

# The Question of Curriculum in Dark Times: Hannah Arendt, W. G. Sebald, and Teachers as Autobiographical Subjects

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The problem of studying the curriculum, Madeleine Grumet (1991) once pointed out, is that we are the curriculum. As William Pinar (2011) has reminded us, the “question of the subject” in curriculum studies is based on a double-entendre: curriculum as subject matter but as also concerned with the subject as individual learner. This double meaning, Pinar suggests, signals curriculum’s allegorical or “double consciousness” (141). In an allegory, while a specific story is being told, a more general one is also being communicated (Pinar 2011). What kinds of stories are being told in curriculum studies presently? And with what implications for teachers as subjects? The dominant one in these “dark times” (Arendt, 1968) centres on testing, with repeated episodes of: outcomes-only based assessment; student learning reduced to numbers, the bottom line being whether scores contribute to or detract from a school’s funding, with dire implications for the school, teachers and learners if they fall afoul of pre-set targets and teachers as “clerks” (Arendt 1958; Greene 1971; 1995) rewarded—or punished—for students’ test scores; (Au 2011; Rubin 2011). An alternative, **continually murmuring, story in curriculum studies paints a more complicated picture**, one important strand of which has been articulated through autobiography.

The past two decades has seen an explosion in the number of memoirs published, so much so that, even in times of austerity, with bookshops closing left, right and centre, those that remain prominently feature a section dedicated to biographies and autobiographies. If there are writers of memoir, there must also be readers. “It is indeed quite probable that the desire to read auto/biographies of others is a sort of spontaneous reflex of the narratable self’s desire for narration ... what orients this search is simply the conviction that each narratable self has a life about which a story can be narrated” (Cavarero, 2000, p. 74). But who, or what, is a narratable self? Two writers who have considered this question in “dark times” are Hannah Arendt and W. G. Sebald; “dark times” appears in the title of one of Arendt’s (1968) books.

The broad lineaments of the life stories of Hannah Arendt (1906-1975) and W.G. Sebald (1944-2001), one studying in the domain of political philosophy, the other in literary criticism and social critique, are familiar to those acquainted with their works. Arendt and Sebald both left Germany and lived largely in exile from their homeland, one (Arendt) at the beginning of what turned out to be a catastrophic sequence of events and the other (Sebald) born at the end of the Third Reich, in its wake and thus inheriting, with birth, the ‘ineradicable, inescapable, ever-recurring, hideously retrievable 1944’ that was to mark his life course (Ozick, 1996, p. 34). Arendt makes much of the importance of beginnings while Sebald became preoccupied with endings: “the phenomenon of suicide in old age” (Sebald in Kafatou, 1998, p. 33), this due to the long-term effects of trauma. While neither scholar belongs to curriculum studies, both have written and thought in



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ways that are increasingly being recognized as pertinent to education and especially, educators (e.g., Hansen, 2012; Joldersma, 2014).

At the centre of concern for many in curriculum studies is the subject, an individual, someone who is currently “missing in action,” as William Pinar (2011, p. xi) has recently reiterated. This is so despite the fact that action rests on the fact of natality: for Arendt, with birth, someone appears in the world, who is distinct from every other being that preceded and will follow him or her, and about whom a story can be told. “The real story in which we are engaged as long as we live has no visible or invisible maker because it is not made. The only “somebody” it reveals is its hero, and it is the only medium in which the originally intangible manifestation of a uniquely distinct “who” can become tangible *ex post facto* through action and speech” (Arendt, 1958/1998, p. 186). When W. G. Sebald turned from literary scholarship to prose fiction, he told the stories of people’s lives, based on those of real individuals that he had known or heard about, whose lives had been profoundly affected by what they had experienced or witnessed in the wake of war (particularly, of Nazism). While most of the attention on Hannah Arendt has focused on her political writing (totalitarianism, violence, revolutions), and thinking/judgment, she also wrote, passionately and thoughtfully, about stories, and where one of her main contributions in this domain has been her very un-post-modern insistence that life precedes any story told about it. In other words, the text is secondary. Sebald has been heralded as among the most textual, and intertextual, of modern writers, and is often claimed as post-modern in sensibility as well as style. And yet, the salience of the year of Sebald’s birth to the kinds of life-stories that he chose, persistently, to tell is tied to a web of lives of actual individuals. In a post-war context, Sebald has perhaps contributed most to storying as a form of thinking, even as Hannah Arendt has helped us theorize the links between action, judging and the stories narrated.

