

HANNAH ARENDT



JULIA KRISTEVA

TRANSLATED BY ROSS GUBERMAN

HANNAH ARENDT

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FEMALE GENIUS: GENERAL INTRODUCTION

One of the most fervent passions is the genius's love of truth.

—Pierre-Simon Laplace

“What a genius!” Our recent claims of discovering “genius” within ourselves—whether in the form of a talent, a natural gift, or a prolonged search for truth—have put an end to the ancient deification of personality. At first, the divine spirit charged with watching over the birth of the future hero was transformed into a viable means of innovation.¹ As Voltaire put it, “this invention in particular appeared to be a gift from the gods; this *ingenium quasi ingénitum* was a sort of divine inspiration.” Whether by simple metonymy or by analogy, “a genius” later became someone who “displayed genius,” if not someone who simply happened to influence someone else.²

Hannah Arendt, one of the protagonists of this three-part work, made light of “the genius,” whom she considered to be a product of the Renaissance. Tired of being reduced to the fruits of their labors, the men of the Renaissance became increasingly munificent, and as they lost touch with God, they grafted His transcendence onto the very best among their ranks. Since that time, the *divine*, disguised as a genius, has made up for this loss by producing a mystery play

that has transformed the creator into something unique. Does this mean that the absolute has descended upon us? Or that we should consider this loss to be a challenge to humanity? Is it a demand from a superman? Or is it a refusal to lower ourselves to the level of “products” or “appearances” in a society plagued by “consumption” and the “spectacle”? Suffice it to say that “genius” is a therapeutic invention that keeps us from dying from equality in a world without a hereafter.

Even so, do we dare speak about “genius” without ignoring the “evil genius” who devoted all his resources to deluding Descartes himself? In our day, it would appear, the word “genius” stands for paradoxical occurrences, unique experiences, and remarkable excesses that manage to pierce through an increasingly automated world. The troubling, even formidable, emergence of such phenomena helps us understand the meaning of human existence. Does this mean that genius helps substantiate the meaning of life? The protagonists of this work believe that it does not: as we shall see, my geniuses consider life to be substantiated through more modest means indeed. They do suggest, however, that our existence can be perpetually revived by that which is extraordinary. Significantly, however, this brand of extraordinariness is not achieved by gaining entry into the hallowed halls that record the rigorous ordeals of history. Like the ancient Greek heroes, my geniuses displayed qualities that, while no doubt exceptional, can be found in most of us. And they (the geniuses, which in this case are three *female* geniuses) did not hesitate to make mistakes and to let us know their limitations. What distinguishes these geniuses from us is simply that they have left us to judge a body of work rooted in the biography of their experience. The work of a genius culminates in the birth of a subject.

Each of us leads some sort of existence, and many of us have lived through adventures, often interesting ones, that can provide fodder for family legend and sometimes for the local newspaper or even the nightly news. Yet such experiences are not the stuff of a noteworthy biography. Let us agree here to use the term “genius” to describe those who force us to discuss their story because it is so closely bound up with their creations, in the innovations that support the development of thought and beings, and in the onslaught of questions,

discoveries, and pleasures that their creations have inspired. In fact, these contributions touch us so intimately that we have no choice but to moor them in the lives of their authors.

Some works of art have an impact that is greater than the sum of their parts. The way these works affect us depends ultimately on the historical disturbances they bring about and on the way they influence other people and their followers—in sum, their effect depends on the way *we* respond to them. When someone finds himself at this juncture and capitalizes upon it, he becomes a genius—even if all he ever did was be born into the world, work, and then die. We endow him with a biography that fails to explain the excess, the indulgences, or the invasiveness of his life. Still, the reason we afford such a biography to geniuses, and not to just anyone, is to sound an alarm: regardless of whatever creation, work of art, or deed has come about, someone has lived. Are we someone? Are you someone? Try to be someone!

A Mozart concerto, a funny Charlie Chaplin scene, and Madame Curie's discovery of radium were all events as unusual as they were inevitable, and as unforeseen as they were indispensable. Since "it" took place, we cannot imagine a world without "it," as if "it" has always been with us. The temporary shock caused by such acts and works makes us want to explain "it" away by conjuring up the superhuman and by contemplating the destiny or the genetics that preside over the birth of individuals. That is, when we do not make "it" into an everyday occurrence by proclaiming, as did Buffon, that "genius is endless patience" or, for the more romantic among us, by repeating Valéry words: "Genius! O endless impatience!" At the same time, when geniuses demand that we endow them with a life that amounts to less than their "genius" itself, they play another trick on us: they make us look at ourselves in a way that is just as ingenious as the way they locate their extraordinary character between their own pleas and the unpredictable opinion of the human beings who respond to them and who ordain them. At heart, they are geniuses for us—and for eternity, so much so that we become geniuses ourselves, the sort of geniuses that accompany "our own" geniuses.

