

Cholent and the ‘False Divinity’ of Greece: Hannah Arendt’s Hellenism

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Hannah Arendt was born into a German-Jewish family in 1906 and her life, like that of many other refugees, was marked to the core by her Jewishness. Nevertheless, her status as a Jewish intellectual has not always been celebrated. Indeed when she died in 1975 she felt determinedly exiled by the Jewish community. Arendt’s *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (1963) scandalized many Jewish readers, who were outraged by her account of the trial of a high-ranking Nazi official, which criticised the complicity of the Jewish Councils with Nazi orders while allegedly downplaying the role of anti-Semitism as a motivation in Adolf Eichmann’s actions. Many of Arendt’s Jewish readers, including prominently her friend Gershom Scholem, were shocked by her analysis of the trial. Scholem accused Arendt of a lack of empathy for the victims of the Holocaust and of offering a tone-deaf report of the criminals who had committed acts against them. It was, in part, this hostile feeling towards Arendt amongst some Jewish intellectuals which motivated Jerome Kohn and Ron Feldman to assemble Arendt’s so-called *Jewish Writings* (2007) into a single volume for publication. As Feldman writes: “partly because she was subjected to a modern form of excommunication from the Jewish community and partly due to the power of her other writings, her Jewish writings were for the most part neglected and forgotten”.² The book includes approximately 40 essays, journal articles, reviews and letters, some of which remained unpublished in her lifetime. The important collection brought a new perspective on Arendt, revealing the centrality of Jewishness and Judaism both to her self-understanding and to her thought. In these writings, the editors suggest, Arendt emerges as the embodiment of the ‘conscious Jewish Pariah’. Yet, Arendt’s interest in the so-called ‘Jewish Question’ could hardly be said to have been marginal to her most celebrated work. From *The Origins of Totalitarianism* to *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (neither of which appear as ‘Jewish writings’ in the publication for obvious

¹ I would like to thank the editors, Vered Lev Kenaan and Patricia Rosenmeyer, for their guidance and invaluable suggestions. I am very grateful to Richard Armstrong, Simon Goldhill, Bonnie Honig and Phiroze Vasunia for their insightful comments.

² Ron Feldman ‘Introduction: The Jew as Pariah: The Case of Hannah Arendt (1906-1975)’ in Hannah Arendt *The Jewish Writings*, edited by Jerome Kohn and Ron H. Feldman (Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 2007) , xlii

reasons of length), the plight of the Jews had been central to her understanding of the political dynamics of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

A notable exception is her ‘philosophical’ masterpiece *The Human Condition*: “Arendt’s most read, studied, and scrutinized work[.], and one in which there is hardly any mention of Jews, Jewish affairs or Jewish history.”³ Instead, the most prominent protagonists in this volume are not contemporary political subjects at all, but rather the citizens of a two-and-half-thousand-year-old city-state. Arendt’s reflections on human existence lead to her imagining a ‘Greek solution’ (her phrase) to the problems of modernity. It is to the Athenian polis, as well as to the philosophy of Aristotle, that Arendt looks to recover a life of action and a notion of political community. Arendt attributes to the Greeks the discovery and formalisation of the space of appearance – the stage on which men reveal themselves to the world through their speech and action. As Mary Dietz argues: “Arendt’s political vision was decisively (if only metaphorically) Hellenic: the classical Greek polis was her model of the public; Pericles, the Athenian statesman immortalized by Thucydides, was her exemplary citizen-hero; and the quest for freedom as glory through ‘self-revelation’ in plurality was her political vision.”⁴ More recent work has contested this characterisation. Patchen Markell, for instance, sees the foregrounding of the ancients as being genealogically motivated rather than offering them as an ideal for emulation. Instead of idealisation, what we have in Arendt is a phenomenological account of the emergence of an idea of action. For Markell, “the trouble [...] is not that Arendt romanticizes the Greek [...], the problem lies not in Arendt’s evaluation of “Greece” but in her simplified description of it”.⁵ Yet, as we shall, the boundary between description and evaluation is particularly complex for an author like Arendt whose work staddles the historical and normative.