In this article, I explore the intersections between Arendt’s writing on lives and Sebald’s brand of life-writing, with the goal of reflecting on how these intersections inform the question of the autobiographical subject in curriculum studies as it pertains to discernment: the relationship between thinking and judging. I will then turn to consider the implications of these intersections for the teacher as autobiographical subject in dark times.

## Beginnings (Arendt)

In tracing the roots of the verb ‘to act’ in Greek and Latin, Arendt finds two different trajectories, which divided the verb into two different meanings. The Greek *archein* means to begin, lead, or rule while in Latin, the verb *agere* means to set in motion (viz., ‘lead’). The Greek verb *prattein* means to pass through, achieve or finish and the Latin *gerere*, to ‘bear’ or carry through (Arendt, 1958, p. 189). Arendt comments that the second meaning has predominated, in that we tend to understand the verb to act as to bring something to completion. However, Arendt suggests, the original meaning of action as to begin or set in motion is more closely connected to action as natality: to the fact that when someone is born, a stranger is brought into the world, whose actions and effect on the web of human relationships cannot be predicted.

She identifies three characteristics of the web of human relationships: unpredictability, frailty, and intangibility. Unpredictability arises from action and speech as being revelatory: “one discloses one’s self without ever either knowing himself or being able to calculate beforehand whom he reveals” (Arendt, 1958, p. 192). The frailty of human affairs comes about because actions are boundless, with the potential “to force open all limitations and cut across all boundaries” (Arendt, 1958, p. 190). The intangibility of human affairs has to do with action being the *sine qua non* definition of



what it means to be human: the realm of human affairs is constituted *through* plurality (the fact that each person is distinct from one another) and is brought into being, and only sustained, through the actions of individual human beings.

Arendt's conceptualization of story focuses on those stories that concern the narration of a life, which is not surprising, given her interest in action. The first book that Arendt wrote was about the life of a young Jewish woman, Rachel Varnhagen, who grew up in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century in Berlin, and whose main struggle was with her Jewish identity: "When you are all alone it is hard to decide whether being different is a blemish or a distinction. When you have nothing at all to cling to, you choose in the end to cling to the thing that sets you off from others" (Arendt, 1957, p. 178). Arendt later published *Men in Dark Times*, which combines narration with analysis of key episodes from the lives of ten individuals (men and women) whose lives spanned the first half of the twentieth century and who were affected by "its political catastrophes, its moral disasters, and its astonishing development of the arts and sciences" (Arendt, 1968, p. vii). "Even in the darkest of times we have the right to expect some illumination," says Arendt; this light can come from ideas but equally from "the uncertain, flickering, and often weak light that some men and women, in their lives and their works, will kindle" (p. ix).

Out of action thus begins a story, where "[t]he trouble is that whatever the character and content of the subsequent story may be, whether it is played in private or public life, whether it involves many or few actors, its full meaning can reveal itself only when it has ended" (p. 192). It therefore falls to others to tell one's story. Arendt's conceptualization of life writing rests primarily on the genre of biography. Autobiography, in Arendt's perception, might be likened to the 'strong man' theory of action which attributes all beginnings and endings to one actor, this being a myth since others help bring into being what one has initiated. Also, actors—meaning those who act—do but they also suffer, which means that we are each affected by what we ourselves do as well as what others do. On Arendt's terms, autobiography turns the actor into a maker, thus resting on that "strange pretense of a self that makes himself an other in order to be able to tell his own story" (Cavarero, 2000, p. 84). The shape of someone's life, Arendt maintained, could only be seen by someone other than the one who lived it. One cannot live one's life, in its flux of events, and also make it into a story at the same time.

This principle is well-illustrated by Karen Blixon (pseudonym for Isak Dinassen), whose work both Arendt and Cavarero draw on, and who tells the story of a man who is awakened in the middle of the night by a great noise and runs outside, here and there, until he finds and repairs the leak in the dike. In the morning, the path made by his footsteps form the shape of a stork. Life can feel like this, the fable intimates—a stumbling around in the dark, blindly, doing one's utmost, until life ends. And yet, the distinctiveness of a life is such that it leaves something behind. "Life cannot be lived like a story, because the story always comes afterwards... the one who walks on the ground cannot see the figure that his/her footsteps leave behind, and so he/she needs *another* perspective," namely that of a storyteller "to trace the design" (Cavarero, p. 3; emphasis in the original).