And what role do women play in all this? Is it true, as La Bruyère and others have written, that women have "talent and genius . . . only

for handiwork”? Of course, it has long been asserted that women’s only genius is the genius of their patience, whereas style is the exclusive province of men.

The twentieth century has put an end to the notion that women are the birthing half of a species of mammals. The growth of industry, which demanded a female workforce, and then the growth of science, which has slowly increased our knowledge of procreation, have effectively freed women from the constraints of the life cycle. Although these trends have been underway for thousands of years, only privileged minorities and a few exceptional personalities have been able to take advantage of them thus far. The twentieth century has made this emancipation accessible to the majority of women, particularly in the industrialized world, and we have every reason to believe that women in Asia, Africa, and Latin America are prepared to follow a similar path. For better or for worse, the next century will be a female one—and female genius, as described in this work, gives us hope that it might be for the better.

The feminist movement is the third stage in the progress of women (the first being the suffragist movement in the late nineteenth century and the second being the militant struggle for equal rights in all aspects of life, as described in Simone de Beauvoir’s manifesto *The Second Sex*). The feminist movement, beginning with the unrest in the late 1960s, focused with a heartfelt violence on this newfound freedom and on the unforeseen differences that such freedom laid bare: the existence of another sexuality, another language, and another politics. But this rejection of tradition did not avoid falling prey to excess, the most troubling example of which was to see motherhood as the ultimate proof that women have been exploited by every imaginable form of patriarchy since time immemorial. In the manner of libertarian “movements,” the feminists have assembled “all women” into an emancipating force, or even a revolutionary force, as is the case with the majority of proletariat groups and developing countries. These downward drifts, far from being a thing of the past, have become tainted with a reactionary conformity that manages to discredit any notion of feminine specificity or freedom that is not based on seduction—which means not based on reproduction

and consumption. Putting that aside, and putting aside the balancing act that characterizes all manner of social mores, much evidence points to a revival of women's emancipation.

One example may be found in the prominent (and growing) role that women play in the political life of democracies. We can safely assume that this display of political and economic competence will only become broader and more widely accepted, not only in the Western world but also in developing countries.

Motherhood, which has benefitted from scientific progress and which was demeaned at one time in certain quarters, has since emerged as the most essential of the female vocations. In the future, motherhood will be desired, accepted, and carried out with the greatest blessings for the mother, the father, and the child. Will mothers become our only safeguard against the wholesale automation of human beings?

In the end, the particular accomplishments of each woman and her personality, which cannot be reduced to the common denominator of a group or a sexual entity, have become not only possible but also proclaimed with great pride. It is because I am myself, and specifically myself, that I am able to introduce the contributions of women to a large segment of the world.

This particularity is where we shall find the sparkle of female genius. Recognizing the substantial contribution made by a few extraordinary women whose life and work have left their mark on the history of the twentieth century is one way to call attention to the singularity of every woman. Is it not true that going beyond your own limits presents a more appealing antidote to the various forms of "groupthink," whether they be generously libertarian or sensibly conformist?

We still must acknowledge that, no matter how far science may progress, women will continue to be the mothers of humanity. Through their love of men, too, women will continue to give birth to children. That fate, though tempered by various techniques and by a sense of solidarity, will remain an all-consuming and irreplaceable vocation. Everyone knows that women, through an osmosis with the species that makes them radically different from men, inherit

substantial obstacles to realizing their genius and to contributing another specific, if not ingenious, talent to the culture of humanity that they shelter in their wombs. Many people have thumbed their noses at these insurmountable natural conditions that appear to banish female geniuses for good—and such caricaturists have not always been wretched misogynists. Think of the marvelous Mlle de Merteuil, who thought that certain women, such as the *Présidente de Tourvel*, would never amount to “more than a type of species.” Joyce, that unsurpassed wordsmith who knew his Molly from personal experience, believed he was in the right when he accorded time to men while reserving space and the species for women: “Father’s time, mother’s species.” And Baudelaire, the most disdainful of them all, scoffed at “the childish side of motherhood.”

These views are not wrong, but they fail to tell the whole story. Mothers can be geniuses, not only of love, tact, self-denial, suffering, and even evil spells and witchcraft but also of a certain approach to living the life of the mind. That approach to being a mother and a woman, at times warmly accepted and at times outright refused or wrought with conflict, bestows upon mothers a genius all their own. Women, greater in number and in confidence than ever before, have proved this beyond cavil: though curled up like children in space and in the species, women are also able to work toward unique, innovative creations and to remake the human condition.

