

Hannah Arendt
Sonning Prize acceptance speech, 1975

Ever since I received the rather startling news of your decision to choose me as the recipient of the Sonning Prize in recognition of my contribution to European civilization, I have been trying to figure out what I could possibly say in response. Seen from the perspective of my own life, on the one hand, and of my general attitude to such public events on the other, the simple fact with which I find myself confronted stirred up so many partly conflicting reactions and reflections that it wasn't easy for me to come to terms with it—apart from the fundamental gratitude which leaves us helpless whenever the world offers us a true gift, that is, something which really comes to us gratuitously, when Fortuna smiles, splendidly disregarding whatever we have cherished consciously or half-consciously as our aims, expectations, or goals.

Let me try and sort these things out. I'll start with the purely biographical. It is no small matter to be recognized for a contribution to European civilization for somebody who left Europe thirty-five years ago by no means voluntarily — and then became a citizen of the United States, entirely and consciously voluntarily because the Republic was indeed a government of law and not of men. What I learned in these first crucial years between immigration and naturalization amounted roughly to a self-taught course in the political philosophy of the Founding Fathers, and what convinced me was the factual existence of a body politic, utterly unlike the European nation-states with their homogeneous populations, their organic sense of history, their more or less decisive division into classes, and their national sovereignty with its notion of *raison d'état*. The idea that when the chips were down diversity must be sacrificed to the "union sacrée" of the nation, once the greatest triumph of the assimilatory power of the dominant ethnic group, only now has begun to crumble under the pressure of the threatening transformation of all government — the government of the United States not excluded — into bureaucracies, the rule of neither law nor men but of anonymous offices or computers whose entirely depersonalized domination may turn out to be a greater threat to freedom and to that minimum of civility, without which no communal life is conceivable, than the most outrageous arbitrariness of past tyrannies has ever been. But these dangers of sheer bigness coupled with technocracy whose dominance threatens indeed all forms of government with extinction, with "withering away" — at first still an ideological well-intended pipe dream whose nightmarish properties could be detected only by critical examination — were not yet on the agenda of day-to-day politics, and what influenced me when I came to the United States was precisely the freedom of becoming a citizen without having to pay the price of assimilation.

I am, as you know, a Jew, *feminini generis* as you can see, born and educated in Germany as, no doubt, you can hear, and formed to a certain extent by eight long and rather happy years in France. I don't know what I contributed to European civilization, but I do admit that I clung throughout these years to this European background in all its details with great tenacity occasionally amounting to a slightly polemical stubbornness since I lived of course among people, often among old friends, who tried very hard to do just the opposite: to do their best to behave, to sound, and to feel like "true Americans," following mostly the sheer force of habit, the habit of living in a nation-state in which you must be like a national if you wish to belong. My trouble was that I had never wished to belong, not even in Germany, and that I therefore had difficulty in understanding the great role which homesickness quite naturally plays among all immigrants, especially in the United States where national origin, after it lost its political relevance, became the strongest bond in society and in private life. However, what for those around me was a country, perhaps a landscape, a set of habits and traditions, and, most importantly, a certain mentality, was for me a language. And if I ever did anything consciously for European civilization, it certainly was nothing but the deliberate intent, from the moment I fled Germany, not to exchange my mother tongue against whatever language I was offered or forced to use. It seemed to me that for most people, namely, all those who are not especially gifted for languages, the mother tongue remains the only reliable yardstick for whatever languages later are acquired through learning; and this for the simple reason that the words we use in ordinary speech receive their specific weight, the one that guides our usage and saves it from

mindless cliches, through the manifold associations which arise automatically and uniquely out of the treasure of great poetry with which that particular language and no other has been blessed.

