James Merrill, like Proust, experiences the opposition of Athens and Jerusalem. His encounters teach him that the question of whether to be guided by reason or revelation rests ultimately on the false presupposition that the two constitute a contrary pair. He discovers that the pursuit of the truth cannot avoid unmasterable moments of revelation which, however, far from constituting a “miraculous” exception to the lawful work of reason, are opened up by the movements of discourse itself. Over the course of the events resumed in *Sandover*, JM and DJ learn that the world of meaningful, significant relationships they inhabit cannot be fully appreciated or preserved by regarding it merely as the artifact of actions of subjects. Instead, language itself, as a medium that cuts across or through even the distinction between the living and the dead, emerges as a fundamental, yet abyssal, “ground.”

As we have seen, this stress on how meaning emerges, willy-nilly, from the traces of language (or from the traces of traces) in such a way as to escape determination or mastery by conscious, rational agency, connects the lessons of *Sandover* to the Arendtian concern for the autonomy of the meaningful political world in relation to “life” or instrumentalizing action. In Arendt’s view, that perspective narrows the significance of things, actions, and events to the sub-
ject's purposes of preservation and enhancement. In Merrill's poem, the horizon of meaning that emerges in the course of JM and DJ's investigations and experiments cannot be reduced to their own subjective projections. That does not mean, however, that meaning is to be located in a metaphysical beyond; rather, JM and DJ learn that meaning's source is as near to hand as conceivable. For it is nothing less than the unpredictable twists and turns of their own speeches and deeds, which always turn out to mean more and other than originally intended, expected, or received. The interactive or intersubjective character of language virtually guarantees that the meaningfulness of the world they explore escapes their conscious mastery and so constitutes it as a world, that is, as something more than the projection of a subject and so something that resists the subject's wishes and intentions. The novelty of Sandover is its articulation of the way in which the very solidity of the world requires no more ground than the exchange and circulation of linguistic signs.

The modern concept of fiction can act, has acted, as a source of reassurance about the boundaries between the real and the unreal, the clear and the obscure, the direct and devious. The earliest novels, literary historians tell us, were not novels at all, but literal deceptions: an invented narrative was presented as "real" through the device of its author pretending to be its editor or discoverer. The concept of fiction in its modern sense, however, depends on the reader's voluntary submission to the unreal time, space, and voice constructed by the novel, the Coleridgean "willing suspension of disbelief." That phrase repays some reflection. Because disbelief is willed by the agency of the reader, and because disbelief is only suspended and not entirely abandoned, the treatment of the novel as a fiction serves to bolster the reading subject's confidence in its own cognitive powers. Modernity thus understands the novel as a "fiction" in the sense given the term by legal usage: as something "stipulated" to be the case for certain purposes but about which a definitive judgment or commitment to believe is reserved. Keeping the novel in its place by determining it as an experience about which one need not feel called upon to arrive at a definitive judgment or commitment is a strategy that rests ultimately on the epistemological subject's firm control over the real and the unreal. By means of such assumptions and devices, then, the
reader, even in giving himself or herself over to the world of the novel and letting it work its effects upon him or her, is still willing the suspension of critical powers; the reader remains a subject of will at all times. It is this power that enables fiction to assume the status of an artifact of an experience neither true nor untrue but simply, neutrally, "unreal."

The American fictions explored in Chapter 4 upset these formal delimiters along with the epistemological subject upon which they rest and, for that reason, should perhaps be considered "postmodern." Merrill’s poem, especially, withdraws any such cognitive reassurance for the very simple reason that the experience it testifies to is unavailable to the reader who insists on approaching it in the conventional "conditional mode." To reduce the matter to a formula, the work of Burroughs, and even more powerfully (as I argued) that of Merrill, is both true and untrue, or, perhaps better, in Umberto Eco’s and Jean Baudrillard’s terms, it is neither real nor unreal but "hyperreal." This is because their work foregrounds mechanisms that link the text of the "fiction" to the larger narratives to which it refers, upsetting the epistemological reliability necessary to the idea of the reader entering into a stable contractual relationship between reader and author in which the reader willingly suspends his or her belief in return for a vivid aesthetic experience.

According to M. M. Bakhtin, this commingling and interpenetration of fictive and nonfictional elements is virtually constitutive of the modern novel as a distinct genre. The novel is distinctive, Bakhtin argues, in that it not only transforms other literary genres (through parody, reformulation, and changes in tone and emphasis) but also maintains a constant relationship with “extraliterary genres, with the genres of everyday life and with ideological genres”: “constructed in a zone of contact with the incomplete events of a particular present,” the novel therefore “crosses the boundary of what we strictly call fictional literature.” Bakhtin himself regards the formal incompleteness of the novel—its relentless appropriation and transformation of extranovelistic and extraliterary discourse—as a symptom of its immaturity, attributing it to the fact that the novel remains but a "developing genre." But if one dispenses with this teleological perspective and ceases viewing the novel’s "border violations," as Bakh-
tin calls them, as steps on the way to a purified and perfected genre, the phenomenon of the confusion of the fictional and the real becomes evident in its own right—and as Sandover indicates, there is no reason to restrict it to the novel.

The political relevance of this phenomenon is that it helps capture what has commonly been felt to be at stake politically in literary forms such as the novel: their inherent connectedness to an outside world of extraliterary discourses, making them in some sense strongly worldly in character. This is why Merrill’s poem unexpectedly reveals a political engagement: it is a virtual allegory of the transformation of self-contained poetic concerns into a far broader series of discursive phenomena, and that in itself makes for political engagement despite Merrill’s oft-expressed hostility to political discourse. That hostility is founded on a suspicion of intellectual systems generally, and rigid patterns of thought and evaluation in particular, which Merrill associates with both political systems and the leveling, generalizing gaze of the theorist. To such an image of the intellectual, Merrill prefers an intelligence that employs beliefs and modes of thought in the pursuit not of Truth but of fulfillment. What matters in such a project is access to beliefs, which includes the ability to take up and leave off ideas pragmatically as opposed to the demands of a coherent or deductive system. The discourse of politics is antithetical to such a project primarily owing to the unsupple character of ideological contestation, and it is for this reason that poetry cannot survive its politicization: “The trouble with overtly political or social writing,” as Merrill told an interviewer in 1969, “is that when the tide of feeling goes out the language begins to stink.”