The three women who are the subject of this work are by no means the only women to have left their mark on the increasingly diverse pursuits of our time. My personal affinities are what led me to read, enjoy, and choose Hannah Arendt (1906–1975), Melanie Klein (1882–1960), and Colette (1873–1954). I hope that by the end of this work, the reader will be persuaded that my personal choices are worthy of a more objective selection.

The twentieth century was one in which the accelerated progress of technology revealed, more forcefully than before, both the excellence of humankind and the risks of self-destruction that lurk within it. The Holocaust alone proves this to be the case, and it is hardly necessary to add the atomic bomb and the dangers of globalization to the list.

With value systems fallen by the wayside, we now deem life to be the ultimate good. It is both a threatened life and a desirable life—but in the end, what sort of life is it? Hannah Arendt was consumed with such thoughts when she responded to the death camps of two totalitarian regimes by setting her hopes on a respectable political activity that would lay bare the “miracle of natality.”

But Arendt did not wish to believe that language could turn mad and that the “good sense” of humanity could conceal the threat of lunacy. It would be up to Melanie Klein to investigate these chasms of the human psyche and to devote herself to studying the death drive that gives life to the speaking being from the onset, although melancholia and paranoid schizophrenia question the primacy of that operation.

The sensualists and seductresses who become intoxicated with the flesh of an apricot, with the arum of their lover’s member, or with a schoolteacher’s lilac-scented breasts have not, for all that, abandoned the atomic age. If the twentieth century turns out to be more than just a terrible memory, it will be in part because of the pleasure and immodesty of the liberated women that Colette described with the impertinent grace of the insurgent that she was. A zest for words, when grafted onto the robots that we have become, may be the most wonderful gift that female writing can offer the mother tongue.

I include here two German-speaking Jewish women who explored, in the English language and in London and New York, the weightiness of politics and the limits of human nature. I also include a French countrywoman who rekindled the fire of the materialists and a sophisticated debauchery. The genius of these three women has restored, with a complexity that complements the truths they tell, the many faces of modern Time.

These three women lived, thought, loved, and worked with men—with their men, sometimes by tolerating the authority of a master or by depending on his love, and sometimes by running the risks inherent in rebellious acts that are tinged with an unimpeachable innocence. In each case, however, these women were able to maintain more or less respectable independence.

It may come as a surprise that this book discusses, among Arendt’s other writings, the political works on anti-Semitism and

totalitarianism that made her famous. Tracing the development of her work seemed to be the most fruitful avenue, tracing the portrait of the woman-thinker whose substantial contributions to political thought have been either praised or criticized by others before me. I also consider how Arendt gave voice to Heidegger's concept of *Dasein* [Being] and yet replaced the solitude of the "being-thrown-in-the-world" with the virtuosity of the "appearance." Heidegger's concept of errancy, when cast against the anonymity of the "they," becomes suddenly unrecognizable once Arendt focuses on the miraculous "birth of each person" into the "frailty of human affairs," that is, into political life. Though she always remained attentive to the great philosopher's work, Arendt, that lover of pure thought, was able to move beyond it and to become a political theorist in a class by herself—one who has been discussed at length and yet who remains just as topical today. Not only was Arendt the first person to link the two totalitarian regimes because they both destroyed human life but also she made it known that the "appearance" is a condition intrinsic to humanity: she reveals the irreducible singularity of each person, provided that he finds the courage to partake in the common sense of those around him. After all, the media frenzy that has shaken up the world since Arendt's death amounts perhaps to more than just a curse, particularly if we examine it through the lens of the genius of this woman who revalued political meaning as a "taste" for showing, observing, remembering, and recounting.

Freud had just discovered the unconscious as well as the relationship between mental illness and sexuality. He was surveying the pitfalls of pleasure while settling scores with the social conformists who did not want—and who still do not want—to admit that the human body is a being of desire. To this concern for Eros and Thanatos, the founder of psychoanalysis added far more strident battles with his disciples that were primarily Oedipal in nature. It was at that time that Melanie Klein devoted herself to studying decompensation. Caring for children had taught her that in the beginning is the urge to destroy, an urge that eventually is transformed into madness but that always remains a conduit of desire. Freud had already said as much, but it was Klein who fully developed the notion. A more

radical pioneer of child psychoanalysis than was Anna Freud, Klein created the real possibility of a psychoanalysis of psychosis, one that could circumvent the spiritualism of Jung that had wandered, against Freud's teachings, into that very domain.