Although Arendt’s commitment to equality and plurality ally her to democratic Athenian politics, her paradigm of Hellenic action in *The Human Condition* is surprisingly as much the figure of Achilles as it is Pericles. Exploring Achilles’

³ Jerome Kohn ‘Preface: A Jewish Life: 1905-1975’ in Arendt (2007), ix

⁴ Mary Dietz (2002) *Turning Operations: Feminism, Arendt, Politics* (London and New York, Routledge 2002), 101

⁵ Patchen Markell *Bound by Recognition* (Princeton NJ, Princeton University Press, 2003), 65

choice of immortal fame over a long life, Arendt writes of Achilles: “only a man who does not survive his one supreme act remains the indisputable master of his identity and possible greatness. [...] [Achilles’ action in battle] became the prototype of action for Greek antiquity and influenced, in the form of the so-called agonal spirit, the passionate drive to show oneself in measuring up against others that underlies the concept of politics prevalent in the city-states”.⁶ Arendt identifies in the figure of Achilles a unity between action and identity and a passion to disclose this identity in contest with others. Indeed, this element of agonism is carried over into Arendt’s discussion of the *polis* which she sees in profound continuity rather than rupture with Homeric society. “Speaking metaphorically and theoretically,” she memorably writes “it is as though the men who returned from the Trojan War had wished to make permanent the space of action which had arisen from their deeds and sufferings, to prevent its perishing...The *polis* properly speaking, is not the city-state in its physical location; it is the organization of the people as it arises out of acting and speaking together”.⁷ Arendt, of course, recognizes that these are not the *historical* reasons for the emergence of the city-state, and yet she sees the polis as ensuring a foundation for collective memory which takes over from the function of epic poetry. When Arendt speaks of the polis as not a place but as a structure of political organization, she elides the differences between different *poleis* and erases the historical relationship to democracy. For sure, she recognizes that Achilles’ action is “highly individualistic”⁸, but she doesn’t address how Achilles, as a figure of aristocratic isolation, could act as the prototype “of acting and speaking together”. With Achilles’ heroism as its exemplar, it is not difficult to understand how Arendt’s ‘Greek solution’ overlooked the exclusion of women and slaves from its instantiation of human freedom.

This essay will ask to what extent Arendt’s Hellenism was conditioned by her Jewishness. How can we make sense of her double commitment to the Greeks and the Jews? How do we understand Arendt’s work existing as it does between the ‘Greek

⁶ Hannah Arendt *The Human Condition* (Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1998), 193-4. See Markell (2003) 64-65 for an interesting discussion of this passage which puts it in the context of Arendt’s missed encounter with tragic action: “By declaring the example of Achilles to be the prototype of action for the Greeks, Arendt sacrifices an opportunity implicit in her own intermittent citations of Sophocles and of Aristotle’s *Poetics*—the opportunity to read tragedy as a response and alternative, from within Greek antiquity itself, to the impossible Achillean pursuit of mastery and self-sufficiency” (65).

⁷ Arendt (1998) 198

⁸ Arendt (1998) 194

solution’ and the ‘final solution’? In this task of reconciling Arendt’s Jewish and Greek interests, I follow Bonnie Honig who has recently argued that “*The Human Condition*, commonly called Arendt’s most Greek text, may have a Jewish unconscious.”⁹ But moving away from Honig’s focus on *The Human Condition*, this essay will look at a couple of other examples where Arendt’s Greek and Jewish affiliations appear to overlap. It will argue both that Arendt’s Hellenism was profoundly marked by the experience of the Shoah and that her sense of Jewish identity drew on a longer history of Hellenised Jews.

Human

One might be tempted to see Arendt’s ancients as a continuation of the legacy of German philhellenism and its tenacious grasp on intellectuals in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Certainly it is possible to see Arendt’s election of the Greeks as a mark of her debt to Heidegger.¹⁰ She shares with her former teacher an investment in Greece as an originary moment – one which requires an excavation of modernity to retrieve. Like Heidegger too, her attachment to the ancient world is a conceptual one which never advocates a return to the actualities of ancient life. But to see a nod to Heidegger as the ultimate reference of her ancient proclivities would be reductive, not least because her Greeks are as much Nietzsche’s or Marx’s as they are Heidegger’s. More importantly, it is in her treatment of ancient texts and ancient ideas that Arendt articulates her distance and rejection of Heidegger and other aspects of the German intellectual tradition. Her crucial turn away from metaphysics towards politics, for instance, is hinged around a reading of Plato rather than a debate with Heidegger. Similarly, her rejection of mortality in favour of natality finds its source in

⁹ Bonnie Honig ‘What Kind of a Thing is Land? Hannah Arendt’s Object Relations or: The Jewish Unconscious of Arendt’s Most “Greek” Text’, *Political Theory* vol 44.3, (2016), 308

¹⁰ On Arendt and Heidegger see Dana R. Villa *Arendt and Heidegger: The Fate of the Political* (Princeton NJ, Princeton University Press, 1996). See also Margaret Canovan (1990) *Hannah Arendt: A Reinterpretation of her Political Thought* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1990) and Antonia Grunenberg *Hannah Arendt and Martin Heidegger: History of a Love*, Translated by Peg Birmingham, Kristina Lebedeva, and Elizabeth von Witzke. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2017). On Arendt’s Greeks as a symptom of her ‘reluctant modernism’ see Seyla Benhabid *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2003) and Hanna Fenichel Pitkin *The Attack of the Blob: Hannah Arendt’s Concept of the Social* (Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1998).

an analysis of antiquity. Arendt's ancients, in other words, do not act as an entry ticket into German culture but as a way for her to develop a distinct and resistant space within a tradition which she inhabits but fundamentally reshapes.

