

DEAD MOTHERS

1. Two quotes

For the living, death is primarily disappearance

Hannah Arendt

When mother dies, one is, for the first time, really alone
in the world and that is hard

Wystan Hugh Auden

2. Two death messages

Auden, August 1941

A telegram finds its way from England, over the Atlantic, to a Summer house in Newport. The hostess receives it over the telephone, just as she and her guests are preparing to go to a dinner party. She finds the great poet's partner, Chester Kallman, and whispers in his ear. Chester mixes a strong drink, gives it to Wystan and says:

- We're not going to the dinner party.
- Oh, goody, goody.
- Because your mother is dead.

Wystan Hugh Auden covers his face with his hands and weeps.

Arendt, July 1948

A telegram finds its way from England, over the Atlantic, to a Summer house in New Hampshire, where Hannah Arendt is working on part 2, "Imperialism", of her book *Origins of Totalitarianism*. After reading the telegram, she immediately writes a letter to her husband in New York:

Dearest,

I just got a telegram from England.
Mother died sleeping tonight.
I am both sad and relieved.

A week earlier she had helped her mother Martha to pack her things and leave the furnished two-room apartment on Manhattan, which they - Hannah, her husband, and her mother - had shared for seven years.

3. Two possible memories

Auden, Around 1915

A duet with his mother Constance.

She has chosen Wagner's *Tristan and Isolde* to share with her eight year old boy.

As *Tristan and Isolde* they drink from the love potion; looking into each other's eyes, they see how hatred and animosity give way for a passionate love.

- *Sweetest maid!*

Tristan sings to him with Constance's mature alto.

- *Dearest man!*

Isolde answers through his own clear boy's voice.

Constance's huge hand reaches out towards him

- *Isolde!*

and he puts his little hand in hers

- *Tristan!*

Together, triumphantly

- *Escaped from the world,
I have won you!*

and then, affectionately

- *Supreme joy of love,
I am aware of you alone.*

His brother John enters the room, clapping his hands.

Arendt, January 1919

A demonstration with her mother Martha.

The Spartacists, led by Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht, are trying to take over Berlin. In January 1919 supportive demonstrations take place all over Germany.

In Königsberg Martha Arendt takes to the streets with her eleven year old daughter. Marching in a river of people, Martha clutches her daughter's hand, saying:

- Hannah, this is history!

4. Two disappearances

Auden, 1941

The only tie he always had taken for granted dissolved in a second.

She left a void behind, a world where every life,
every love
is just for the time being.

This is the Abomination. This is the wrath of God.

Arendt, 1948

A tie is gone. A bond. An alliance. A connection.
An obligation. A leash. A burden.
A common history. A shared exodus. A love triangle.
A closeness. A weight.

I am both sad and relieved.

5. Two memorial stones

Auden, 1941

He writes her a memorial stone, a Christmas oratory, calls it
"For the Time Being". It is dedicated to her:

IN MEMORIAM
CONSTANCE ROSALIE AUDEN
1870-1941

1941: wartime, prospects horrifying, Advent is dark.

This is the Abomination. This is the wrath of God.

There is no one to lead us, no one to lead him, his general is dead.

*Our resourceful general
fell down dead as he drank
And his horses died of grief.*

But a miracle occurs: the Child is born.

As the human "we" in Auden's oratory leaves childhood and grows up, the divine simultaneously performs a movement in the opposite direction:

God is transformed from an omnipotent parent into a needing child.

The child leaves us no commandments, gives no verdicts.

Auden's oratory encourages shepherds and wise men alike to go and see the divine child for themselves, trust what they see, and act on that sight as loving grown ups would act towards a child.

A mother is dead. God is a child. It's time to grow up.

Arendt, 1966

If Arendt ever wrote anything that remotely could be seen as a memorial stone, it would perhaps be "Rosa Luxemburg: 1871-1919", a review of a biography on Luxemburg, written nearly 20 years after Martha's death.

In that review, half a sentence points explicitly back at Hannah Arendt herself, in a for her unusual way:

"... this story, faithfully handed down to me when I was a child"

The story she refers to was what she calls the Luxemburg "legend"

"The sentimentalized image of the bird watcher and lover of flowers, a woman whose guards I'd good-by to her with tears in their eyes when she left prison"

Arendt retells this story a bit condescendingly, but still says that it probably is true. This ambiguous tone might well reflect her attitude to Martha, who most certainly is the one who "handed it down" to Hannah, as a first introduction in Luxembourgian socialism.

So, Hannah Arendt's review of a book about a long since dead public figure, might partly be a late tribute to her mother.

But in the summer 1948, when Martha died, Hannah Arendt was primarily occupied with death of another scale than one private, personal death.

In writing her three volume inquiry into the origins of totalitarianism, she tried to understand the inconceivable events during the last decades in Europe, to understand how totalitarianism works, what it does to us.

The totalitarian goal, death before death:

people disappearing from the living, before they are dead

Death before death:

All spontaneity killed, and thereby the miracle of unexpected action turning the course of events. Only conditioned reactions remain.

Millions of mothers had died. But millions of children were born, each of them a new beginning, a new beginner. Being human, with the power to start something new.

Annika Ruth Persson,
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