On this view, political discourse is by its very nature inextricably linked to the grossly articulated feelings of the moment, so it cannot result in genuinely significant writing, that is, writing that creates its own context and readers. It is evident, however, that Merrill limits his rejection of political writing to that which is “overtly” political, to that which trades in received understandings and is “engaged” in especially direct or obvious ways. Merrill is not, absurdly, ruling out the possibility of politically significant poetry or literarily significant political writing (say, Yeats’s “Easter 1916,” or The Declaration of Independence, or Thoreau’s Walden), but rather, aesthetically or liter-
arily significant writing that depends directly on ephemeral policies, causes, or "issues" for its emotional impact. What is commonly read as Merrill’s apoliticism, then, is better understood as a rejection of the stupefying ideological belief systems that crowd the postmodern public sphere—dominating for a moment, only to disappear without a trace—in favor of the invention of beliefs and perspectives worth preserving for discussion and hence open to transfiguration. To the extent that the latter is in fact what we might want to mean by "the political," Merrill’s un- or antipolitical attitudes seem superficial indeed.

One might argue that this amounts to no more than that Merrill’s elitism and aestheticism are not un- or antipolitical but, more narrowly, antidemocratic or elitist. Those who criticize Merrill often stress just this point, acknowledging a political turn but deploring the direction. And Merrill himself has seemed to confirm such fears, associating the cultivation of the sensibility he espouses with the lives of the few: “Some will always have a more complex emotional or intellectual life than others, which a more complex art will be called upon to nourish.”8 No matter how equitable the society, Merrill appears to be saying, the distinctions that matter for culture cannot be erased; the difference between oppressor and oppressed may be eliminable, but not that between popular and high culture, because the latter is rooted in intractable human differences, however distorted their expression in a given society. This is a genuine form of elitism, though it is not for that reason unpolitical; indeed, it thrives on and nourishes acute political judgments, as the framework that emerges in Sandover makes clear. Whatever the truth of that judgment, however, the significance of Merrill’s work for political theory lies elsewhere—not in its appraisal of democracy but, rather, in its conception of how one transcribes or represents the emergence of the event itself, or better, how one testifies to the emergence of the contingent through practices that escape the grasp of sovereign will and the certitudes of the epistemological subject.

At issue here is the question of the particular. To draw on Adorno’s reflections in Negative Dialectics, Merrill pursues strategies designed to show up the insufficiency of Western, theoretical, “conceptual thinking.” Adorno rejects the concept because it presents the particu-
lar only as an example of the general, grasped conceptually in a manner independent of any experience of a particular; the problem is that this is prejudicial to the disclosive power of the contingent particular, which loses its specificity and peculiarity, becoming an example rather than a particular. Adorno suggests thinking through models rather than concepts, that is, unfolding the contents of particular events and problems in order to acknowledge and preserve their peculiarity rather than to fold them into a larger conceptual scheme; indeed, the point is to disrupt any such scheme.9 The strategy (comparable in some respects to Derrida’s) involves an acknowledgment of, even an affinity for, the concrete particular. But a strange conundrum haunts such writing: the excavation of the particular contingent, supposed to be so disruptive and transgressive, is placed within the service of a larger narrative lesson about the virtues of the contingent. In other words, there is a danger that the peculiarities at stake get buried under the abstract, general, conceptual “lesson” about the importance of the contingent, open-ended performativity of discursive action. The demand that the contingent be preserved, that the model not be sacrificed to the concept (even a concept of contingency), if taken seriously, places severe discursive pressures on the would-be theorist, whose very success in articulating the contingent would then seem to undermine his or her fundamental intentions.

I think that the importance of Merrill’s strategy lies in his scrupulous attention to this dimension. On the one hand, he has commingled discourses such that his poem cannot be considered a purely imaginary artifact because, no matter how strange or occult, it maintains a contact with the real that can never be entirely bracketed. On the other hand, Merrill’s basic commitment to a poetic discourse means that the generalizing judgments he does hazard are inevitably folded back into the particularity and uncertainty of the experiences that generate them. They remain, on Kant’s terms, reflective not determinant judgments: the question mark of the poem as a whole hangs over every “final” interpretation offered, decisively undermining its finality without, however, making possible its simple dismissal.

The perspective JM and DJ ultimately adopt meshes, as we have seen, with Hannah Arendt’s revision of the political as the site of
an identity that lives on only in discourse, “free” not in the sense of being the vehicle of unconstrained will but in the sense of being unconstrained by will, undetermined by subjective manipulation and therefore open to continual revision and renewal, to the ceaseless transformation and transfiguration of identity as the price of the “immortality” that preservation through discursive remembrance offers. That conception answers to Arendt’s desire to counter the nihilistic worldlessness that for her characterizes modernity by identifying a source of meaningful action that, however, does not rely on the transcendental grounds of Platonic, “other-worldly” metaphysics but instead issues from and remains within the entirely relative and variable world of discourse, act, and event. To avoid nihilism and subjectivism, the world of meaningful relationships must not be reducible to the “anthropological” projections of a willful subject; to avoid Platonism, such a world must not refer for its stability and solidity to meaning grounded in an extra-human agency. For Arendt, the “political” satisfies these exacting demands because the virtually infinite variety and plurality brought to bear on events through public discussions of them ensure the continual irruption of fresh meaning even as such meaning remains self-referentially tied to the actions and speeches of individual actors themselves, because actors’ public identity always fails to coincide with their own willed self-identification and therefore possesses a measure of tangibility and reality that transcends the merely psychological or private self.

Such a world of meaningful, significant relationships, actors, and events, far from constituting a solid foundation, is inherently fragile, evanescent, transitory. By its very nature, it cannot reliably be got hold of, managed, produced, or reproduced at will. The evanescent and transitory character of the meaning generated by political action in Arendt’s sense has the effect, however, of transforming the enterprise or practice of political theory. If the meaningfulness of political action, and the identities formed through it, are not such that it can be produced or organized in the manner of purposive or instrumental action, then the raison d’être of political theory cannot be (as in already discussed the Platonic traditions criticized by Lyotard) to gain a clearer theoretical understanding of the truth of politics, the better to instantiate it in practice “here below.” Put dif-
ferently, the Platonic appropriation of the model of craftsmanship, in which the vision of the product precedes and governs the actual production of the artifact itself, becomes not only useless but positively harmful once the reality of the horizons of meaning within which action takes place is seen to depend on a *dislocation* of event and its anticipatory vision. Arendt’s task would be rather to preserve, by testifying to, actual events of the emergence of political meaning. The problem, in other words, is how to *write* political theory, not in order to secure a pristine theoretical vision, to establish the unchanging truth of the political in theoretical form, but rather to register, or better to celebrate, the emergence of unexpected and unprecedented meanings through discursive action.