But as Katherine Harloe explains, there remains a fundamental paradox to Arendt's commitment to antiquity: "From *The Origins of Totalitarianism* onwards, Arendt insists that a fundamental fact of contemporary life is the breaking, to use her own favourite figure, of 'the thread of tradition'. The rupture in thought and experience occasioned by the twentieth-century phenomena of totalitarian domination on the one hand, and the threat of total nuclear destruction on the other, is absolute, and the inadequacy of the traditional categories of Western political, moral and legal thought to grasp these unprecedented and horrific possibilities marks the end of that tradition. What point can there be in invoking the ancient past under such circumstances? Why dwell upon the Greek, Roman and Christian origins of a tradition all but blotted out by the horrors of the present?"¹¹ For all Arendt's conscious efforts to reshape the tradition of German philhellenism, the question remains why should such a tradition continue to exist at all? For "a persecuted Jew, a stateless émigré"¹² who had witnessed first hand the failures of Western thought, how can we understand the desire to forge her place in its traditions rather than abandoning them altogether? Arendt's answer seems to be that it is precisely *qua* stateless persecuted Jew that a recourse to antiquity seems most necessary. If Judaism as the religion of the book can be understood as a reaction to the statelessness of its followers, then perhaps there is something paradigmatically Jewish in Arendt's turn to the ancient *word*?

The enigmatic conjunction between Greek and Jew informs one of the most famous passages in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951). Here Arendt discusses the situation of refugees after the Second World War. This is the section which ultimately leads her to argue for the importance of the 'right to have rights' as she reveals the emptiness of the concept of human rights in the context of the stateless. Arendt argues that the declaration of the Rights of Man at the end of the eighteenth century ought to

¹¹ Katherine Harloe 'Hannah Arendt and the quarrel of ancient and modern: 'On humanity in dark times: thoughts on Lessing' and the politics of historiography.' *Classical Philology*, 113 (1) (2018), 20

¹² Benhabib (2003), xxxviii

have been “a turning point in history”¹³ as man emancipated himself from God and historical convention and became the source of his own Law. But while theoretically speaking no higher authority should be placed above the individual man or woman, in practice the real source of law is the people of a particular territory and not the individuals. The new secular freedoms and the loosening grip of social conventions had important and unforeseen consequences for the protection of minority populations within European nation states: “The full implications of this identification of the rights of man with the rights of peoples in the European nation-state system came to light only when a growing number of people and peoples suddenly appeared whose elementary rights were as little safeguarded by the ordinary functioning of nation-states in the middle of Europe as they would have been in the heart of Africa”.¹⁴ In other words, within Europe itself peoples such as the Jews had as little protection from the concept of human rights as the colonial subjects did in relation to their European colonisers. Once the Jews and other minority peoples lost their ability to exercise civic rights, they lost their ability to be recognised by the state to which they allegedly belonged.

As Arendt observes: “The Rights of Man [...] had been defined as ‘inalienable’ because they were supposed to be independent of all governments; but it turned out that the moment human beings lacked their own government and had to fall back on their minimum rights, no authority was left to protect them and no institution was willing to guarantee them”.¹⁵ The Rights of Man were therefore unenforceable when they failed to be supported by the rights of citizens. In the wake of the decline of the nation state in the twentieth century, the concept of human rights would become even more precarious if not to say vacuous. It was, in part, in reaction to the newly founded UN’s Universal Declaration of Human Rights (which repeated the same vicious circle rather than breaking with) that Arendt would make this famous observation:

We became aware of the existence of a right to have rights (and that means to live in a framework where one is judged by one’s actions and opinions) and a right to belong to some kind of organized community, only when millions of people emerged who lost it and did and did not regain these rights

¹³ Hannah Arendt *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (London, Penguin Random House, London 2017), 380