## Eichmann

Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem* shares with *Rahel Varnhagen* and *Men in Dark Times* that peculiar combination of narration and analysis that we also see in other life writing, like Carolyn Steedman's. Steedman brings her social historian lens on class to the project of writing her own and her mother's lives, fusing narration with constructing an argument around class. Steedman called her narrative writing 'case study': "Case-study presents the ebb and flow of memory, the structure of dreams, the stories that people tell to explain themselves to others" (Steedman, 2008, p. 21).



Whatever else *Eichmann in Jerusalem* is (a report, a treatise on evil), it is also a case study of one man (Benhabib, 1996). It is a case study that carries certain resemblances to the genre of biography, in that while it focuses on Eichmann's trial and that period of his adult life with which the trial was concerned to pass judgment on, it also narrates Eichmann's beginnings, as it also narrates the manner of his ending, including his last words. Arendt became interested in: with how Eichmann explained himself within the sticky situation in which he found himself in Israel in accounting for his actions during the war. It can be risky, under any circumstances, to write about the life of a perpetrator. Lawrence Binet (2012) reflects on this problem in *HHhH*, which is an account of Reinhardt Heydrich's assassination but that also entails narrating Heydrich's story. Binet regularly interrupts the narrative with meta-reflections on different ways in which the story could be constructed. Binet's real interest, he maintains, is in the story of Gabcik, and the story Binet's father told him of the Czeck resistance, which resulted in Gabcik's killing of Heydrich. In its meta-fictional form, Binet's *HHhH* draws attention to the fact that *how* the story is told can often be as important as the story itself.

In the opening to her 1964 Postscript to the Eichmann book, added one year after the book's original publication (1963), Arendt explains that "[t]his book contains a *trial report*, and its main source is the transcript of the trial proceedings which was distributed to the press in Jerusalem" (p. 280; Arendt's emphasis). However, the book was clearly much more than that, bringing to bear Arendt's acuity of perceptions on the trial and ultimately, on the man himself. Eichmann was someone that Arendt came to know; she would even say, "I know him well" (Arendt, *The Last Interview*, p. 43). I am interested in how this event (namely, Arendt's attending of Eichmann's trial and her decision to report on it) is tied to Arendt's interest in story, on the one hand, and in thinking and judgment on the other.

Adolf Eichmann falls under Arendt's description (in *The Human Condition*) of someone around whose neck it would have been better that a millstone be slung and the person thrown into the ocean. Eichmann's self-described 'hard luck' story became tragic for millions of others who were affected by his actions, directly or indirectly. The Israeli court clarified with respect to "crimes committed en masse": "*the degree of responsibility increases as we draw further away from the man who uses the fatal instrument with his own hands*" (judgment cited in Arendt, 2006, pp. 246-7; emphasis added by Arendt). Eichmann may not have killed any person, but he was responsible for transporting countless millions to their death. If it were better that a millstone had been tied around Eichmann's neck and that he be cast in the sea, it is because his name (and life) had become synonymous, for Arendt, with "the banality of evil" (p. 252). The subtitle of Arendt's book indicates that it is a "report" but on this thesis. Yet, the phrase appears only once, on the last page of the last chapter, which concludes with Eichmann's last words, after having ascended the gallows "with great dignity" (p. 252). He says, Arendt reports: "After a short while, gentlemen, *we shall all meet again*. Such is the fate of all men. Long live Germany, long live Argentina, long live Austria. *I shall not forget them*" (p. 252; Arendt's emphasis). Arendt draws attention to the clichés that, like a bad refrain, could be detected throughout his speaking during the trial: "It was as though in those last minutes he was summing up the lesson that this long course in human wickedness had taught us—the lesson of the fearsome, word-and-thought-defying *banality of evil*" (p. 252; Arendt's emphasis).

It would have to wait for Arendt's *The Life of the Mind* before she turned her mind once more to the relationship between thinking (and its absence) and evil, a subject that she had first considered conceptually in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, where she had originally argued that Nazism constituted a new form of (Kant's) "radical evil" (Arendt, 1951). In *The Life of the Mind*, it was clear that her thinking on the subject had changed



by her encounter with Eichmann: “Factually, my preoccupation with mental activities has two rather different origins. The immediate impulse came from my attending the Eichmann trial in Jerusalem” (Arendt, 1978, p. 3). Arendt then goes on to narrate how while we have learned (in school, as part of tradition) that evil is something “demonic” (p. 3), in Eichmann, she was “confronted” with something “utterly different and still undeniably factual. I was struck by a manifest shallowness in the doer that made it impossible to trace the uncontestable evil of his deeds to any deeper level of roots or motives. The deeds were monstrous but the doer—at least the very effective one now on trial—was quite ordinary, commonplace, and neither demonic nor monstrous” (p. 4).