From Arendt’s perspective, I hazard, what we might call “writing the political” involves not telling the whole truth about the nature of political action in the sense of achieving a comprehensive and exhaustive theoretical vision but something more like “remaining true” to the political in the sense of being faithful, in one’s own discursive practice, to the specific texture of political action, its simultaneous openness to revision and resistance to a singular, manipulative will. Such writing is not only political theory; it possesses a quasi-political force in that it serves to illuminate, and thus preserve for appreciation, the value of events that are free precisely in so far as they are unprecedented. Far more effectively than by appealing to normative criteria, however well grounded, such writing contributes to stimulating and refining our political sensibilities by articulating the political emergence of political events themselves. The light *Sandover* can shed on our understanding of the practice of political theory, then, concerns above all else the imperative to eschew the deductive argumentative routines of “Platonic” theory in favor of forms of narrative more adequate to capturing the peculiar contingency and overdetermination of the emergence of political meaning. It suggests that the thought of postmetaphysical political theory cannot be far removed from considerations of narrative practice and textual articulation, or at least that an encounter with such problems is unavoidable.

There is good reason, then, as Ronald Beiner has observed, to view the theorist as a storyteller. But what, exactly, might that mean—how *does* the theorist write when the aim is not comprehensive illu-
mination but the disclosure of a partial, contingent meaning and the celebration of contingency? For Beiner, doing theory as storytelling means “true stories that help us to see our nature more clearly, and . . . serve to disclose (or remind us of) possibilities of human life that are hidden from us by our immersion in the needs and preoccupations of the present” (p. 10). Arendt’s narrative political theory, according to Beiner, articulates historical events with an eye to rescuing them from the oblivion of forgetting so as to enlarge our sense of what is possible and what is closed off, and so to enhance our reflection on who we are and what we might do. Beiner seems ultimately, however, to want to yoke this use of narrative to the practical project of making judgments about conduct; the point of enriching political theory to include narrative is that it deepens and widens the ensemble of relationships and possibilities within which we act and so, widens the field of our judgment. In Beiner’s vision, then, the narrativization of theory remains instrumentally tied to the (rather traditional) project of passing judgment on political and moral phenomena. However necessary that enterprise may be, Arendt’s interest in the political is at least as concerned with the identification of sources of meaning and significance in a world threatened by nihilism and ideology as with the making of ethicopolitical judgments.13 Given the concern for retrieving sources of meaning, it makes sense to look closely at Arendt’s narrative practice, one of the most remarkable exemplifications of which is her reading of the founding of the American Republic in On Revolution.

For Arendt, the fundamental affinity between political theory (as narrative) and the political itself (as the ever-changing, doxastic world of witnessed and interpreted human interaction and event) lies in the irreducibly textual, interpretative character of each. George Kateb captures this identity when he points out that “Arendt frequently distinguishes between words and deeds, or between talking and doing, as the basic modes of action. But given all that she excludes as not properly political, the distinction cannot stand. It must
collapse, with the result that there is only one true mode of politi-
cal action, and that is speech, in the form of talking or occasionally
writing, as with the Declaration of Independence and other manifes-
toes or addresses to the world, writing that should be read aloud.”14
Kateb allows that deeds count as political only in so far as they are
primarily communicative in character, and as the mark of the pri-
macy of the communicativeness of a deed, he points to the quality of
“luminosity[,] . . . exemplariness, [and] instantaneous intelligibility.”

Kateb’s stress on “instantaneous intelligibility” seems to me, how-
ever, to be at odds with Arendt’s insistence on the unpredictable and
initiatory character of political action, the way in which such action
discloses a personality quite distinct from the actor’s own subjec-
tivity. As she puts it in her essay on Hermann Broch, “We can only
agree with the Gospel phrase: ‘For they know not what the do’; in
this sense no acting person ever knows what he is doing; he cannot
know and for the sake of man’s freedom is not permitted to know.”15
Arendt does, it is true, affirm that the public identity constituted
and disclosed through action, while invisible to its bearer, “appears
clearly and unmistakably to others.” But the clarity and distinctness
of such appearances ought not to be assimilated to notions of self-
evidence or an incontestable identity of meaning, if only because for
Arendt that would be sufficient to identify them as antipolitical in
character: for Arendt, both self-evident and rational truths are, from
the point of view of political action, simply “that which we cannot
change,” whereas the utterly relativistic, doxastic world of political
action is change itself.16 To be sure, changeability, initiation, and be-
ginning cannot be celebrated in every sphere of human existence; the
freedom of authentic political action is both limited and transitory,
but no less relevant as a source of meaning and significance for that.
What must be appreciated, then, is what we might call the existential
relevance of the transitory and contingent, and, as we shall see, a nar-
rative approach to theory is essential to shaping that appreciation.

Arendt’s turn to narrative reflects her appreciation of the system-
atic bias with which political action has traditionally been viewed
in the West: she warns of “an inevitable flaw in all critical exami-
nations of the willing faculty,” namely, that “every philosophy of the
Will is conceived and articulated not by men of action but by phi-
losophers, . . . who in one way or another are committed to the bios theoretikos and therefore by nature more inclined to 'interpret the world' rather than to 'change it.'”17 Professional thinkers, Arendt continues, “have not been 'pleased with freedom' and its ineluctable randomness; they have been unable to pay the price of contingency for the questionable gift of spontaneity, of being able to do what could also be left undone.” To remedy the fact that the Western philosophical tradition has described and evaluated action from the point of view of those for whom action necessarily takes place on a lower ontological or spiritual plane, Arendt suggests turning away from thinkers to “men of action, who ought to be committed to freedom because of the very nature of their activity” (2:198).

The hope that we might discover in the “men of action” an articulation that would provide us with a different inheritance than that of the philosophers proves, however, to disappoint; and that disappointment, I argue, is central to understanding the meaning of Arendt’s use of narrative. The basic perplexity involved in action that is free in the sense that it appears as an interruption in the chain of previous causes is easily stated: “An act can only be called free if it is not affected or caused by anything preceding it and yet, insofar as it immediately turns into a cause of whatever follows, it demands a justification which, if it is to be successful, will have to show the act as the continuation of a preceding series, that is, renege on the very experience of freedom and novelty” (2:210). The quality of freedom characteristic of authentic political action is, if you like, immediately obscured by the fact that its very politicalness calls forth a retrospective interpretation that presents it as justified, that is, as responsive to a pre-existing moral or political or spiritual imperative rather than an unprecedented departure in the scheme of things. The “men of action,” then, unwilling or unable to face up to the “abyss of freedom,” resort instead to the expedient of presenting their innovations as “re-establishments and re-constitutions, not absolute beginnings” (2:213). As a result, the “men of action” themselves, the innovators and founders, are blind to the true dimensions of their distinctiveness and originality, and their interpretations of their deeds blind others to them as well.