¹⁴ Arendt (2017) 381

¹⁵ Arendt (2017) 381

because of the new global political situation. The trouble is the calamity arose not from any lack of civilization, backwardness, or mere tyranny, but, on the contrary, that it could not be repaired because there was no longer any ‘uncivilized’ spot on earth, because whether we like it or not we have really started to live in One World. Only with a completely organised humanity could the loss of home and political status become identical with expulsion from humanity altogether.¹⁶

Arendt argues that the ‘right to have rights’ must exist as a juridico-political precondition for the protection of other human rights. Although a great deal has been written about the meaning and significance of Arendt’s phrase, rather less has been said about the important presence of antiquity in Arendt’s critique. For immediately after this passage, Arendt turns to Aristotle:

Before this, what we must call a ‘human right’ today would have been thought of as a general characteristic of the human condition which no tyrant could take away. Its loss entails the loss of the relevance of speech (and man since Aristotle, has been defined as a being commanding the power of speech and thought), and the loss of all human relationship (and man, again since Aristotle, has been thought of as a ‘political animal,’ that is one who by definition lives in a community), the loss, in other words, of some of the most essential characteristics of human life.¹⁷

What is the significance of the distinction that Arendt draws between the concept of a ‘human right’ and ‘a general characteristic of the human condition’? The idea of a ‘human right’ understands membership in a community as an additional ‘right’ rather than an ontological fact of humanity. In Aristotle’s *Politics*, by contrast, the definition of man as an ‘political animal’ places man in his sociality as a fundamental dimension of his being. Aristotle attributes the polis to nature and thus embeds the notion of community within a conception of humanity that challenges the individualistic legacy of the modern discourse of human rights. The state, as Aristotle asserts, is prior to the individual (καὶ πρότερον δὲ τῆ φύσει πόλις ἢ οἰκία καὶ ἕκαστος ἡμῶν ἐστίν) and “he who is unable to live in society, or has no need because he is sufficient for himself, must be either a beast or a god” (Aristotle, *Politics* 1.1253a). A fundamental part of this human exceptionalism for Aristotle is man’s capacity for speech which equips him for a life in the polis directed towards *eu zen* (living well). It is within this context that Arendt understands Aristotle’s view of slavery:

¹⁶ Arendt (2017) 388

¹⁷ Arendt (2017) 388

This was to a certain extent the plight of slaves, whom Aristotle therefore did not count among human beings. Slavery's fundamental offense against human rights was not that it took liberty away (which can happen in many situations), but that it excluded a certain category of people from the possibility of fighting for freedom – a fight possible under tyranny, and even under the desperate conditions of modern terror (but not under any conditions of concentration-camp life). Slavery's crime against humanity did not begin when one people defeated and enslaved its enemies (though of course that was bad enough), but when slavery became an institution in which some men were “born” free and others slave, when it was forgotten that it was man who deprived his fellow-men of freedom, and when the sanction for the crime was attributed to nature.¹⁸

Arendt's reference to Aristotle's concept of natural slavery as she debates modern ideas about human rights and the situation of the refugee is significant for a number of reasons. If ancient (and modern) slavery have been seen as a blind spot in Arendt's political philosophy, here we see her addressing arguably antiquity's most noxious legacy – the doctrine of *natural* slavery – head on. As Emily Greenwood argues powerfully about the legacy of Aristotle: “the classical idea of the exclusive, political community, with Aristotle as its spokesperson, continues to sow legacies of political exclusion, in which citizens are disenfranchised of the vote, and in which members of our political community are not seen and not counted, because of the compact between political citizenship and a selective conception of who corresponds to our society's vision of the full human being.”¹⁹

Arendt's representation of the polis in *The Human Condition* is notorious for its apologetic relationship to the question of ancient slavery. Arendt knows very well that the Athenian polis founded on the principle of equality was premised on the “the existence of ‘unequals’ who, as a matter of fact, were always the majority of the population”.²⁰ For Arendt the creation of the public realm necessitated the emancipation of citizens from necessity and that emancipation was predicated on the enslavement of others:

¹⁸ Arendt (2017) 388-9

¹⁹ Emily Greenwood ‘Overthrowing Deadly Metaphors’, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-T9Ppg-KNsw>, 2020

²⁰ Arendt (1998) 32

What all Greek philosophers, no matter how opposed to *polis* life, took for granted is that freedom is exclusively located in the political realm, that necessity is primarily a pre-political phenomenon, characteristic of the private household organization, and that force and violence are justified in this sphere because they are the only means to master necessity – for instance by ruling over slaves – and to become free. Because all human beings are subject to necessity, they are entitled to violence toward others; violence is the prepolitical act of liberating oneself from the necessity of life for the freedom of the world.²¹

