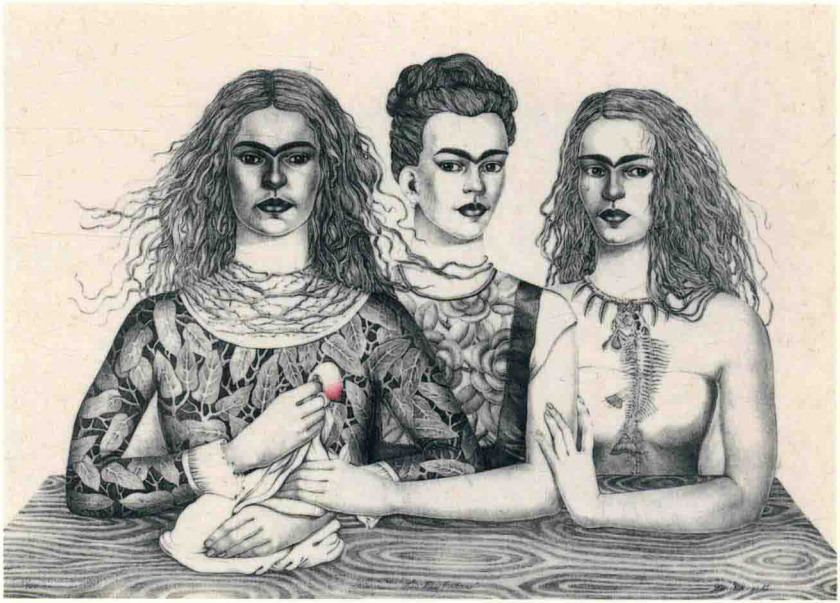
MORAL TEXTURES



FEMINIST NARRATIVES IN THE PUBLIC SPHERE

MARIA PIA LARA

Moral Textures

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Contents

Introduction

This book seeks to contribute to a new understanding of the women's movement by philosophically interpreting its historically unprecedented contributions to late modernity. I frame this research within the tradition of critical theory, which understands philosophical accounts as reconstructive theories that are in need of empirical references, viewing the accounts as falsifiable, postmetaphysical and normative. My goal has been to elaborate a theory of how social movements, through their interventions in the public sphere, create and generate solidarity through narratives which demand recognition and, at the same time, aim to redefine the collective understanding of justice and the good life by proposing new visions of institutional transformation. While I place these contributions in the public sphere, the originality of my position lies in the particular way I approach this newly public participation. I argue that women made (and make) use of the public sphere by interrelating two different validity spheres, the moral and the aesthetic. In making this unusual connection, I argue, feminists have created both new forms of social relationship and new forms of theoretical understanding. The feminist movement provided (and provides) a much more comprehensive understanding than was previously available of how the realms of justice and the good life must be interconnected and how a critical view of them promotes transformations of democratic conceptions and institutions.

In order to demonstrate that the women's movement achieves this new level of clarification, I cannot concentrate only on its public role as a participatory democratic movement. I must also look closely at the discursive level. I seek to demonstrate how the aesthetic and moral interweaving of women's discourses establishes a new viewpoint that profoundly reorders social values and needs. I argue that the women's movement, in its struggle to achieve public recognition of women's

rights and needs, has developed an 'illocutionary form'. Before entering into the explanation of how I conceive these social and cultural dynamics, I will clarify the terms that I introduce as the basis of my theory, as well as the theoretical sources from which I draw them. The works of Jürgen Habermas, Hannah Arendt, Albrecht Wellmer and Paul Ricoeur enable me to build up the core of my model.