At the end of The Life of the Mind, Arendt underscores the failure
of her turn to the articulations of political actors: "When we directed our attention to men of action, hoping to find in them a notion of freedom purged of the perplexities caused for men's minds . . . we hoped for more than we finally achieved. The abyss of pure spontaneity . . . was covered up by the device . . . of understanding the new as an improved re-statement of the old" (2:216). We will not, then, discover, ready-made, an articulation of authentic political action as sheer spontaneity in the accounts of the actors themselves; there is no "other" tradition of discourse, outside philosophy and thus free from its prejudice against action "here below," with whose aid we might free ourselves of those prejudices; no other ground on which to stand but that of our own tradition of reflective thought. Yet that tradition is singularly unhelpful in thinking authentic freedom; within it, only Augustine's concept of the human as a beginner, or natality, suggests a still-to-be-developed alternative (2:216-17).

There is, however, a third alternative: the narrative reinterpretation of the words and deeds of the men of action themselves, a reinterpretation so constructed as to bring to the foreground the distinctiveness and originality of their actions even at the cost of doing violence to their own understanding of them. This is the strategy Arendt pursues in *On Revolution* (and elsewhere), and it is wholly consistent with her more general claim in *The Human Condition* that "action reveals itself fully only to the storyteller, that is, to the backward glance of the historian, who indeed always knows better what it was all about than the participants" (p. 192). That action might reveal itself "fully" means, presumably, that it reveals those qualities that mark it as originary, distinctive, and novel, that is, free in Arendt's sense. Clearly, such a revelation is available to the storyteller not because the latter is in possession of more facts or regards events with greater objectivity than the participants but because of the reinterpretation of events the storyteller is able to accomplish. Narration — by foregrounding some aspects at the expense of others, which are pushed into the background, by placing events in contexts other than those imputed by the actors themselves — can textually isolate that in the event which is indeed distinctive and originary and which thus opens up the possibility of a new beginning. For Arendt, at least in "the modern age," after the definitive destruction not of the past but
of the authority of the past, the enterprise of political theory can never stray very far from considerations of language and interpretation: “Any period to which its own past has become as questionable as it has to us,” as she writes in her essay on Walter Benjamin, “must eventually come up against the phenomenon of language, for in it the past is contained ineradicably.”

Arendt’s narratives of political action will detach the deeds, even the spoken deeds, of the “men of action” from their own reductive understandings of them and narrate them in such a way as to bring out their truly novel and distinctive features. In this regard, her much-discussed “distinction-making” can be seen for what it is: an indispensable textual strategy with which Arendt undermines the identity, emphasized by historical actors themselves, between their political innovations and the imperatives of the past, interrupting it and so isolating its interruptive character. In this manner, Arendt’s narratives become themselves of a piece with the phenomenon of freedom she seeks to articulate: just as political action, in her view, brings into being the absolutely contingent by doing what might as well have been left undone, so her texts operate by discovering unexpected meanings and innovative departures by single-mindedly refusing to read the present as a mere continuation of the past. Thus totalitarianism is not the return of tyranny but “a novel form of government,” and the founding of the American Republic did not yield “Rome anew” but rather “a new Rome.”

Given her understanding of the open, revisionary character of free political action, it is hardly surprising that Arendt should be drawn to literature as a model for the practice of political theory; for in her view, “literature imposes no binding edicts. Its insights do not have the compelling character of the mythos which it serves in an intact religious view of the world. . . . Neither does art, and especially literature, possess the coercive forcefulness, the incontrovertibility, of logical statements; although it manifests itself in language, it lacks the cogency of logos.” Contained in Arendt’s understanding of literature, it seems, is the intuition that narrative, literary meaning emerges in a thoroughly immanent manner and cannot be reliably determined in advance by the reader’s vision of the meaning or of the structure of the text. The experience of literary meaning in Arendt’s
sense would then suggest the very opposite of Plato’s metaphors of craftsmanship, in which everything is guided and judged according to the stable, end-determining vision possessed by the author of the fabrication process; in literature, on the contrary, such meaning as one finds could not have been posited or even imagined in advance of the reading process, at least not determinately. Moreover, the meaning that emerges through the acts of writing and reading does not itself come to stand as a permanent or definitive delimiter of the further emergence of meaning. The antipolitical quality of “compelling necessity,” then, which is “the common denominator of the mythical and logical world view,” is singularly absent from storytelling, which “reveals meaning without committing the error of defining it” and so stifling further revelations (pp. 134, 105).

While literary meaning does not compel, and while, like the meaningfulness of political action itself, it is therefore evanescent and transitory (though no less real for that), it is tangible enough however to reveal “the meaning of what otherwise would remain an unbearable sequence of sheer happenings” (p. 104). Literature is uncompelling in the sense that it can indeed be resisted, but it is not for that reason lacking in power: the power, precisely, to illuminate, preserve, and render intelligible actors, events, and their worlds. Thus, Arendt speaks of the political not in terms of fixed human purposes, moral imperatives, or philosophically divined essential attributes but with a markedly erotic vocabulary: what sustains political freedom (as opposed to the freedom of the philosophers, freedom philosophically understood) is its sheer attractiveness as a way of life. Arendt celebrates the actor’s “passionate openness to the world and love of it,” a love of the “inexhaustible richness of human discourse,” which is “infinitely more significant than any One Truth could ever be.”21 In entering the public sphere, the actor “opens up for himself a dimension of human experience that otherwise remains closed,” a dimension that is compelling because of “the joy and gratification that arise out of being in company with our peers, out of acting together and appearing in public, out of inserting ourselves into the world by word and deed, thus acquiring and sustaining our personal identity and beginning something entirely new.”22 Authentic political action, one would say on the basis of the terms in which Arendt chooses to
describe it, is compelling in the sense of being seductive rather than commanding, a seductiveness grounded in the attractions of what is different, plural, novel, unexpected and yet admirable and distinctive. If one would open up the world of human plurality and experience its discursive joys, one has to open oneself, as it were, becoming vulnerable to the world and allowing its discourses to traverse and affect oneself rather than attempting only to control or subdue. Just so the attractions of the literary, which does not “interfere with life according to a preconceived pattern” but rather allows a story to “emerge.”