Despite the dogmatism of the ferocious explorer that she is accused of being, Klein's work lends itself to a popular readership. Her work has been carried forward by original and fruitful developments that proved her right all along: W. R. Bion and David W. Winnicott were not her disciples but her followers. Without them, and without the modern psychoanalysis of psychosis and autism that dominates her work, we still would not understand the distinguishing mark of modern culture that is the ever-present risk of madness and the wide range of treatments we can use to stave it off.

The idea that pleasure is not only organic but also emerges in words, as long as those words become sensory, has never been articulated more effectively than by the French geniuses after Rabelais, particularly by the eighteenth-century sensualists and libertines. And yet it is Colette who can claim the privilege of saturating the French language with the pagan tastes that make up the charm of our civilization, all the while telling us how this sort of sensuality is rooted in the sexual antics of the well-bred or in the poignant pleasures of the common folk. To realize her genius, Colette, unlike Arendt and Klein, did not first have to overcome a master: she saw her husbands, Willy and then Jouvenel, as primarily a source of assistance and protection, and in the end, an annoyance. Rather, Colette had to face the authority of the mother tongue, which forced her to confront both reason and femininity, to love both of them equally, and to transmute one into the other. Colette's only real rival would prove to be Proust, whose narrative search has a social and metaphysical complexity that goes well beyond the adventures of Claudine and her counterparts. And yet Colette far surpasses Proust in the art of capturing pleasures that have never been lost.

These three experiences, these three truth-telling works were produced at both the heart of the twentieth century and at its margins. Though Arendt, Klein, and Colette were not truly excluded or marginalized, they nevertheless lay outside the norm. These women

manifested their freedom to explore without heeding the dominant trends, institutions, parties, or schools of thought. Arendt's work is interdisciplinary (is it philosophy? political science? sociology?), and it delves into religions and into ethnic and political groupings; her work avoids the mainstream views of the "Right" as well as the "Left." Klein, for her part, challenged the conformity of the Freudians, and without fearing the consequences of being disloyal to the prevailing psychoanalytic orthodoxy of the day, she broke entirely new ground in the study of the Oedipus complex, fantasy, language, and prelanguage. At first provincial and outrageous, and then worldly while remaining a woman of the people, Colette was never fully part of the literary establishment until she developed her insight into social mores and her sensual rebellion.

Though innovative in its refusal to conform, the genius of these women came at a price: rebels glean their stimulation from their genius, and they pay for it by being ostracized, misunderstood, and disdained. That fate is common to all geniuses. Is it also common to women in general?

Life, madness, and words: the three women relied on them to become lucid and passionate investigators while drawing on their existence as much as on their thinking and while sharing their unique perspective on the most important issues of our time. I attempt to study these women without limiting myself to the well-known themes always linked to their names. Hannah Arendt is more than just "the banality of evil" and the Eichmann trial, and more than just the linking of Nazism and Stalinism. Melanie Klein went further than the "precoocious paranoid projection," the "want and gratitude" commanded by the "part object" that is the mother's breast and the "multiple splitting" that culminates in endogenous psychosis. And the provocation of the little urchin who acted outrageously in order to prevail at the Académie Goncourt does not fully account for the magic of Colette. These themes are no more than a few trees obscuring forests that are far more appealing but that are also dangerously more complex.

Of course, the zeal of the experts has already put to rest these commonplace associations: our three protagonists, often misunderstood or even persecuted during their lives, have since acquired

their own set of commentators and fanatic adherents. I do not devote a great deal of time here to the work of the many specialists who have already spent much energy, with scrupulous attention to detail, on reconstructing various controversies and on clearing up the inevitable misunderstandings that shaped the paths of these three women.

Instead, I limit myself to studying these three women carefully and faithfully so as to reconstruct their individuality while putting each in her proper perspective—not to liken what cannot be likened, but to portray, amid the resonance that will sound among these three compositions, the complexity of twentieth-century culture as well as the major role played by women in its most vulnerable arenas: life, madness, and words.

Do we owe these uncommon forms of genius and these unforgettable innovations to these women's femininity, so unusual in itself? It is a question worth asking, and the title of this work implies that we do. At this early stage, however, I would rather not respond to the question. I began this study with the hypothesis that I knew nothing, that "woman" is an unknown, or at least that I preferred not to "define" what a woman is so that an answer might emerge out of a careful accumulation of examples. So perhaps, after accompanying each woman into her own genius, we will strike a chord that appears to bring them all together. We may hear some music composed of singularities, dissonant keys, and counterpoints that go beyond the fundamental tonalities. Perhaps that is what female genius is—that is, if female genius even exists. For now, I suggest that we reserve judgment until the end of our journey.