A Cultural Interpretation of Speech-Acts

The term 'illocutionary' comes from Habermas' effort to combine J. L. Austin's speech-act theory with the normative ambition of the critical theory tradition. By illocutionary force, Habermas refers to a speech-act in which 'alter' and 'ego' understand one another solely on the basis of well-argued reasons. The goal of such illocutionary action is to achieve a consensus based on mutual understanding. While I follow Habermas in this normative approach to illocutionary force, I wish to elaborate it in a new way. To attain such a mutual understanding, I claim, one must first address the other with powerfully imaginative speech, not only to attract the attention of 'alter', but also to open up possibilities for creating different kinds of recognition and solidarity between both parties. The aim of an illocutionary act is simultaneously to transform preceding views of 'alter' and 'ego' such that after the action is performed neither party remains the same. In this way, the initial asymmetry of a dialogue is contemplated as a first step. The possibility of engaging others through a powerful dialogue conceives of language as possessing a disclosive capacity. The term 'disclosure' is taken from its original Heideggerian source, which refers to the aesthetic and ontological roots of language, which according to Arendt's interpretation are inextricably linked. The normative element, however, remains important insofar as language is conceived as a self-reflexive and critical tool. Language and reason are linked insofar as the moral and the aesthetic dimensions are both seen as communicative and differentiated spheres of validity. This viewpoint leads to an understanding of how, with the subjects of the speech-acts focusing on newly problematic social issues, it is possible to transform them by creating new narratives in the public sphere. I call the dynamics of such efforts 'illocutionary force'. I understand the consensual element of this force as an action that includes two analytically differentiated moments empirically bound together and which can create, simultaneously, a pragmatic effect on both parties. The first moment refers to the capacities of a speech-act to disclose new meanings and understandings in relation to 'justice'. The other moment comes after 'alter' and 'ego' have transformed themselves via this act of mutual understanding, and refers to

their ability to reorder their values and beliefs in light of it. This reordering implies a public agreement about a new definition of justice and its connections to the good life.

In performative terms, this approach to speech-acts suggests the interrelation of agonistic and consensual moments. The agonistic refers to the initial asymmetry of ego's position and her capacity to produce a powerful narrative that provides an account of the lack of justice created by situations about marginalization, oppression or exclusion. The other moment consists in the consensual act of reaching agreement about the normative content of this claim for recognition, which must relate such accounts to the moral sphere and depends upon the capacity to propose a better understanding of what justice means and how it can be reconceived through institutional transformations. I claim that women's narratives have this emancipatory content whatever their particular viewpoints, and provide the best example of how 'claims for recognition' are conceived as 'illocutionary forces'. By contrast, discourses which aim at exclusion and separation cannot be considered illocutionary; rather than having a moral ambition, 'polluted' discourses assert the superiority of their particularities. By entering into the public sphere and struggling for public recognition, emancipatory narratives mediate between particular group identities and universalistic moral claims, providing new frameworks that allow those who are not members of the group to expand their own-self conceptions and their definitions of civil society.

Women's narratives show how this can be done. They have reordered understandings of what the public sphere is, by casting doubt on previous views of the reasons for cultural, social and political marginalization. These feminist 'illocutionary forces' have fought imaginatively, building a bridge between the moral and the aesthetic validity spheres across the rigidly traditional gendered division between private and public. This bridge-building provides a critical example of how questions related to self-determination and questions related to self-realization have been redefined as specific historical linkages between autonomy and authenticity, as suggested in chapter 4. Indeed, I wish to argue that these specific links between two validity spheres have provided a new approach to the definition of moral subjects.

That I build upon an interpretation of Habermas' early research on the public sphere in order to link critical theory with a more cultural understanding of emancipation is by no means arbitrary. In my view, it is possible to trace in this early work a clear connection between the aesthetic and the moral dimensions of modern identities. However, Habermas makes this cultural-aesthetic connection only at an empirical level. Such empirical references appear again in his late writing, when

he thematizes the simultaneous processes of individualization and socialization in relation to George Herbert Mead's theory, as explained in chapter 1. In these discussions, Habermas shows a clear understanding of how groups employ fictional narratives to contest and restructure conceptions of subjectivity, notions of morality and expectations about the good life. The problem is that Habermas does not accompany these empirical insights with a philosophical account of justification; neither does he connect an emancipatory theory of the public sphere with a discussion of how the cultural identities of groups and individuals are related to moral claims for justice on a universalistic basis. In his book *Between Facts and Norms* (1996), Habermas shifts from his earlier empirical focus on cultural struggles in the public sphere to an institutional account of law, which he describes as a 'strong public' that provides the space for emancipatory discourses contesting the empirical contents of norms. Habermas is offering here a philosophical account of the integrative role of the public sphere in its procedural dimension, but he loses sight of his important earlier insights about the interaction between moral and aesthetic spheres, the communicative spheres of reason that are equally important in creating new understandings of the self and of societies' self-representations which could provide for the link between particularistic claims of recognition and universal demands of justice. The task of conceptualizing the interrelation of normative and cultural-aesthetic accounts of justice and the good therefore remains.[1]