Arendt makes a key turn in her narrative of the founding of the American Republic by introducing one of her distinctions, though in this case the distinction is indeed one held (she argues) by the actors themselves: that between power and authority. The American colonists, she tells us, understood the crucial distinction between violence and power (she defines the latter, with Burke, as the ability to act in concert), but their revolution did not require but rather presupposed the establishment of power (that having been achieved over the course of 150 years of establishing and governing new communities). Thus the withdrawal of the legitimacy provided by “royal charters and the loyal attachment of the colonies to king and Parliament in England” posed a very different problem: “the establishment and foundation not of power but of authority” (p. 178). That power in Arendt’s Burkean sense had long been established in America accounts, Arendt argues, for the radically different outcomes of the American and French modern revolutions; for it meant that the withdrawal of traditional, monarchical authority did not immediately pose the problem of order by shaking the entire society to its foundations:

The rupture between king and parliament indeed threw the whole French nation into a “state of nature”; it dissolved automatically the political structure of the country as well as the bonds among its inhabitants, which had rested not on mutual promises but on the various privileges accorded to each order and estate of society. . . . The conflict of the colonies with king and Parliament in England dissolved nothing
more than the charters granted the colonists and those privileges they enjoyed by virtue of being Englishmen; it deprived the country of its governors, but not of its legislative assemblies; and the people, while renouncing their allegiance to a king, felt by no means released from their own numerous compacts, agreements, mutual promises, and "co-sociations." (P. 180)

The violence of the French Revolution is to be found not only in the Terror but above all in the fact that the French understood power as a kind of natural force, "superhuman in its strength" and constituted "outside all bonds and all political organization." The salient characteristic of power so understood is that it is mute, manifesting itself most clearly in deeds that thrust aside institutions and conventions in order to meet the inchoate and irresistible needs of "the people." This force is not really political power so much as strength, the dictatorial strength that understands the birth of a polity along the lines of an almost physical, architectural shaping or fabrication process. The establishment and exercise of political power in America, in contrast, is grounded in discourse: "To [the American revolutionaries,] . . . power came into being when and where people would get together and bind themselves through promises, covenants, and mutual pledges." American power need not rely on some suprapolitical force grounded absolutely outside all institutions but is, if you like, thoroughly (and plurally) discursive in character. Thus the emergence of adistinctively American polity in the wake of the withdrawal of the traditional sanctions of British history will mean not the opening of "the political realm to this pre-political, natural force of the multitude" but, rather, the opposite, a purely discursive, deliberative political society (p. 181).

The understanding of power which spares America the inarticulate violence marking the Old World's encounter with modernity presents another problem, however, that of authority, because mutual promises and compacts, though sufficient to establish power, seem far too uncertain to provide the stability necessary for a polity that would last: "Neither compact nor promise upon which compacts rest are sufficient to assure perpetuity, that is, to bestow upon the affairs of men that measure of stability without which they would
be unable to build a world for their posterity, destined and designed to outlast their own mortal lives.” Arendt thus finds in the American Revolution an especially vivid instance of the basic perplexities of the authentically free, originary political action canvassed above: the peculiar way in which it both ushers in the contingently new and disruptive and obscures its novelty by interpreting it as responsive to a previously existing law, purpose, or imperative. This observation then provides an opportunity for a further distinction: Americans turn to law, to “the task of laying down a new law of the land, which was to incorporate for future generations the ‘higher law’ that bestows validity on all man-made laws,” to find the authority needed for stability. This they can do because unlike the French, who ground the law in the people’s power as a mute, violent force, Americans regard the law as reflective of a higher transcendental region distinct from the power constituted by discursive action: the rebirth or repetition of a great, ancient republic (p. 182). In the American Revolution, then, or more precisely in its political discourse, Arendt finds an exemplar of the way in which creative political action inevitably reneges on itself: a creative departure in the order of things, the American Revolution immediately reinterprets its practice of political power as guided by a privileged origin functioning as an authoritative, transcendental absolute, thus obscuring its originary character.

Arendt’s narrative, however, leads ultimately to an ironic reading of the American founding in which “reflection and choice” yield not the conformity of the future course of the Republic to a pregiven rational vision but, rather, the certainty of the further generation of entirely new and unforeseen points of departure or beginnings. What the founding of the American Republic will have demonstrated is that action creates principles rather than derives from them (the principle at issue here being the possibility of founding a republic on nothing but deliberation and promising), and what really legitimates that principle, it will turn out, is not higher authority but rather the success of the republic itself—the sheer, contingent fact that over the course of its history colonial America had indeed learned to establish and maintain power discursively. At the heart of the American Revolution, then, is a virtual tautology: America’s deliberative, discursive politics is legitimate because it is successful, because it does indeed
“build a world,” not by means of violent, dictatorial shaping but by relying on the revelatory capacities of discursive interaction (p. 166).

The Revolution, then, would merely “bring the new American experience and the new American concept of power out into the open”; and what is important here is precisely the novelty of American experience, the way in which the American practice of power reflects not a tradition of political thinking but the sheer force of events that dramatically distill the very essence of the political:

It is an event rather than a theory or a tradition we are confronted with [by the early colonial compacts], an event of the greatest magnitude and the greatest import for the future, enacted on the spur of time and circumstances, and yet thought out and considered with the greatest care and circumspection. . . . No theory, theological or political or philosophical, but their own decision to leave the Old World behind and to venture forth into an enterprise entirely of their own led into a sequence of acts and occurrences in which they would have perished, had they not turned their minds to the matter long and intensely enough to discover, almost by inadvertence, the elementary grammar of political action and its more complicated syntax, whose rules determine the rise and fall of human power. (P. 173)

The grammar of political action is plural; it possesses a complex syntax because it is therefore inherently relational. Power is both plural, in that it is an attribute not of individuals but of collectives, and relational, in that it organizes individuals in terms of “joint enterprises” based on mutual accords (p. 175). Thrown back on their own resources and unsheltered by traditional European institutions, the early American colonists discovered the actual ground of purely political power—namely, the abyssal ground of human interaction, which is never more stable than mutual promises, agreements, and confidences can make it. This fact, however, escapes the consciousness of the “men of action” themselves and must therefore be prized loose through Arendt’s narrative reinscription.

Political power itself is created by guaranteeing and extending the sphere in which individuals can conduct joint enterprises and govern their affairs in terms of mutual promises, but whence the principle of order according to which the liberty to create power in that sense
can be absolutely guaranteed? If the constitutional order is itself the expression of power in the American (Arendtian) sense, what is to prevent it from being superseded by further political enterprise? How can, by what right does, a power defined as essentially open and revisable, that is defined in terms of interrupting the temporal chain of historical causes and introducing something new into the world, guarantee conditions “for posterity”?

The revolutionaries seek answers to these questions by turning to ancient Rome as both “model” and “precedent.” That model teaches respect for “beginning,” but the Founders could conceive beginning only as an occurrence in the distant past, a limitation in direct contradiction to the events of the American founding which, taking place as they did under modern conditions, could never be shrouded in the past. Thus Arendt sees in America’s tendency to worship the Constitution not a secular religion but a willingness to celebrate beginning as such: the success of the revolution “was decided the very moment when the Constitution began to be ‘worshipped’, even though it had hardly begun to operate” (p. 197). The Founders’ return to Rome is in fact a radical reinterpretation of it, one that shifts the locus of authority from the senate to the judiciary. Pointing out that the etymological root of auctoritas is augere, to augment or increase, Arendt notes that a Roman citizen cared for the city by preserving the spirit of ancestors who founded it, a care that tied the citizen to the founding through pious remembrance. In this optic, change could only mean increasing or enlarging the status quo. For the American revolutionaries, the Roman idea that foundation “automatically” develops its own stability, that authority is innovation guided by the desire to extend into the future what had been begun by others, appeared as the natural solution to the problem of “how to obtain the sanction of legitimacy for a body politic which could not claim the sanction of antiquity” (p. 202).