VOLUME ONE

LIFE

*Hannah Arendt:
Or Action as Birth and Estrangement*

LIFE AS A NARRATIVE

“It seems as if certain people are so exposed in their own lives (and only in their lives, not as persons!) that they become, as it were, junction points and concrete objectifications of ‘life.’”¹ Hannah Arendt (1906–75) wrote these words, which foreshadowed her own fate, when she was only twenty-four years old. By that point she had already met and loved Heidegger, who remained an intriguing presence throughout her life, and she had already defended her doctoral dissertation in Heidelberg. Her thesis, translated into English as *Love and Saint Augustine*, was written under the direction of the same Karl Jaspers in whom she confided her deepest thoughts. From the start, she found herself so exposed that she crystallized herself into the “junction points and concrete objectifications of life.”

After considering a life devoted to theology, and then turning to the study and “dismantling” of metaphysics, the young philosopher focused much of her thinking on *life*. In the beginning it was life for its own sake: in the name of self-preservation, Arendt was forced to flee Germany in a 1933 exile that helped her escape the Holocaust.

At first she stayed in Paris, and then, in 1941, she landed in New York, where she became an American citizen ten years later. As a political theorist in New York, she completed a major study of the history of anti-Semitism and the origins of totalitarianism before returning to some fundamental reflections on the life of the mind.

Gripped from the start by that unique passion in which life and thought are one, Arendt's journey, so turbulent and yet so profoundly coherent, consistently put life—both life itself and life as a concept to be analyzed—at the center of her work. Far from being a “professional thinker,” Arendt placed her thought at the very core of her life. It is tempting to see this specifically Arendtian trait as a particularly female characteristic, all the more because the “repression” considered so “problematic” in women is what kept Arendt from withdrawing into the obsessive edifices of pure thought and anchored her instead in corporeal experience and in bonds with other people.²

Even more important, the theme of life guides her thinking throughout all her writings, growing in purity and structure as it intersperses political history with metaphysical history. It underlies her thought process as she establishes with great intellectual fortitude—in a move that would prove eminently controversial—that Nazism and Stalinism are two sides of the same horror, totalitarianism, because they both partake in the same denial of human life. With the upsurge of technological progress since World War One, this destructive contempt for life, already apparent in other civilizations, has attained unparalleled heights. The totalitarian regimes, which found themselves on the same trajectory because they shared, however distinctly, the same denial of life, were united through the phenomenon of the concentration camps. To that end, Arendt wrote that “the mass man's typical feeling of superfluosity—an entirely new phenomenon in Europe, the concomitant of mass unemployment and the population growth of the last 150 years—has been prevalent for centuries in the contempt for the *value of human life*.” She went on to add, “the old adage that the poor and oppressed have nothing to lose but their chains no longer applied to the mass men, for they lost much more than the chains of misery when they lost interest in their own well-being: the source of all the worries and



Figure 1 Hannah Arendt, 1927.
(©AKG)

cares which make human life troublesome and anguished was gone. Compared with their immaterialism, a Christian monk looks like a man absorbed in worldly affairs.”³

Arendt’s somber tone, one of anger tinged with irony, presaged the sometimes apocalyptic concern that surrounded her determination that “radical evil” resides in the “perverted ill will,” in Kant’s sense, to make “men superfluous.” Put another way, the adherent of totalitarianism destroys human life after obliterating the meaning of all life, including his own. Even worse, this “superfluousness” of human life, whose origins Arendt ascribes to the rise of imperialism, reemerges in those modern democracies that are consumed with automation: “Radical evil has emerged in connection with a system in which all men have become equally superfluous. The manipulators of this system believe in their own superfluosity as much as



Figure 2 Hannah Arendt, 1935.
(©Leo Baeck Institute)

in that of all others, and the totalitarian murderers are all the more dangerous because they do not care if they themselves are alive or dead, if they ever lived or never were born. The danger of the corpse factories and holes of oblivion is that today, with populations and homelessness everywhere on the increase, masses of people are continuously rendered superfluous if we continue to think of our world in utilitarian terms. Political, social, and economic events everywhere are in a silent conspiracy with totalitarian instruments devised for making men superfluous.”⁴

In the face of this threat, Arendt crafted a passionate defense of life in *The Human Condition*. On the opposite extreme from the sort of life that is numbingly reproduced by the vitalist relentlessness of the consumer culture and of the modern technology allotted to the “life process,” Arendt sings an ode to the uniqueness of every birth and