To be a hero, Arendt explains, originally meant to venture out from one’s hiding place, the privacy of the self, to “act and speak at all, to insert one’s self into the world and begin a story of one’s own” (Arendt, 1958, p. 186). The key words here are: “a story of one’s own.” “The last time Eichmann recalled having tried something on his own was in September, 1941” (Arendt, 2006, p. 79), Arendt wryly observes. “Eichmann remembered only moods and the catch phrases he made up to go with them” (p. 62), one being the ‘elation’ that also marked his funeral oration. Arendt closely tied thinking with judging; the two are distinct but related activities of the mind. Thinking, at its most elemental, involves the Socratic two-in-one. Socrates tells the “thick-headed” Hippias that he must be fortunate to go home and not be faced with “an obnoxious fellow” who “cross-examines” everything he says (Arendt, 1978, p. 188). Socrates explains that when he goes home, he is not alone; he finds himself in the company of himself. Ultimately, Arendt says, we have to come to an agreement with ourselves, for we have to live with ourselves. To do otherwise is to live a life of contradiction, like Shakespeare’s Richard III who, when alone, finds himself at war (“fly: what! From myself? Great reason why:/Lest I revenge. What! Myself upon myself?”) but who, when with others like him, finds the necessary courage to commit crimes: “Conscience is but a word that cowards use” (Shakespeare cited in Arendt, 1978, p. 189). While Richard III may have had his moments of feeling troubled, by and large, Arendt says, those who do not practice that inner dialogue remain as one: one who does not mind to contradict himself (because he will not be faced with the contradiction): “this means he will never be either able or willing to account for what he says or does” (p. 191).

Thinking, as Arendt is at pains to point out, is an activity; it continues examining and re-examining, to the point of undoing thoughts already made: “thinking means that each time you are confronted with some difficulty in life you have to make up your mind anew” (p. 177). Thinking happens behind closed doors, as it were; it is invisible to others, unless made manifest (e.g., through writing) and it works with representations. Judging deals with particulars; with things “close at hand” (p. 193). Judging is the manifestation of thought in situations, in life itself; it consists in “the ability to tell right from wrong, beautiful from ugly” (p. 193). In addressing the relation between thinking and judging, Arendt explains that judging is the “by-product of the liberating effect of thinking” (p. 193). If thinking allows for this ability to think for oneself, in the privacy of oneself, and therefore for refusing, desisting, and not following or being swept up in what others believe, this “purging” ability is freeing (p.192); it allows for the *political* expression of difference, which is freeing, allowing the political expression of difference, which is judging: of saying, this is wrong, or, this is right, then acting otherwise than the norm.

In *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, Arendt occupies the place of the storyteller who comes afterwards, here to tell Eichmann’s story, not as he had narrated it, through his interviews with Sassen in Argentina or in court (Eichmann was also busy writing his autobiography while in prison in Israel), but to illuminate what she saw as the devastating ‘design’ of his *unthinking* life. The story has come to stand as a “lesson” (Arendt, 2006, p. 288): a



cautionary tale of the catastrophic consequences of thoughtlessness: Eichmann's inability to imagine another perspective than his own because insulated from reality through an obdurate focus on himself. Eichmann was filled with "a storehouse ... [of] human-interest stories of the worst type" (Arendt, 2006, p. 81)—of episodes that filled him with 'elation' at precisely inappropriate moments when a thinking person would have exercised judgment. In this, Eichmann's life was exemplary while also being completely *unheroic*, for he failed to think for himself and therefore begin a story of his own.