For Arendt the relegation of women and slaves to the domain of labour is the price Athenian society paid for the creation of polis life. Elsewhere in *The Human Condition*, she explicitly defends Aristotle for his characterisation of the slave as non human saying that “he denied not the slave’s capacity to be human, but only the use of the word “men” for members of the species man-kind as long as they are totally subject to necessity”.²² Arendt is thus part of long tradition of philosophical readers of Aristotle who minimise the offensiveness of his views on slavery and defend it on the grounds of philosophical consistency.²³

Yet, the passage from *The Origins of Totalitarianism* adopts a different tone. She reveals how, even in the absence of its recognisable institutions, slavery continues to inform our notions of the human today. Arendt analogises the situation of the Jews in the concentration camps to that of slaves.²⁴ Appearing in a parenthesis, the analogy remains rather indirect since Arendt’s more immediate reference is to Jews as refugees. The concentration camp functions as the limit case of the “loss of community” which starts with the condition of statelessness. But the discussion of slavery seems to intensify Arendt’s focus on the experience of the camps. She argues not just for an equivalency between slaves and inmates in terms of their predicament and the deprivation of their freedom. She sees a fundamental symmetry between the ideological acts of dehumanisation committed by the Nazis and the proponents of the doctrine of natural slavery. For the dehumanisation occurs not in the denial of rights to slaves but in the belief that some men were ‘born’ free and others ‘slave’. Such a belief system obscures the realities of enslavement as a man-made construct, a

²¹ Arendt (1998), 31

²² Arendt (2017) 84

²³ On which, see Greenwood (2020).

²⁴ Arendt (2017) 389

construct which is the result of man's violent actions towards his fellow man. Attributing to nature what is in fact a wholly human crime is an act of false consciousness. Moreover, the emphasis on being born a slave could not contrast more profoundly with Arendt's philosophy of natality. For Arendt, birth is both a metaphor and a living reality of the human capacity for renewal and for action. Birth and enslavement are for Arendt conceptual antinomies. It is this insight which informs the peroration of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*:

But there remains also the truth that every end in history necessarily contains a new beginning; this beginning is the promise, the only 'message' which the end can ever produce. Beginning before it becomes a historical event, is the supreme capacity of man; politically, it is identical with man's freedom. *Initium ut esset homo creatus est* - 'that a beginning be made man was created' said Augustine. This beginning is guaranteed by each new birth; it is indeed every man.²⁵

Aristotle's central presence in perhaps Arendt's most well-known and influential discussion of the plight of the stateless has been largely unacknowledged by her readers. Yet, it raises important questions about Arendt's identity as a Jewish classicist. The role of Aristotle in Arendt's argument here is equivocal. It is clear that she draws heavily and closely on the thesis of Aristotle's *Politics*, citing as axiomatic his understanding of man as a political animal whose distinctive attribute is the power of speech. For Arendt, Aristotle's equation of humanity with membership in political community is central to her critique of modernity and its emphasis on the rights of man. Yet, it is Aristotle's view that the human and the citizen are co-extensive categories which ultimately leads him to exclude slaves from humanity. The doctrine of natural slavery is the mechanism by which Aristotle's philosophy turns a contingent fact into a philosophical abstraction and a universal proposition. Arendt follows Aristotle's logic about the necessity of equating human flourishing with membership in the polis and understands that this entails the exclusion of slaves from the category of humanity. But for Arendt this appears to be a warning to modernity rather than a sanction. Her assessment is that it is the failure of modern political philosophy to understand the primacy of citizen rights which produced the necessary conditions for the dehumanisation of peoples such as the Jews. So while she cleaves closely to Aristotle's politicisation of the human, she characterises Aristotle's doctrine

²⁵ Arendt (2017) 629

of natural slavery as a ‘crime against humanity’. Nevertheless, such a crime appears to fall short of the crimes of the twentieth century:

Yet in the light of recent events it is possible to say that even slaves still belonged to some sort of human community; their labour was needed, used exploited, and this kept them within the pale of humanity. To be a slave was after all to have a distinctive character, a place in society – more than the abstract nakedness of being human and nothing but human. Not the loss of specific rights, then but the loss of the community willing and able to guarantee any rights whatsoever, has been the calamity which has befallen ever-increasing numbers of people. Man, it turns out, can lose all so-called Rights of Man without losing his essential quality as man, his human dignity. Only the loss of a polity itself expels him from humanity.²⁶