Thus the true authority implicit in the founding of the Republic, though anticipated, emerges or is proved only by the successes of those who come after in augmenting and improving it: “No doubt the American founders had donned the clothes of the Roman maiores, those ancestors who were by definition ‘the greater ones,’ even before they were recognized as such by the people. But the spirit in
which this claim was made was not arrogance; it sprang from the simple recognition that either they were founders and, consequently, would become ancestors, or they had failed. What counted was . . . solely the act itself” (p. 203). The only authority the Founders have is the authority of founders, and that can be conferred only retrospectively. So Arendt sees that worship of the Constitution can mean not only the veneration of the written document but the celebration of “the act of constituting,” which has to do with the capacity to act in concert and falls outside the scope of governmental administration as such. What is celebrated is the act of founding a body politic grounded in nothing but the shared, discursive performance of unprecedented political acts themselves. But that is a paradoxical authority; for unlike the Roman “return” to the ancestors and their specific deeds, American political culture involves a return to no fixed identity but rather to the principle of innovative, authority-creating, founding action itself. What makes American political culture distinctive is that the absolute quality of founding—the fact that political freedom is indeed abyssal and reliant only on the fragile premise of a joint enterprise—became itself a political act in virtue of having been widely witnessed and turned into discourse (p. 204). Authentic political action—action bold enough, distinctive enough, seductive enough to inspire attempts to preserve and extend it—is itself the new absolute, at once the most fragile and the most dangerous absolute imaginable.

But the Founders achieve this celebration of beginning by framing it in terms of the law. The content of authority in the American Republic is its continuous revision and reinterpretation of the Constitution: “in the American republic the function of authority is legal, and it consists in interpretation” (p. 200). That is, the American revolutionaries renege on their revolutionary acts by searching for a transmundane absolute to ground a higher, founding law, an absolute that logically would assume the shape of an “Immortal Legislator”: John Adams’s “great Legislator of the Universe,” Jefferson’s “laws of nature and nature’s God” (p. 185). As Arendt puts it, “It was precisely the revolutions, their crisis and their emergency, which drove the very ‘enlightened’ men of the eighteenth century to plead for some religious sanction at the very moment when they
were about to emancipate the secular realm fully from the influences of the churches and to separate politics and religion once and for all" (pp. 185–86). The need for an absolute, Arendt speculates, was in part "an inheritance" from the time when "secular laws were understood as the mundane expression of a divinely ordained law"; but the desire to formulate modern answers to premodern questions is not the whole story, and in regarding the ancients as believing in a divine origin of law, the revolutionaries simply projected their own perplexities and concerns onto earlier periods of history (p. 189). For the Greeks, the task of law was to establish a specially demarcated space in which power could be practiced; for the Romans, law was the mode whereby already constituted, mundane associations were brought together in greater alliances or partnerships (p. 188). Such law as practiced by the ancient Greeks and Romans needs no absolute; especially in the latter case, it is "relative by definition" and hence characteristically political.

The insistent question of the absolute was not Greco-Roman but rather Hebraic in origin, and Arendt detects it inscribed in the very grammar of the law itself, as understood by the American revolutionaries. Law was a commandment limiting what can be done, and as such—only as such—it required a transmundane justification: "What mattered was that . . . the laws themselves were . . . construed in accordance with the voice of God, who tells men: Thou shalt not. Such commandments obviously could not be binding without a higher, religious sanction. Only to the extent that we understand by law a commandment to which men owe obedience regardless of their consent and mutual agreements, does the law require a transcendent source of authority for its validity, that is, an origin which must be beyond human power" (p. 189). Western political thought, by Arendt's account, rereads Roman practices in terms of Hebraic imperatives, and the American revolutionaries, as the inheritors of that tradition, thus find themselves in a paradoxical search for a source of absolute authority to lay down external limits on a practice of power for which external, unchangeable limits are, precisely, irrelevant (pp. 190–91). The most original of these replacements for the absolute of divine guidance is Jefferson's appeal, in the Declaration of Independence, to the absolutely compelling quality of "self-evident truths,"
whose validity seems to be beyond argument, decision, or justification. Compared with the ritual invocation of heaven or hell, such an appeal possesses real force in an enlightenment culture (p. 192). Precisely because it possesses such appealing plausibility, however, the idea of a divinely inspired reason becomes the most effective move by which the originary, interruptive force of founding political action is interpretatively obscured. Consequently, self-evident truth, the enlightenment’s successor concept to divine revelation, covers over the abyssal quality of freedom that the withdrawal of traditional authority had brought to the fore.

Having inherited “the traditional concept of law” as command, the Americans search for, and regrettably discover, a new absolute capable of grounding the commanding sovereignty their inheritance demands, thus obscuring the originality of their own discovery of authentic political power. In a sense, the movement from originary revelation to retrospective self-obscuration describes the substance of Arendt’s narrative of the founding of the American Republic. To leave the matter at that, however, would be to obscure the most essential dimension of her narrative; for Arendt equally wishes to show that the retrospective justification that “reneges” on the creative political act cannot stand and that the insufficiencies, contradictions, and gaps that attend the justifying discourse negatively testify to the originality of the act itself. “It is true enough that the men of the American Revolution remained bound to the conceptual and intellectual framework of the European tradition,” she writes, but this bondage to tradition does not determine the “destinies of the American republic to the same extent as it compelled the minds of the theorists” (p. 195). In Arendt’s story, the effective if only furtively acknowledged source of authority in America is not divine sanction (if it had been, the American Revolution would have gone the way of other modern revolutions with the definitive collapse of absolutes in modernity) “but the act of foundation itself” (p. 196). What finally acquires authority or becomes authoritative in America, in Arendt’s judgment, is nothing less than authentic political action itself, understood as an originary, creative, and freely evolving (though strictly limited) capacity to act, to begin and begin again.