I admit that I have wondered whether, in the heat of the moment of the trial, Eichmann deceived Arendt; whether he was in greater control of his public appearance than Arendt gave him credit for; whether he knew full well his lies and the effect of his lies on others; whether he was, if not the originator of the Final Solution, their perfect instrument. I wonder if Arendt is too vehement in her assertion that Eichmann had no ideological beliefs of his own. I have read the English version of the transcript of Israeli investigator's Avner Less' pre-trial interview with Eichmann (Eichman & van Lang, 1983). I have also considered such recent books as *Eichmann Before Jerusalem* by German scholar Bettina Stangneth (2014), which is based on documents Arendt would not have had access to at the time of her writing. I wonder if Arendt's appraisal of Eichmann is itself a judgment that does not take account of a fuller picture, and whether she simply dug in her heels when challenged. I do not yet have a definitive answer to my questions, although I know that Arendt admitted to 'cross-examining' herself on this point of Eichmann's banality, while also squarely facing the skepticism of many others, including those she trusted, like her mentor, Karl Jaspers (Young-Bruehl, 2004). I have found it useful to compare Arendt's perspective with that of W.G. Sebald, another German writer and scholar, also deeply preoccupied with questions raised by the Holocaust and to whom stories, based on real lives, became central to thinking through difficult questions.

### Endings (Sebald)

Sebald writes in a mode of belatedness: of one who comes after, who is conscious of being too late to change events that have already happened, but where thinking is actively trying to catch up: to understand the significance of events painful to remember or to hear about. Sebald writes in the grey space of what Cathy Caruth (1995) has called the delay, or interval, of trauma. He was interested by the phenomenon of suicide in old age: of the density that memory acquires over time as it settles. What contributes to this density are 'coincidences' or congruencies: the accumulated layers of adjacent, yet related, events, facts, thoughts and emotions. A sense of their interrelatedness builds and builds until the point when understanding begins to crystallize and in crystallizing, also threatens to unravel: not unlike Arendt's image of thinking.

Sebald's interest in lives postdates his interest in stories. For most of his adult life, he had been a literary scholar. His graduate work (masters and doctoral) was based on German authors and he had certainly read, even steeped himself, in German post-war fictional writers. While Sebald began his university studies in Germany, he soon moved to Switzerland, not being able to abide the intellectual atmosphere of the German post-war university. He then accepted a position at the University of East Anglia, in the United Kingdom, and remained teaching there for the rest of his life, in exile from his native Germany save for periodic visits home. In 1997, he returned to Germany to give a series of lectures, which were later published as *The Natural History of Destruction*. One of the main subjects of those lectures is German post-war literature and by extension, Germany itself and its responsibility. Sebald comments: "when we turn to take a retrospective view, particularly of the years 1930 to 1950, we are always looking and looking away at the



same time. As a result, the works produced by German authors after the war are often marked by a half-consciousness or false consciousness designed to consolidate the extremely precarious position of those writers in a society that was morally almost entirely discredited” (p. ix). By ‘half’ or ‘false’ consciousness, Sebald was referring to the “business” of covering over the legacy and burden of the past, in which many were implicated. As Arendt herself observed about Germany in the postwar period, admissions of collective guilt served to “whitewash ... those who had done something... where all are guilty, no one is” (2003, p. 28), and where many of those in government or business who had been in power or benefited during the war, discretely remained so afterwards. Arendt uses as a case in point civil servants, which she says Hitler had inherited from the Weimar Republic and Adenauer inherited from the Nazis, “without much difficulty” (2003, p. 35). Late in his life, Sebald made a turn from scholarly criticism to the writing of prose fiction, and where his own prose fiction became a study in how to write auto/biographically “at a slant” yet with the weight of conscience, about those very subjects that German post-war writers were avoiding, or only pretending to write about. I pause here over his account of Alfred Andersch—a popular, successful post-war German writer who bears a certain uncanny resemblance to Arendt’s Eichmann.

### Andersch

Andersch was a radio broadcaster, publisher and later, novelist. Born in 1914 in Munich, he was briefly detained in Dachau (for three months) and rather than fly to Switzerland, he remained in Germany, later claiming the epithet of internal emigrant. An internal emigrant was considered to be someone who was resident in Germany during the Nazi period but not a participant—who was in exile and thus in resistance in every way but physically and geographically. However, Sebald questions this stance, pointing to Andersch’s work at Lehmann’s Verlagbuchhandlung; the publisher openly supported the Nazi policies on race and “racial hygiene” (p. 116). Sebald paints Andersch as ambitious—an opportunist who married a Jewish woman, ostensibly to protect her from the Nuremberg Laws, but whose family was also quite well off. A year later, in June 1942, when the Final Solution was being implemented, he divorced her, at the same time as he was applying for membership in an elite German club of writers (the Reich Chamber of Literature), thus placing his wife in a precarious position. Andersch was called up to the front, applying for a “cushy job in the Air Ministry” although he ended up in a different unit (p. 122). He was pleasantly surprised to be sent to war: riding on a motorbike through Italy, drinking Chianti in little villages: “wartime tourism”, as Sebald calls it (p. 123). Sebald quotes from Andersch’s published letters: “It’s amazing... to think of all I’ve seen this year” (in Sebald, p. 123). Sebald’s Andersch sounds uncannily like Arendt’s depiction of Eichmann, as someone besotted with their own experience and who cannot see the forest for the trees, and where that same word, ‘elation’, reoccurs: “Andersch was not the only middle-class German citizen to feel a certain elation in the [war] experience” (Sebald, p. 123).

