ... is liable to the death penalty”. To each count Eichmann pleaded: “Not guilty in the sense of the indictment”.<sup>34</sup>

As mentioned above, the narrative technique deployed by the author throughout the text consists of weaving biographical data with the historical event, intertwining both with the topics brought up by the different actors during the trial. Thus, the reader creates a fairly complete image of the prosecuted criminal. As an illustration, in the following quote, the reader can confirm that Eichmann suffers from a lack of understanding of the meaning of plurality, while his willingness to be conditioned by the environment is plausible.

He was not stupid. It was sheer thoughtlessness – something by no means identical with stupidity – that predisposed him to become one of the greatest criminals of that period. And if this is “banal” and even funny, if with the best will in the world one cannot extract any diabolical or demonic profundity from Eichmann, that is still far from calling it commonplace.<sup>35</sup>

33 Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, p. 5.

34 *Ibid.*, p. 21.

35 *Ibid.*, p. 288.

Likewise, his predilection for immediately agreeing with others rather than agreeing with himself is notorious. This is, as has already been said, a loser, whose greatest glory has been that of collaborating in the machinery of a heinous crime. The accused – the narrator detects – does not think about the damage he did because he never really thought about anything. He is an ordinary, mediocre man, only concerned with his social advancement and always desperate to belong to something that protects him from self-ignorance. Furthermore, he has an irrefutable inability to dialogue with himself.

May 8, 1945, the official date of Germany's defeat, was significant for him mainly because it then dawned upon him that thenceforward he would have to live without being a member of something or other. "I sensed I would have to live a leaderless and difficult individual life, I would receive no directives from anybody, no orders and commands would any longer be issued to me, no pertinent ordinances would be there to consult – in brief, a life never known before lay before me."<sup>36</sup>

The peculiarities listed above correspond specifically to those of banal evil, stated by Arendt throughout the book and which could be summarised in the following points:

An egocentric subject with:

- A superficial attitude
- A limited language that is manifested by the abuse of cliché.
- Poor thinking and imagination.
- An inability to assume a critical attitude.
- A total incompetence to understand otherness.

In the face of death, he had found the cliché used in funeral oratory. Under the gallops, his memory played him the last trick; he was "elated", and he forgot that this was his own funeral. It was as though in those last minutes he was summing up the lesson that this long course in human wickedness had taught us – the lesson of the fearsome, word-and-thought-defying banality of evil.<sup>37</sup>

To complete the outline of the banality of evil, Arendt adds:

Only through dialogue with himself, the fruit of introspection, can the individual regulate his own actions and assume a position in the world. Otherwise, it is very likely that terror of the other will be generated, which is the result of the lack of dialogue with oneself and the breeding ground of totalitarianism. One is two, she adds, a principle of plurality within the subject, which leads to the development of reflective capacity and imagination. Plurality thus makes it possible to put oneself in the place of the other.<sup>38</sup>

Well, of all the above, Eichmann was not capable of anything.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p. 32.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., p. 252.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. Arendt, *La condición humana*, chap. 5.

## V. Discourse as a Generating Act of Understanding and Meaning

The narrative act as a source of understanding is widely explained in “The Human Condition”. In the narrative, action and speech are recovered, because “with word and act we insert ourselves into the human world, and this insertion is like a second birth”.<sup>39</sup> Words and actions lead to discovering who each person is, revealing tropes about the self-understanding of modern man. When formed as an action, the narrative activity has many provisional beginnings and endings, which is why it avoids the composition of closed stories, while it aspires to a multidimensional certainty. The narrative makes visible both the action and the plot of human relationships, giving an account of the community that surrounds the story. The narrative also works by recognising the protagonist and portraying the present, past, and future of his life.

The trouble with Eichmann was precisely that so many were like him, and that the many were neither perverted nor sadistic, that they were and still are, terribly and terrifyingly normal. From the viewpoint of our legal institutions and of our moral standards of judgment this normality was much more terrifying than all the atrocities put together for it implied – as had been said at Nuremberg over and over again by the defendants and their counsels – that this new type of criminal, who is in actual act *hostis generis humani*, commits his crime – under circumstances that make it well-nigh impossible for him to know or to feel that he is doing wrong.<sup>40</sup>

Narration always reveals a new beginning, with elements that account for the astonishing and the unexpected – like every true beginning, representing a “specifically human life”, that is, a life that constructs its meaning and that of the community. Thus, the group’s experience, previously inarticulate, is expressed through narration with the respective discursive categories. In the same vein, narration turns a particular story into a prototypical act, establishing an exemplary story that surpasses repetition and is fruitful for listeners.