In this wise, Arendt ultimately would have us reject (though not,
of course, forget) the Roman discourse of repetition and rebuilding; and she finds the recognition of its inadequacy in the rewritings and recontextualizations of ancient ideas and slogans by the revolutionaries themselves. “When the Americans decided to vary Virgil’s line from *magnus ordo saeclorum* to *novus ordo saeclorum,*” she writes, “they admitted that it was no longer a matter of founding ‘Rome anew’ [as Milton had dreamed] but of founding a ‘new Rome’, that the thread of continuity which bound Occidental politics back to the foundation of the eternal city and which tied this foundation once more back to the prehistorical memories of Greece and Troy was broken and could not be renewed” (p. 212). As the tradition provides no help in “thinking” the break they enacted, the break can be read only in the displacements, faults, slips, retranslations, and distortions committed by the revolutionaries; it is, if you like, a trauma that emerges in retrospect and cannot be experienced immediately, that is, in the absence of mediation by subsequent interpretation and judgment. Into the gaps outlined by those textual variations, Arendt boldly inserts her own reading:

What saves the act of beginning from its own arbitrariness is that it carries its own principle within itself, or, to be more precise, that beginning and principle, *principium* and principle, are not only related to each other, but are coeval. The absolute from which the beginning is to derive its own validity and which must save it, as it were, from its inherent arbitrariness is the principle which, together with it, makes its appearance in the world. The way the beginner starts whatever he intends to do lays down the law of action for those who have joined him in order to partake in the enterprise and to bring about its accomplishment. As such, the principle inspires the deeds that are to follow and remains apparent as long as the action lasts. (Pp. 212–13)

Thus, in Arendt’s hands, the story of the American founding—her interpretation is indeed that story—constitutes a new myth superseding those of the Bible and Virgil, a myth of beginning, interruption, and rebirth. Arendt’s narrative of the American founding ought, in principle, to replace that of the Founders themselves; if so, their “desperate search for an absolute,” prompted by “the age-old thought-customs of Western men, according to which each com-
pletely new beginning needs an absolute from which it springs and by which it is ‘explained,’” would give way to an appreciation of the “measure of complete arbitrariness” that marks “the very nature of a beginning” (p. 206). The significance that Arendt finds in the American founding, then, has nothing to do with such traditional formulations as the construction of a rational order, of a polity that will last forever because its institutions mime the immutable laws of nature, or of a constitution founded in the essence of human nature. Instead, one finds an entirely different thought of the political, one grounded in discursive interaction that reveals principles and actors that persist because they are attractive to those who participate in the way of life they open up. America’s principles are not derived from reason or nature but are opened up in the space of discourse itself. So Hamilton’s words, when quoted by Arendt at the close of her narrative, come, in the light of that narrative, to possess a very different meaning from that conventionally applied to them: basing a government on reflection and choice means opening up a political culture that celebrates founding, beginning, and the plurality implied by “the combined power of the many” rather than “the strength of one architect” (p. 214). With this reinterpretation, Arendt has opened up the possibility that political action need not renege on itself: the Revolution produced what could not have been anticipated precisely because the dimension of discursivity outweighed that of violence in the founding.

That is a possibility made apparent, however, only by Arendt’s narrative reinterpretation, to whose strategies and stakes I now return. The political meaning Arendt finds in the discourse of the American founding is not what the “men of the revolution” had in mind when they acted: hoping to build an order for the ages by returning to an originary political principle, they invented and legitimated a new principle of ceaseless new departures, augmentations, and re-interpretations. Turning to the ancients for legitimation, cloaking their original actions in the respected garb of history, the Founders in fact liberate the splendor of political action from two millennia of “borrowed light” (p. 197). As Arendt puts it, these actors engaged in what “turned out to be unprecedented action” (p. 196). Unprecedented action must always turn out to have been unprecedented; one
cannot simply will to act without precedent; the unprecedentedness of Arendt’s America must therefore be ironic, or indeed allegorical, an unintended consequence of the Founders’ actions and in any case not identical to their publicly imputed meanings.

In the case of both authentic political moments and the literary inscription Arendt calls storytelling, then, something unanticipated emerges (whether good or evil is another question, a question of judgment); and this emergence of the unexpected is a characteristic both of the world Arendt seeks to articulate and of her narrative practice itself. This links Arendt’s narrative approach to the articulation of political action to a narrative form that Shoshana Felman refers to as testimonial literature, the discourse of witnessing. According to Felman, much modern literature can be read as responding to a general “crisis of witnessing.” She defines such a crisis as a situation in which the event to be witnessed or described so exceeds the capacity of received discourses to grasp it that it is virtually impossible even to experience; it so must take the form of a trauma—an event whose contours become apparent only long afterward, evidenced by disruptions and distortions in narrative accounts. Such accounts demand a reading practice that is attentive to the gaps, slips, and inadequacies in narrative accounts and interprets them as reflective of a larger, traumatic event, one that is necessarily accidental, intrusive, irruptive. The paradigm for this type of reading is Freud’s decoding of the hysterical symptom, but Felman finds the structure in Mallarmé, Camus, Kafka, Celine, and others as well.

Felman defines narrative straightforwardly: “That ‘something happened’ in itself,” she writes, “is history; that ‘someone is telling someone that something happened’ is narrative” (p. 93). Narrative, then, is closely linked to historical discourses; as Felman puts it, narrative “is defined by a claim to establish a certain history” (p. 94). She goes on to suggest, however, that the apparently natural complicity between narrative and history (narrative establishes historical events; history explains events by narrating them) has been sundered by the “cataclysm of the Second World War and the Holocaust,” which resist their narrativization because to the extent that, in a profound sense, they cannot have been witnessed, they exceed anyone’s capacity to witness them. In Arendt’s terms, events so un-
precedented and refractory as to frustrate the attempt to describe them in conventional discourses resist being turned into stories—or at least, the stories into which they are turned insinuate their continuity with what came before rather than their originality. Faced with such events, narration responds by twisting and turning about itself, exposing its own lacks and insufficiencies, but at the same time revealing, witnessing, or testifying in spite of itself. It shows above all, as Felman puts it, “that one does not have to possess or own the truth, in order effectively to bear witness to it; that speech as such is unwittingly testimonial; and that the speaking subject constantly bears witness to a truth that nonetheless continues to escape him, a truth that is, essentially, not available to its own speaker” (p. 15). Narrative dislocations such as these reveal the interruption of something utterly unprecedented and accidental, which is experienced immediately as a disruption of language but which ramifies outward to emerge as a symptom of a cultural transformation of the broadest and deepest sort. Such modern writers as Mallarmé, Celan, and Camus, in Felman’s reading, have in common an orientation toward responding to apparently accidental or contingent formal disruptions in literary conventions which turn out to figure larger cultural catastrophes, which themselves however are not experienced at once and as a whole but only transpire gradually, fragmentarily, as we become aware of them by experiencing their discursive consequences and effects. Such literature figures the most paradoxical witnessing imaginable, that which testifies to an event that could not have been witnessed in immediate, originary form. And that, of course, is precisely the problem that authentic political action, action that does not impose norms but creates new departures, poses for those who would articulate it.