Perhaps most damning is Sebald’s critique of Andersch’s published post-war fiction, which contain certain linguistic infelicities, even as Andersch was trying at this point to re-invent himself as the next great German writer and exponent of a “new aesthetic” (Sebald, p. 131). In Andersch’s novel, *Die Rote*, Sebald wryly notes, while taking Germany’s “notorious past as its subject” the book nevertheless uses “Auschwitz as a kind of background to set the scene” in such a way that strikes Sebald as obscene (p. 134). His first novel, which features a Jewish girl that the hero, Gregor, is in love with, contains descriptions based on racial characteristics, inserted to account for Gregor’s unaccountable attraction. Sebald draws attention to German jargon and turns of phrase in



Andersch's prose, which reaches strained limits with phrases which remained inappropriately popular after the war: "Efraim finds himself at a party with Anna when he overhears someone he has never met before saying that he intends to go on making merry "bis zur Vergasung" ("until I'm gassed"), a particularly notorious German phrase, still quite prevalent in the postwar years, which must have entered the popular vocabulary in the 1940s" (p. 137).

## Unrecounted

Throughout these Natural History of Destruction lectures, Sebald is reacting to a moral decrepitude that he sees in many post-war German writers at the same time as, unawares, he is seeking the form that his own auto/biographical prose fiction will assume. There are several characteristics of Sebald's prose fiction germane to the discussion of the relation between lives and stories. Sebald's stories are based on the lives of real people. The lives that he consistently explored were those affected by contact with the policies and practices of Nazism. Lives do not exist in isolation from one another but (as in Arendt's web of human plurality) are impacted, directly or indirectly, from encounters with others. The phenomenon of coincidence or contiguity pervades his writing. This contributes to a 'nesting' effect in his narratives, a technique that he learned from other writers (e.g., Thomas Barnhardt, Austrian writer). Through the presence of a narrator—someone who is a walker and a wanderer—who bears a remarkable likeness to Sebald and whose (auto)biographical queries inform the narrative, a personal accountability is also introduced. Throughout his writings is the practice of writing about a difficult subject—"invisible subject"—that the reader senses is on the writer's mind and conscience and that 'infects' the reader in turn, through the structure of 'writing at a slant' (e.g., the nesting technique) such that the sense of something awry builds slowly and inexorably (Strong-Wilson, 2015).

In writing in this way, Sebald was deliberately marking his departure from post-war German writers (like Andersch), while also addressing the moral weight and burden of a subject that weighed heavily on his mind and that impacted his life deeply, given where he was born and when. One of the first narratives that Sebald composed was of his elementary teacher, Paul Bereyter, and it signaled his interest in the manner of a life's ending—its slow destruction and unravelling. The story appears as one of four in his collection, *The Emigrants*, which was the first of Sebald's writings to be published in English in North America (Sebald, 1986). Paul committed suicide by lying on the railway tracks close to his birthplace as well as where he had taught Sebald and his peers once upon a time. Paul was part Jewish. He finished his teacher training just as the Nuremberg Laws were about to come into effect, so instead of teaching (from which he was barred), he was exiled to France where he remained until he returned to Germany, served in the army (which by that time was less picky about its recruits) and then taught in the same community from which he was banished long ago. Late in his life, after retiring, Paul spent his time reading about the lives of others who had committed suicide, overcome by the long-term destructive effects that Nazism had exerted on their lives. This deepening perturbation, Sebald suggests, led to Bereyter's choosing to lay himself down on the rails and to watch the train arriving to carry him (as it had carried others, like him) to his death. Sebald himself died untowardly from a heart attack, while driving, this in 2001.