This critical perspective on Habermas' resistance to conceptualizing the interconnections of justice and the good informs my discussions of women's narratives and their sucessful effort to reconceptualize the liberal view. In order to overcome the limitations of Habermas' viewpoint, I conceptualize the public sphere as a cultural arena where 'public' meanings of justice and the good permeate democratic institutions, and where the tensions produced between facts and norms are seen as the dynamics that allow for the possibility of interventions by emancipatory movements. By introducing a cultural content into Habermas' speech-act theory, I will be able to develop further the approach to the 'disclosive' capacities of language, viewing speech-acts as communicative tools that provide new meanings and contest earlier ones. Making use of Wellmer's deep insight into the communicative interrelation of aesthetic and moral spheres (see chapter 2), I develop a systematic theory about the connection between public narratives and their 'disclosive' potentialities for emancipatory transformations. According to this new approach, I conceive narratives of emancipation as forms of 'recognition' (see chapters 3 and 8). Contrary to the suggestions of many post-structuralists, it is by no means the case that contestatory discourses, or narratives, are necessarily tied only to strat-

egies of resistance *vis-à-vis* strategic power and ideological domination.[2] I demonstrate that emancipatory narratives can themselves create new forms of power, configuring new ways to fight back against past and present injustices, thus making institutional transformations possible. This is the power I call 'illocutionary force'.[3]

If the public sphere is the mediating space where justice and solidarity meet in concrete ways, I need to clarify precisely how it is that 'narratives' demanding recognition from others actually can aim at the redefinition of justice. To be sure, cultural contestations of identity are not necessarily of a virtuous kind; numerous group efforts aim publicly to exclude others. However, while I would acknowledge that such 'polluted' discourses do flow throughout public channels of information, according to my model they do not achieve illocutionary force. It is in order to make this normative distinction that I wish to follow Habermas in the moral reinterpretation he gave to the speech-act theory of Austin and John R. Searle. Justice reframes the terms in which 'alter' and 'ego' find a normative perspective of a 'we' in the act of mutual understanding. This condition points at the possibility that narratives can only be successful when they are integrative, not exclusionary. Within this normative framing, I add the aesthetic connection: subjects engaging in speech-acts learn to configure 'disclosive' possibilities of new understandings, to relate in different ways things that were once seen otherwise. An action that occurs performatively can produce new and simultaneous understandings between the two sides of the performative relation. This is the 'disclosive' effect.

The conception of disclosure I employ here is clearly connected to a new reading of Hannah Arendt's philosophy of language and action in its relation to the aesthetic sphere.[4] Arendt relates Heidegger's ontological conception of language with that of Walter Benjamin, a point that has not escaped Dana Villa's rigorous examination of the relation of Arendt's political project to Heidegger's.[5] I wish to argue that it is precisely because she grasps the connection between the normative dimension of storytelling – where experience is relearned in the political world – and the aesthetic effects of language that Arendt can overcome Heidegger's aestheticism. Developing further Benjamin's initial concern with 'moral responsibility', Arendt is able to grasp the similarity between Heidegger's and Benjamin's conceptions of language and time. Yet Arendt gets beyond the traditionalism of Heidegger's conception by rescuing Benjamin's submerged hope for a utopian future. She conceives this as the capacity of action to perform new 'beginnings', a capacity that points away from repetition and traditionalism to moral responsibility. The aesthetic effect of 'disclosure' can provide a new way of understanding justice. Once the story is retold, it is possible to grasp the narrowness of previous conceptions of justice; debts to the