That such remoteness from reality and such thoughtlessness can wreak more havoc than all the evil instincts taken together which, perhaps, are inherent in man – that was, in fact, the lesson one could learn in Jerusalem. But it was a lesson, neither an explanation of the phenomenon nor a theory about it.<sup>41</sup>

The act of narrating also establishes the ethical context necessary for reconciliation with the facts as they are, not from the position of a historical destiny but from the human condition. Constructed stories are not objective, but they are impartial, since the speaker places himself in the place of the other, although at the same time he assumes the commitment to think for himself. With the above, he contributes to the creation of a world, that is, a universe of links, meanings, and identities habitable for men. Being based on the principle of plurality, which consists of declaring equality and diversity, storytelling is also perspectivist.

39 Arendt, *La condición humana*, p. 201.

40 Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, p. 276.

41 *Ibid.*, p. 288.

## VI. Conclusions

Hence, it is observable that Arendt turns the narrative into a moral: The fact becomes an exemplary figure for her readers, so that it does not fall into oblivion and repetition. The event is ordered from the human condition, showing each actor with their weaknesses and successes, and seeking reconciliation with the facts. The situation is articulated in a collective framework in which responsibilities are distributed, while the story is referred to in terms of reconciliation with the world. Arendt's voice, through the rhetorical mechanisms previously studied, enables a conclusion in which the historical and political meaning intended to be given to the trial is subverted, revealing unforeseen meanings that open new options and perspectives for the reader.

As for the character's speech, it is observable how it is invalidated not by the intervention of the judges, the prosecutor, or the witnesses, but by the narrator's acute vision. Precisely, Arendt traces a path from the representation of the banality of evil through Eichmann's monolithic and denotative discourse towards a creative discourse, which points to radical good through resources such as irony, the dissonant narration, and figurative features, which undermine and relativise that of the character, by allowing the coexistence of opposite points of view, from appraisals whose value questions the so-called totalitarian "truth". The discursive strategies used by the author are aimed at unmasking the biased perception of the trial's actors, mainly its protagonist. Therefore, the narrator's speech weakens, contrasts, and makes Eichmann's claims doubtful.

So, Arendt's speech reveals an individual who embodies something unexpected: it is not a monster, but an unbearably normal subject, like anyone else. The one-dimensionality of the speech, both by Eichmann and the rest of the actors in the trial, is broken by the discursive strategies assumed by the narrator, which strips the event of its misleading pretension of universality. Through Eichmann's discourse, the paradigm of the banal mind is shown and the existence of a creative vision that opposes it and can undermine it is validated.

"Eichmann in Jerusalem. A Report on the Banality of Evil" is a text that constitutes an act of resistance and understanding by sustaining a critical and reflective voice in the face of the micro fascist act that the trial represented. By not saying what was expected, Arendt weighs the different levels of responsibility of those involved and avoids any type of Manichean incitement. By all means, with this scriptural exercise, Arendt illustrates how the temptation of fascism can appear anywhere, even in the courtroom, where wanting to do justice, one may not proceed in a completely impartial way: "Still, it was undeniable that he had always acted upon 'superior orders,' and if the provisions of ordinary Israeli law had been applied to him, it would have been difficult indeed to impose the maximum penalty upon him."<sup>42</sup>

42 Ibid., p. 294.

Undoubtedly, by portraying Eichmann, demonstrating that his actions are based on banal evil, the text achieves understanding through the construction of a story that leads to the transformation of both Arendt and her readers. The author achieves this understanding by putting herself in the place of the narrated event, opening a gap for the reader to capture it, recreate it, redefine it and give it a new coherence that includes the plurality of previously unheard voices.

Arendt, as we noted above, has been criticised for various ideas expressed in this text. However, in the book's postscript, she seeks to clarify that she does not intend to defend Eichmann, but rather to point out that thoughtlessness and frivolity in the bureaucratic machinery can be more harmful than human evil itself.

Narration, as an act of understanding, generates another consciousness and another sensitivity by assuming a collective-revolutionary enunciation, in Deleuze's terms, which brings together dispersed voices and narrates from different worldviews; but above all it opens the possibility of a transformation that gives way to a community in gestation, which does not yet have a voice. Just as Primo Levi writes about Auschwitz assuming the voice of those who are missing, in the same way, Arendt expresses that absent voice, that of a community that offers better solutions to the existing ones, that of the coming community.