Having acknowledged the doctrine of natural slavery as a ‘a fundamental offense against human rights’, she here again seems to diminish the calamity of slavery by arguing that slaves retain an acknowledged place in society. The slave, for Arendt, “is more than the abstract nakedness” of the human being. With the images of naked bodies piled up in the concentration camps in mind, one might agree with Arendt that the systematic extermination of the Jews required an extreme degree of dehumanisation. Arendt seems to acknowledge a conceptual continuity between Aristotle’s dehumanisation of the slave and the ideology of Nazism while at the same time restoring Aristotle’s pre-eminence as a political thinker. The allusion to antiquity, then, is characteristically complex. For all the power of Aristotle as a reference, Arendt makes clear that any hope of a nostalgic recuperation of a past age is a self-delusion:

We can no longer afford to take that which was good in the past and simply call it our heritage, to discard the bad and simply think of it as a dead load which by itself time will bury in oblivion. The subterranean stream of Western history has finally come to the surface and usurped the dignity of our tradition. This is the reality in which we live. And this is why all efforts to escape from the grimness of the present into nostalgia for a still intact past, or into the anticipated oblivion of a better future are vain.²⁷

Like the reference to Aristotle, antiquity in general remains an ambivalent reference in Arendt’s work. It seems to oscillate between a providing a “neutral” genealogy and

²⁶ Arendt (2017) 389

²⁷ Arendt (2017) xiii

a privileged resource. Yet, in this passage, what she calls “the subterranean stream of Western history” seems to have a more malign influence. Rather than acting as an antidote to modernity, the Classical tradition seems to be complicit with the loss of dignity. Perhaps the *Origins of Totalitarianism* have an inescapable classical source?

Dog

The question of a nostalgia which Arendt addresses in the *Origins of Totalitarianism* is key to my second example, so too, as we will see, is Aristotle’s definition of man. My focus is Arendt’s discussion of Heinrich Heine’s *Hebrew Melodies* (the third cycle of poems in Heine’s late work, *Romanzero* 1851) in her early essay ‘The Jew as Pariah: A Hidden Tradition’ (1944). At the outset of this essay Arendt seeks to understand nothing less than the position of the Jews in European culture: “When it comes to claiming it owns in the field of European arts and letters, the attitude of the Jewish people may best be described as one of reckless magnanimity. With a grand gesture and without a murmur of protest it has calmly allowed the credit of its great writers and artists to go to other peoples, itself receiving in return (in punctiliously regular payments) the doubtful privilege of being acclaimed father of every notorious swindler and mountebank”.²⁸ For Arendt, the Jews have generously offered up their cultural achievements to the very nations which have denied them the very rights which would acknowledge their membership in the community. Arendt sees Jews willingly participating in and enriching a European culture which conceptualises their very existence as a problem. The so-called ‘Jewish Question’ which preoccupied European nation states in the nineteenth century saw the existence of the Jewish people as a threat to the idea of the nation itself. For a Jew such as Heine, the ambivalence of his position found a resolution, Arendt argues, in his *Hebrew Melodies*. She quotes from Heine’s poem ‘Princess Sabbath’ (1851):

In Arabia’s book of fables
We can see enchanted princes
Who at times regain their former
Human shape and comely figure:

²⁸ Arendt (2007) 275

Once again the hairy monster
Changes back into a princeling,
Dressed in brightly jeweled splendor,
Sweetly fluting amorous ditties.

But the magic respite ends,
And again all of a sudden
We behold his royal highness
Retransmuted to a monster.

Of a prince so used by fortune
Is the song I sing. His name is
Israel. A witch's magic
Has transformed him to a dog.

As a dog with doggish notions,
All the livelong week he piddles
Through life's slime and slopes and sweepings,
Mocked and jeered at by street-urchins.

But on every Friday evening
At the twilight hour, the magic
Fades abruptly, and the dog
Once more is a human being.

Human now, with human feelings,
Head and heart uplifted proudly,
Dressed in clean and festive clothing,
He goes in his father's mansion.

.....

“Schalet, ray of light immortal!
Schalet, daughter of Elysium!”
So had Schiller's song resounded,
Had he ever tasted schalet,

For this schalet is the very
Food of heaven, which, on Sinai,
God Himself instructed Moses
In the secret of preparing,

...

Yes, this schalet's pure ambrosia
Of the true and only God:
Paradisal bread of rapture;
And, with such a food compared,

The ambrosia of the pagan,

False divinities of Greece,
Who were devil 'neath disguises
Is the merest devils' offal.