Like Arendt, Felman relies on the metaphor of natality to capture what is involved in this process:

Psychoanalysis and literature have come both to contaminate and to enrich each other. Both, henceforth, will be considered primarily as events of speech, and their testimony, in both cases, will be understood as a mode of truth’s realization beyond what is available as statement, beyond what is available, that is, as a truth transparent to itself and entirely known, given, in advance, prior to the very process of its utter-
The testimony will thereby be understood, in other words, not as a mode of *statement of*, but rather as a mode of *access to*, that truth. In literature as well as in psychoanalysis, and conceivably in history as well, the witness might be . . . the one who (in fact) witnesses, but also, the one who *begets*, the truth, through the speech process of the testimony. (P. 16)

To the extent that the truth to be narrated is that of an event—contingent, accidental, and for that reason traumatic—it will have been begotten gradually, suggested by displacements and fault lines in the grammar of its articulations and not in a full descriptive account of the event as it happened, when by definition it could not have been experienced. Just so authentic, disruptive, founding political action, by Arendt’s account: its sheer novelty suppressed by the need for justifications, it will emerge only gradually, begotten by the backward glance of the storyteller or historian whose relaxed need for justification enables him or her to isolate the faults in the account to reveal the departure and novelty. If authentic political action is of the order of the natal, its emergence requires the midwife of narrative.

Felman presents psychoanalysis as a narrative, testimonial discipline of that sort:

The curious thing about this stunning theoretical event [Freud’s discovery of the unconscious via the most apparently random and senseless private events] is the way in which its very generality hinges, paradoxically, on its accidental nature: on the contingency of a particular, idiosyncratic, symptomatic dream. In the symptomatic and yet theoretical illumination of this radically new kind of intelligibility, psychoanalysis can be viewed as a momentously felicitous, and a momentously creative, *testimony to an accident*. (P. 17)

By Arendt’s understanding, political theory as storytelling would also constitute a “momentously creative testimony to an accident,” to the creativity of the accidental, if we suppress the primary meaning of *accidental as mishap* and instead stress the word’s secondary significance of an unexpected or unintended happening. Like Felman’s modern writers, Arendt’s political narrative moves forward by continually breaking through its own framework (p. 48).
For that reason, Arendt’s narrative articulation of political events—as distinct from her recovery of an understanding of the character of the political—bears more than a family resemblance to her experience of thinking as such, which begins, according to Arendt’s testimony, when one’s self-evident truths have been shaken and one’s knowledge has been rendered less than reliable. Only when one has found one’s concepts wanting in application, or when one has exhausted one’s reason and has therefore been strangely “emptied,” can one genuinely question an object, event, or experience, that is, question it in such a manner that one’s investigation yields more than an augmentation or extension or restatement of original premises:

Thinking in the Socratic sense . . . is a maieutic function, a midwifery. That is, you bring out all your opinions, prejudices, what have you; and you know that never, in any of the [Platonic] dialogues did Socrates ever discover any child [of the mind] who was not a wind-egg. That you remain in a way empty after thinking . . . And once you are empty, then, in a way which is difficult to say, you are prepared to judge. That is, without having any book of rules under which you can subsume a particular case, you have got to say “this is good,” “this is bad,” “this is right,” “this is wrong,” “this is beautiful,” “this is ugly.” And the reason why I believe so much in Kant’s Critique of Judgment is not because I am interested in aesthetics but because I believe that the way in which we say “that is right, that is wrong” is not very different from the way in which we say “this is beautiful, this is ugly.” That is, we are now prepared to meet the phenomena, so to speak, head-on, without any preconceived system.”

To meet phenomena head-on does not mean to see them as they really are, without any concepts at all, presuppositionless, but rather to respond to their novelty by articulating them “otherwise.” To take one of Arendt’s most controversial judgments, totalitarianism is not evil simply in the sense that it satisfies our preexisting concept of evil; rather, the novelty of totalitarianism, which exceeds anything anticipated, itself expands and alters our conception of evil, shows us what evil is, if we are able, and willing, to think it. Arendt’s narrative practice of political theory is predicated on the idea that the meaning attaching to political action always only transpires, in the strict ety-
mological sense of the term; that it leaks out gradually through judgments, interpretations, stories, reconsiderations, revisions. What Felman says about Freud’s discovery—that “it takes two to witness the unconscious”—is true of Arendtian political action, and for essentially the same reason: the ineluctable inaccessibility of the contingent, the novel, the truly accidental to its own subject.\(^{30}\)

As a practice oriented toward negotiating that paradox, Arendt’s narrative approach to political theory recommends itself not so much to contemporary attempts to rethink the political as to efforts to innovate in the practice of political theory. A reading of Arendt’s narrative accomplishments not only suggests links between theory and narrative but argues in favor of discovering political theory in what are commonly marginalized as “fictional” narratives. To see Arendt as writing or recommending fiction, however, requires that we ignore the “traditional” concept of fiction or fictionalizing as the shaping of raw material into a coherent order or structure or, rather, a coherency that might be derived from a fundamental source, logic, or idea. For that conception of fiction, Arendt has no use; it is akin to the coercive character of logic and cousin to the absurdities of ideological thinking and organization. Arendt both condemns ideology for attempting to turn the world into a “fiction” and asserts that the only way to guarantee meaning in life is to turn one’s life into a story.\(^{31}\) But these statements are only apparently contradictory, because storytelling and fiction are not at all the same; for where fiction totalizes and organizes, storytelling reveals the unexpected revelations of events, an intelligibility of an entirely other kind. Arendt’s political narratives are indeed like Merrill’s accounts in that both are monuments to the revelatory force of contingency and event: both serve to make us not merely tolerant of, but grateful for, that over which we have no control and could not have anticipated and which, for that reason, is uncertain; for, as both would teach us, these latter are the very conditions of worldliness itself.

By constructing a narrative that finds such revelations in the founding of the American Republic, Arendt has unearthed a political meaning almost opposite to that of an entire tradition of reflection. Rather than building the city as a work of art, she discovered the peculiarly fragile but powerfully revelatory strength of ungov-
erned discursive interaction, a politics that does not impose identities but celebrates the birth of new ones. America’s attempts to “fiction” itself by deliberating and promising can be expected to maintain the greatest distance possible from the intentions of the deliberators and promisers: the deliberative, interpretative community, for Arendt, will be at the farthest remove possible from “the state as a work of art.” Precisely insofar as it foregrounds deliberation, an American politics will not have committed the “sin” of attempting to “make life poetic, live it as though it were a work of art . . . or use it for the realization of an idea.” 32 Against America’s own understanding of itself as the realization of timeless truths, immutable principles, or absolute ideas, Arendt’s narrative reveals another America, one adrift in the unpredictable, uncontrollable perlocutionary consequences of its monumental privileging of the discursive. 33