The second issue which could not but come up for special consideration from the perspective of my own life concerns the country to which I now owe this recognition. I have always been fascinated by the particular way the Danish people and their government handled and solved the highly explosive problems posed by the Nazi conquest of Europe. I have often thought that this extraordinary story, of which you, of course, know more than I do, should be required reading in all political science courses which deal with the relations between power and violence, whose frequent equation belongs among the elementary fallacies not only of political theory but of actual political practice. This episode of your history offers a highly instructive example of the great power potential inherent in nonviolent action and in resistance to an opponent possessing vastly superior means of violence. And since the most spectacular victory in this battle concerns the defeat of the "Final Solution" and the salvation of nearly all the Jews on Danish territory, regardless of their origin, whether they were Danish citizens or stateless refugees from Germany, it seems indeed only natural that Jews who are survivors of the catastrophe should feel themselves related to this country in a very special way.

There are two things which I found particularly impressive in this story. There is first the fact that prior to the war Denmark had treated its refugees by no means nicely; like other nation-states it refused them naturalization and permission to work. Despite the absence of anti-Semitism, Jews as foreigners were not welcome, but the right to asylum, nowhere else respected, apparently was considered sacrosanct. For when the Nazis demanded first only stateless persons for deportation, that is, German refugees whom they had deprived of their nationality, the Danes explained that because these refugees were no longer German citizens the Nazis could not claim them without Danish assent. And second, while there were a few countries in Nazi-occupied Europe which succeeded by hook or by crook in saving most of their Jews, I think the Danes were the only ones who dared speak out on the subject to their masters. And the result was that under the pressure of public opinion, and threatened neither by armed resistance nor by guerrilla tactics, the German officials in the country changed their minds; they were no longer reliable, they were overpowered by what they had most disdained, mere words, spoken freely and publicly. This had happened nowhere else.

Let me now come to the other side of these considerations. This ceremony today is no doubt a public event, and the honor which you bestow upon its recipient expresses a public recognition of someone who by this very circumstance is transformed into a public figure. In this respect, I am afraid, your choice is open to doubt. I do not wish to raise here the delicate question of merit; an honor, if I understand it rightly, gives us an impressive lesson in humility, for it implies that it is not for us to judge ourselves, that we are not fit to judge our own accomplishments as we judge those of others. I am quite willing to accept this necessary humility because I have always believed that no one can know himself, for no one appears to himself as he appears to others. Only poor Narcissus will let himself be deluded by his own reflected image, pining away from love of a mirage. But while I am willing to yield to humility when confronted with the obvious fact that no one can be a judge in his own case, I am not willing to give up my faculty of judgment altogether, and say, as perhaps a true Christian believer would say, "Who am I to judge?" As a matter of purely personal, individual inclination I would, I think, agree with the poet W. H. Auden:

Private faces in public places
Are wiser and nicer
Than public faces in private places.

In other words, by personal temperament and inclination — those innate psychic qualities which form not necessarily our final judgments but certainly our prejudices and instinctive impulses — I tend to shy away from the public realm. This may sound false or inauthentic to those who have read certain of my books and remember my praise, perhaps even glorification, of the public realm as

offering the proper space of appearances for political speech and action. In matters of theory and understanding it is not uncommon for outsiders and mere spectators to gain a sharper and deeper insight into the actual meaning of what happens to go on before or around them than would be possible for the actual actors and participants, who are entirely absorbed, as they must be, by the events themselves of which they are a part. It is indeed quite possible to understand and reflect about politics without being a so-called political animal.