Heine, *Princess Sabbath*²⁹

In this poem, Heine depicts the background from which he came – announcing that his name is Israel. He represents the Jews as fairy princes metamorphosed by a witch's magic into a dog. Israel lives out a “doggish” life in the week and is treated with ridicule. His doggish existence, subject to the necessities and indignities of labour, exclude him from the category of man. An animal by virtue of not being a *political animal*. But on Friday night the magic wears off and he is returned to humanity. Through the rituals of the Jewish Sabbath, the Jew regains his dignity and becomes again a prince. Arendt sees Heine's poem as embodying many of the traits of the pariah identity: it uses humour and irony together with creativity and unreality in its desire to “to hold up a mirror to the political world”.³⁰ Ultimately, for Arendt such a stance, while understandable, falls short of the kind of collective political engagement that she sees as necessary for reclaiming a place in the political community for the Jews. Bonnie Honig, in her insightful reading, takes Arendt to task for reading past Heine's political activism: “Heine's poem seems to suggest that the release from animality is a result of the curse's self-weakening or self-suspension, almost a kind of autoimmunity. The suggestion misleads though and obscures another suggestion in the poem: the possibility that release may also be taken and not just suffered or granted. It may be an effect of power or agency, and not just of exceptional self-suspension. That is, it may testify not to the weakness of the curse, or the mercy (or cruelty!) of the curser, but rather to the resilience, agency, and power of its sufferer.”³¹ In other words, while Arendt sees only Israel's passivity and Heine's corresponding refuge in unreality, Honig uncovers a much more active stance of self-assertion in the counter-metamorphosis of the Sabbath Jew. Moreover, as a communal

²⁹ The translation is from *The Complete Poems of Heinrich Heine: A Modern English Version* translated by Hal Draper (Boston, Suhrkamp/Insel Publishers Boston, 1982) with some minor changes.

³⁰ Heine is major source of Jewish jokes for Freud in his *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious* (1905), Sigmund Freud *Standard edition of the complete psychological works of Sigmund Freud*, edited and translated by James Strachey, (London, The Hogarth Press, 1953)

³¹ Bonnie Honig, ‘The Laws of the Sabbath Poetry: Arendt, Heine and the Politics of Debt’, *UC Irvine Law Review* vol 5.2, (2015), 466

ritual, the Sabbath perhaps models the kind of collective action in concert that Arendt announces as the necessary route to emancipation at the end of the essay: “For only within a framework of a people can a man live as a man among men, without exhausting himself. And only when a people lives and functions in consort with other peoples can it contribute to the establishment upon earth of a commonly conditioned and commonly controlled humanity”.³²

Arendt champions a different dimension of Heine’s resistance. “Heine”, Arendt argues, “is the only German Jew who could truthfully describe himself as both a German and a Jew.” In particular, Arendt sees Heine’s Hellenism as his entry card into German culture:

By seeing Phoebus Apollo in Rabbi Faibusch, by boldly introducing Yiddish expressions into the German language, he in fact put into practice that true blending of cultures of which others merely talked.³³

Heine refuses to sacrifice his Jewishness on the altar of German assimilation. Rather, for Arendt, Heine is an example of successful ‘blending’. But that blending could not be direct between German and Jew it could only be achieved by a third way – antiquity, Greek antiquity. She reserves her greatest admiration for one particular act of Greek/Jew/German reconciliation. Quoting these lines from Heine’s ‘Princess Sabbath’, “Schalet, ray of light immortal Schalet, daughter of Elysium! So had Schiller’s song resounded, Had he ever tasted Schalet”, she writes, “in these words, Heine places the fare of Princess Sabbath on the table of the gods, beside nectar and ambrosia.”³⁴ What Arendt finds most remarkable about Heine is his refusal of social advancement and his obstinate desire to offer “the homespun Judaism of everyday life [...] a place in general European culture”.³⁵ Heine displays a class consciousness in elevating the humblest dish to the banquets of the Olympian gods. Parodying Schiller’s ‘Ode to Joy’, Heine seems to compose a new anthem of Jewish freedom. Although Arendt praises his use of the German language, it is ultimately Heine’s philhellenism which is the medium of his emancipation. If Heine is “among

³² Arendt (2007) 297

³³ Arendt (2007) 281

³⁴ It is notable for Arendt’s idea of blending that Heine uses the French/German *schalet* for the Yiddish, *cholent*.