Several of Sebald's writings have been published posthumously. One of these is a co-authored collection with Jan Peter Tripp, translated as *Unrecounted*. Michael Hamburger, who translated other of Sebald's works, points out that Tripp and Sebald were contemporaries, even close friends; they both grew up in the same area and went to school together. They were both exposed to the same events and, importantly, shared a



similar sensibility. *Unrecounted* assembles 33 of Sebald's poems (haiku) with 33 of Tripp's lithographs. It is a haunting collection, due to the conjunction of Sebald's poems (e.g. "Unrecounted/always it will remain/the story of the averted/faces"— Sebald & Tripp, 2004, p. 81) with Tripp's artful lithographs, which are all of eyes, most those of real individuals, like Borges and Beckett and including Sebald and Tripp. The eyes look preoccupied: with thinking, discerning, noticing; ever so slightly averted, because the sight is difficult to bear, attention nevertheless maintained.

### **The Question of the Autobiographical Teaching Subject in Dark Times**

In his re-visiting of the implications of the eight-year study on curriculum studies, William Pinar (2011) considers the place of Ralph Tyler, who he dubs curriculum's Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. The Progressive Education Association undertook a longitudinal study of the curricula of American secondary classrooms in the 1930s. Tyler, then research director of the Committee on Evaluation and Recording, used the occasion to develop his principles of curriculum and instruction, a slim volume first published in 1949 but reprinted since several times, the most recent being 2013. Tyler's four 'principles' of curricular construction—devise objectives, develop a teaching/learning plan, organize the classroom, and assess student learning—have been instilled in new teachers, with little recognition that this way of doing curriculum represents only one possible approach, and that the method is essentially driven by the last criterion: assessment (Pinar, 2011). If assessment has been the threat hanging over students, it has also been systematically applied to teachers, in the wake of the Bush administration's educational legislation, No Child Left Behind followed by Obama's Race to the Top. Tyler's rationale was itself based on Taylorism, an approach to labour management initiated in the 1910s that was intended to optimize economic efficiency. A task was divided into component parts, with a worker assigned each part, which was then subject to an intensive schedule so as to maximize worker productivity and, by extension, profits to the company. Tyler translated this instrumental, "social engineering" approach into teaching and learning in the classroom (Pinar, 2011, p. 83).

As Pinar (2011) points out, curriculum reform can take one of two forms: reorganization or reconstruction. Reorganization "alters the institutional forms through which the intellectual content is structured" (p. 78) and results in surface changes to what Pinar calls the "molds" into which education is poured. The Eight-Year Study, despite its laudable goals, was of this kind (Pinar, 2011); indeed, most curriculum reform belongs in this category. Deeper changes are called for by curriculum reconstruction, which reconfigures "intellectual content in light of new knowledge", which leads to "reshaping the communicative and institutional forms" through which that content is enacted (p. 78). Reconstruction calls for the kind of experimentation in which teachers intellectually engage with subject matter and actively look for new forms through which to teach it; this kind of curriculum change—subjective and social reconstruction—has typically happened by teachers, individually or collectively, in the classroom and/or through certain kinds of professional development.

Tyler was a circumspect writer, allowing for his words to be taken in one of two ways. In my Curriculum Foundations class, Tyler is juxtaposed with Dewey, where Dewey provides a useful counterpoint. Tyler, as Dr. Jekyll, appears as the benign, affable, progressive fellow, the facilitator who helps teachers "look critically at the consequences of their actions" (Kridel & Bullough, 2007, p. 96 cited in Pinar, 2011, p. 83). Through close study, especially in relation to Dewey, who uses some of the same words but differently (e.g., "educational experience"), Mr. Hyde begins to appear: the one who subsumes teachers under the work of the curriculum planner, who positions teachers as manipulating conditions so as to produce desired results, and for whom, as the student



becomes simply a cipher, so too does the teacher: an indicator of the health of outcomes of the state curriculum. As Pinar notes, “what Tyler ‘facilitated’ was behaviorism’s invasive incursion into mainstream educational practices” (p. 84) which renders teachers as “bureaucrats” (p. 85). This abysmal vision of teachers as mere clerks within a system indifferent to student and teacher needs, desires, dreams and ambitions, was remarked on by Maxine Greene in her *Teacher as Stranger*, published only a few short years after Arendt’s *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. Greene was profoundly influenced by Arendt’s work, and was the first to meaningfully transpose Arendt’s theories of action and judgment into education. Greene especially drew on Arendt’s idea of action as beginning: the teacher as initiator. Greene also emphasized teacher thinking as judgment: the teacher being wide awake and critical of ideological trappings of curriculum language, while also being a courageous actor: someone who makes a positive and constructive difference through her actions (Wilson, 2003).