These original impulses, birth defects if you wish, were strongly supported by two very different trends, both inimical to everything public, which quite naturally coincided during the twenties of this century, the period after World War I, which even then, at least in the opinion of the contemporary younger generation, marked the decline of Europe. My own decision to study philosophy was quite common then, though perhaps not run-of-the-mill, and this commitment to a *bios theoretikos*, to a contemplative way of life, already implied, even though I may not have known it, a noncommitment to the public. Old Epicurus' exhortation to the philosopher, *lathe biosas*, "live in hiding," frequently misunderstood as a counsel of prudence, actually arises quite naturally out of the way of life of the thinker. For thinking itself, as distinct from other human activities, not only is an activity that is invisible — that does not manifest itself outwardly — but also and in this respect perhaps uniquely, has no urge to appear or even a very restricted impulse to communicate to others. Since Plato, thinking has been defined as a soundless dialogue between me and myself; it is the only way in which I can keep myself company and be content with it. Philosophy is a solitary business, and it seems only natural that the need for it arises in times of transition when men no longer rely on the stability of the world and their role in it, and when the question concerning the general conditions of human life, which as such are properly coeval with the appearance of man on earth, gain an uncommon poignancy. Hegel may have been right: "The owl of Minerva spreads its wings only with the falling of dusk."

This falling of dusk, the darkening of the public scene, however, did not take place in silence by any means. On the contrary, never was the public scene so filled with public announcements, usually quite optimistic, and the noise that moved the air was composed not only of the propaganda slogans of the two antagonistic ideologies, each promising a different wave of the future, but also by the down-to-earth statements of respectable politicians and statements from left-of-center, right-of-center, and center, all of which together had the net effect of desubstantializing every issue they touched, in addition to confusing utterly the minds of their audiences. This almost automatic rejection of everything public was very widespread in the Europe of the twenties with its "lost generations" — as they called themselves — who of course were minorities in all countries, vanguards or elites, depending on how they were evaluated. That they were small in number does not make them any less characteristic of the climate of the times, although it may explain the curious general misrepresentation of the "roaring twenties," their exaltation and the almost total oblivion of the disintegration of all political institutions that preceded the great catastrophes of the thirties. Testimony to this antipublic climate of the times can be found in poetry, in art, and in philosophy; it was the decade when Heidegger discovered *das man*, the "They" as opposed to the "authentic being a self," and when Bergson in France found it necessary "to recover the fundamental self" from the "requirements of social life in general and language in particular." It was of that decade in England that Auden said, in four lines what to many must have sounded almost too commonplace to be said at all:

All words like Peace and Love,
All sane affirmative speech,
Had been soiled, profaned, debased
To a horrid mechanical screech.

Such inclinations — idiosyncracies? matters of taste? — which I have tried to date historically and explain factually, if acquired in the formative years of one's life, are liable to extend very far. They can lead to a passion for secrecy and anonymity, as if only that could matter to you personally

which could be kept secret — "Never seek to tell thy love / Love that never told can be" or "Willst du dein Herr mir schenken, / So fang es heimlich an" — and as though even a name known in public, that is, fame, could only taint you with the inauthenticity of Heidegger's "They," with Bergson's "social self," and corrupt your speech with the vulgarity of Auden's "horrid mechanical screech." There existed after World War I a curious social structure which still has escaped the attention of the professional literary critics as well as that of the professional historians or social scientists, and which could best be described as an international "society of celebrities"; even today it would not be too difficult to draw up a list of its members, and one would find among them none of the names of those who in the end turned out to be the most influential authors of the period. It is true that none of those "internationals" of the twenties responded very well to their collective expectation of solidarity in the thirties, but it is, I think, also irrefutable that no one of them crumbled faster or threw the rest into greater despair than the entire sudden collapse of this apolitical society whose members, spoilt by the "radiant power of fame," were less able to cope with catastrophe than the nonfamous multitudes who were only deprived of the protective power of their passports. I have drawn from Stefan Zweig's autobiography, *The World of Yesterday*, which he wrote and published shortly before he committed suicide. It is, as far as I know, the only written testimony to this elusive and, to be sure, illusive phenomenon whose mere aura assured those who were permitted to bask in fame's radiance of what today we would call their "identity."