³⁵ Arendt (2007) 281

the most uncompromising of Europe's fighters for freedom" it is because he responds to the Jewish Question in Greek. Arendt describes how Heine was rightly dismissive of the notion that "Jews could exist as 'pure human beings' outside the range of peoples and nations".³⁶ It is not enough for the Jew to be liberated from his doggish existence and become 'a pure human', he must instead aspire to take his place at the table of the Greek Gods.³⁷ Israel must aim at citizenship and not just at 'naked humanity'.³⁸

But Arendt fails to mention that Heine's subsequent line refers to the "False divinities of Greece". The falsity is crucial to understanding the meaning of the poem. Despite Heine's manifest philhellenism, he was ultimately disillusioned with Greece as a solution to the nineteenth-century Jewish Question. And although Greece provides one aesthetic/political model for Heine, Arendt ignores the fact that Israel's story is first an *Arabian* fable. The *Arabian Nights* from which Heine draws was, as Srinivas Aravamudan argues, the 'transcultural text' of the eighteenth century par excellence: "There might be no better global example of the transculturation between East and West that constituted Enlightenment Orientalism than the movement from the Arabic *Alf layla wa-layla* to the French *Mille et une nuits* to the English *Arabian Nights' Entertainments*. [...] To fully understand the genesis of the *Nights*, the scholar needs some familiarity with the Levantine languages that its first European translator, Galland, possessed, especially Arabic, Turkish, Persian, Hebrew, Latin, and Greek."³⁹ In presenting Israel's story as an Oriental tale, Heine strategically allies the Jewish story to an Arabic one. German Orientalism would play a fundamental role in defining the contours of philhellenism. Germany's affiliation with the Indo-European created its other in the Semitic Orient. As Honig writes: "when confronted with the resources of German orientalism, Heine chose to take his bearings from the more

³⁶ Arendt (2007) 280

³⁷ Conversely, there may be an alternative Greek origin to the dog as pariah in the figure of Diogenes the Cynic.

³⁸ Bonnie Honig suggests to me the interesting idea that we spatialise the temporality of the curse, in this case political membership allows one to be dog in the factory all week but in relation to the state (as a kind of Sabbath) one is a man.

³⁹ Srinivas Aravamudan *Enlightenment Orientalism: Resisting the Rise of the Novel* (Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 2011), 50. On the wider context of German Orientalism see Suzanne Marchand *German Orientalism in the Age of Empire: Religion, Race, and Scholarship* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2009) and R. B. Cowan *The Indo-German Identification: Reconciling South Asian Origins and European Destinies 1765–1885* (Camden House, Rochester, NY, 2010).

abject of the exoticized options—the Arabian, which is to say, the other Semitic figure. So even as he sought a way to win acceptance for Judaism, the way he chose to take was not just the one a parvenu might choose, that of using the dominant culture’s most capitalized sources, he also chose to use the least.”⁴⁰ In adapting an Arabian fable, Heine ultimately refuses to allow Greek myth to be his only, or even main, entry point into European culture.

Heine’s decentering of the Hellenic calls into doubt Arendt’s attempted ‘Greek solution’ to the Jewish Questions of the twentieth century. If Heine had contented himself with using Greek culture to formulate his claims for Jewish humanity, he would have contented himself with a humanism whose scope excluded the slave and the barbarian. In allying himself instead to the Arab, Heine doubles down on his status as a *barbaros* and demands membership in the community in that name, on those terms. Heine in other words shows Arendt how a people such as the Jews can “live[.] and function[.] in consort with other peoples [...and...] contribute to the establishment upon earth of a commonly conditioned and commonly controlled humanity”.⁴¹

Yet, Arendt reads past Heine’s potentially revolutionary gesture. Heine’s insistence on a mongrel humanism, a humanism which recognises Cholent as well as Ambrosia, Arab as well as Jew, poses a challenge to Arendt’s political animal. Heine shows Arendt that to read tradition as a persecuted Jew means to change that tradition, to rethink humanism as a doggish humanism. The exclusion of the slave and the stateless from the definition of the human by Aristotle on account of their marginalisation from citizenship should lead Arendt to redefine the citizen rather than the human. Arendt’s Jewish Hellenism rooted in her refugee experience could thus offer more than phenomenology of the political animal, it could offer a reclamation of the *animal* for the *polis*.

⁴⁰ Honig (2015) 470. The synthesis of the Jew and Arab is a wider theme in Heine’s life and work. Heine claimed to be of Sephardic origin (on his mother’s side) and the *Hebrew Melodies* contain several poems about Sephardi Jews, see Gabriel Cooper ‘Facing East: Orientalism and Antisemitism in Heine’s *Hebräische Melodien*’, *Seminar: A Journal of German Studies*, Volume 56 Issue 1, February 2020, 55-74. Hannah Arendt’s own critical relationship to Mizrahi Jews has been the subject of discussion in the aftermath of the publication of *Eichmann in Jerusalem*.

⁴¹ Arendt (2007) 297