Examining the links between narration of one’s own/another’s story and acts of discernment and judging, especially during dark times when teachers are being subjected to curricular reorganization rather than being invited to be subjects of curricular reconstruction, would involve looking at teacher narratives more closely—a task for another paper. Space only permits me to very briefly indicate two that might be of interest—two that have been seminal to the genre of teacher autobiography, Sylvia Ashton-Warner’s (1963) *Teacher*, and Frank McCourt’s (2005) *Teacher Man*—and where, in both stories, even as we hear or see the teacher authors seeking an appropriate form and language for narrating a teacher self in flux, we also see how they struggle with a curriculum that would constrain or diminish their discernment *in* teaching. Ashton-Warner’s is an unusual compilation of narrative, poetry, stream of consciousness dream-like thought and reverie, classroom dialogue, curriculum description and photographs, all centered on Ashton-Warner’s teaching very young Maori children in a primary school in New Zealand, this at a time when a standard British text-book approach to the teaching of reading was the norm to be applied, and inspectors monitored its (colonial) implementation. Ashton-Warner resists, developing what she called an organic approach to reading that was grounded in the words and concepts meaningful in the Maori children’s immediate, everyday lives. Noted author, memoirist and former classroom teacher, Maxine Hong Kingston, who supplied the book’s foreword in the 1986 reprint, wrote: “The very week that I write this, the Reagan administration is attacking bilingual education programs. Urgently, *Teacher* shows how to respect the language that the child already has, and how to go from there to English. I hope its re-publication gives teachers fuel” (Kingston, 1986, p. 9). McCourt’s is a more complex example, riddled as it is with McCourt’s own stereotypes and clichés of student and teacher life in public and private school teaching in 1960s to 1980s New York City—echoes of the falseness in the discourses of Sebald’s Andersch and Arendt’s Eichmann—brought on by his encounters with objectives, lesson plans, textbooks, rules and strictures policed by principals and school administrators. We endure this even as we witness McCourt genuinely struggling with *being* and *becoming* a teacher despite the curriculum, sometimes regretting (yet learning from) his impromptu choices in the classroom and increasingly, rising to the occasion in improbable, stunning epiphanies—of teaching but also of finally discerning his genuine love and care for his students. We wait until almost the end of his teaching career, and of his narrative, before we hear him say, addressing his teacher self: “The mask is mostly off and I can breathe” (p. 244). A “poor curriculum,” Pinar (2015) reminds us, is “one stripped of its distractions” (p. xiii).



## Conclusion

More than ever, discernment is necessary in teaching: the kind of discernment that can contribute to subjective reconstruction rather than to a shuffling of the curricular pieces. Arendt and Sebald, in the wake of catastrophic events within their country of origin, critically examined the highly compromised self-descriptions of individuals implicated in pursuing their own advancement during those times, drawing distinctions between what Arendt and Sebald judged as appropriate and inappropriate ways of responding to the situation. Both Arendt and Sebald turned to biographical forms of writing—Arendt to the case study; Sebald to literary prose fiction—to probe the lives of individuals, and where Arendt, in her most famous case study, offered an analytical narrative report of a perpetrator, while Sebald chose to narrate the lives of those who, enduring, suffered. Sebald's biographical writing, though, leans strongly towards an autobiographical form, through the Sebaldian narrator who bears an uncanny (and visually, unmistakable) resemblance to Sebald himself, thus aligning the narrator's struggle to understand with those individuals who he meets and whose stories he listens to. Threaded through Arendt's and Sebald's writings is their own preoccupation (as subjects) with coming to terms with a dark and baffling subject. For both, discernment is paramount; it is what remains when all other possibilities have been considered. It lies in those searching, troubled eyes in Sebald and Tripp's *Unrecounted*, and the indissoluble ties between thinking and judging in Arendt, with her cautionary tale of an unthinking Eichmann. While the narrative examples offered by Arendt and Sebald may appear stark in the grey light of the present in education, it is a time overshadowed by people (teachers and students) being reduced to numbers, instruments, behaviours serving a hidden agenda. Behind the examples in each case (Arendt, Sebald) lies a theory, which is also a personal commitment: to discernment in word and deed. In curriculum terms, this discernment and commitment brings us back to subjective reconstruction, to the "recurring question of the subject" (Pinar, 2011) which, as Ashton-Warner's and McCourt's autobiographical narratives indicate, animate every day of teachers' lives through the stories we tell or that come to be told by others whose paths crossed ours.

## Notes

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