If I were not too old to decently adopt the current speech habits of the young generation, I could truthfully say that the fact of this prize has had its most immediate and, in my case, its most logical consequence in setting off a "crisis of identity." The "society of celebrities," to be sure, is no longer a threat; thank God it no longer exists. Nothing is more transient in our world, less stable and solid, than that form of success which brings fame; nothing comes swifter and more readily than oblivion. It would be more in keeping with my own generation — a generation that is old but not quite dead — to turn away from all these psychological considerations and to accept this felicitous intrusion into my life as just a piece of good luck, but without ever forgetting that the gods, at least the Greek gods, are ironical and also tricky. Somewhat in this vein, Socrates who began to worry and start his own aporetic questioning after the Delphic oracle, known for its cryptic ambiguities, had declared him to be the wisest of all mortals. According to him that was a dangerous hyperbole, perhaps a hint that no man is wise, and that Apollo had meant to tell him how he could actualize this insight by perplexing his fellow citizens. So, what could the gods have meant by making you select for public honor somebody like me, who is neither a public figure nor has the ambition to become one?

Since the trouble here obviously has something to do with me as a person, let me try another approach to this problem of suddenly being changed into a public figure by the undeniable force not of fame but of public recognition. Let me first remind you of the etymological origin of the word "person," which has been adopted almost unchanged from the Latin *persona* by the European languages with the same unanimity as, for instance, the word "politics" has been derived from the Greek *polis*. It is, of course, not without significance that such an important word in our contemporary vocabularies, which all over Europe we use to discuss a great variety of legal, political, and philosophical matters, derives from an identical source in antiquity. This ancient vocabulary provides something like the fundamental chord which in many modulations and variations sounds through the intellectual history of Western mankind.

Persona, at any event, originally referred to the actor's mask that covered his individual "personal" face and indicated to the spectator the role and the part of the actor in the play. But in this mask, which was designed and determined by the play, there existed a broad opening at the place of the mouth through which the individual, undisguised voice of the actor could sound. It is from this sounding through that the word *persona* was derived: *per-sonare*, "to sound through," is the verb of which *persona*, the mask, is the noun. And the Romans themselves were the first to use the noun in a metaphorical sense; in Roman law *persona* was somebody who possessed civil rights, in sharp distinction from the word *homo*, denoting someone who was nothing but a member of the human species, different, to be sure, from an animal but without any specific qualification or distinction, so that *homo*, like the Greek *anthropos*, was frequently used contemptuously to designate people not

protected by any law.

I found this Latin understanding of what a person is helpful for my considerations because it invites further metaphorical usage, metaphors being the daily bread of all conceptual thought. The Roman mask corresponds with great precision to our own way of appearing in a society where we are not citizens, that is, not equalized by the public space established and reserved for political speech and political acts, but where we are accepted as individuals in our own right and yet by no means as human beings as such. We always appear in a world which is a stage and are recognized according to the roles which our professions assign us, as physicians or lawyers, as authors or publishers, as teachers or students, and so on. It is through this role, sounding through it, as it were, that something else manifests itself, something entirely idiosyncratic and undefinable and still unmistakably identifiable, so that we are not confused by a sudden change of roles, when for instance a student arrives at his goal which was to become a teacher, or when a hostess, whom socially we know as a physician, serves drinks instead of taking care of her patients. In other words, the advantage of adopting the notion of persona for my considerations lies in the fact that the masks or roles which the world assigns us, and which we must accept and even acquire if we wish to take part in the world's play at all, are exchangeable; they are not inalienable in the sense in which we speak of "inalienable rights," and they are not a permanent fixture annexed to our inner self in the sense in which the voice of conscience, as most people believe, is something the human soul constantly bears within itself.

It is in this sense that I can come to terms with appearing here as a "public figure" for the purpose of a public event. It means that when the events for which the mask was designed are over, and I have finished using and abusing my individual right to sound through the mask, things will again snap back into place. Then I, greatly honored and deeply thankful for this moment, shall be free not only to exchange the roles and masks that the great play of the world may offer, but free even to move through that play in my naked "thisness," identifiable, I hope, but not definable and not seduced by the great temptation of recognition which, in no matter what form, can only recognize us as such and such, that is, as something which we fundamentally are not.

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