past that take the form of moral responsibilities in the present are thereby incurred. Narratives that possess such 'illocutionary force' have the 'disclosive' ability to envision normatively – that is, in a critical way – better ways of being in a world of 'equality and distinction'.[6] Such collective narratives acquire normative legitimacy because they are filtered through the public sphere, where actors create fragile and falsifiable agreements about what needs to be done in the social world. It is certainly a virtue of Arendt's conception of the public sphere that she relates it to power. Whenever people are gathered together – through speech and action – they act in concert to achieve practical ends. But they can do so, argues Arendt, only because 'the force that keeps them together, as distinguished from the spaces of appearances in which they gather and the power which keeps this public space in existence, is the force of mutual promise or contract'.[7] This connection allows a conception of power, seen as related to collective agreements, to avoid the charge of being overly rationalistic. For Arendt, the political realm allows actors to produce agreements conceived as 'promises' which are neither 'essentialist' truths or arbitrary opinions but the result of concerted speech and action, that is, of illocutionary effects. In my reinterpretation of Arendt's work, this normative warranty produced through stories about new beginnings is a legitimation process that depends on critical acceptance by other groups in the public sphere. My model departs from Habermas' conception, then, not only by systematically connecting it to the aesthetic domain in a general way but by relating it specifically to notions elaborated by Arendt about the public sphere as a source of storytelling.[8] Her work is of prime importance for reconceptualizing the public sphere in relation to narratives as performances. I am well aware of the doubts that many Arendt specialists have expressed in regard to efforts of Habermasians to reinterpret her work merely as one step in the development of his communicative action theory. Dana Villa, for example, has written a lucid book on Arendt's originality and the theoretical difficulties that arise when one wants to frame her work as only Aristotelian, Habermasian or even postmodern.[9] Villa makes a great effort to show that the primary source of Arendt is Heidegger, although he is forced to acknowledge that Arendt actually builds her own theory 'against Heidegger'. In my interpretation of Arendt, I argue that the possibility of taking Heidegger against Heidegger depends on sources other than Heidegger himself.

These sources do not come from political theory but, rather, from the aesthetic field, mainly from the works of Walter Benjamin and the literary Jewish tradition, which includes other important Jewish writers such as Herman Broch and Franz Kafka. As Villa himself has argued, 'it is the spirit of Benjamin, not Heidegger, that informs [Arendt's] search for hidden treasures – moments of pure initiatory action – covered in

wreckage by the "angel of history"'.[10] Villa's goal – to interpret Arendt's Heideggerianism as 'against Heidegger' – opens up the possibility of seeing that Arendt aimed at conceiving action and speech as primary sources of plurality, and narratives as society's ways of coping with the past, the present, and a possible, utopian future. By connecting Arendt with Habermas, my aim is not to bring Arendt into the Habermasian model, but rather to use both sources as a means towards a more complex and coherent understanding of the normative content of the public sphere and the important cultural role of emancipatory narratives that can crystallize in transformations of our self-understandings about democracy and the good life.

The difference of my approach lies precisely in this emphasis on the moral significance of cultural efforts to reformulate 'values', 'beliefs', 'self-images', 'boundaries' and 'frontiers'. It is in this scenario of contested meanings that the *cultural* contents appear as a frame for struggles of recognition and transformation. My notion of the symbolic order refers to the processes by which societies utilize language as a collective institution to publicly construct self-representations, images and rules, which create and configure symbolic frames that make possible, and permeate, all our actions, beliefs and thoughts. My understanding of 'symbols' emphasizes the public character of meaningful articulation, which points clearly not to their pyschological operation but to how they allow meanings to be incorporated into action.[11]

Women's narratives provide a critical illustration of a positive understanding of the emergence of social movements as emancipatory interventions. With the help of Arendt's conception of 'storytellings', I develop a reconstruction of how the normative and the aesthetic contents of narratives allow the multiple projects of women's identity to express themselves positively in the public sphere. I claim that emancipatory social movements must fight first for a 'new meaning' of justice that provides emancipatory institutional transformations in which the boundaries of what should be considered public and what private need to be redrawn. Feminist interpretations, in 'fact' and in 'fiction', have transformed our previous notions of what these boundaries are, providing a new space for emancipation and integration. What Habermas could not explain, or even envision, is precisely such variegated strategies of deconstructing, retelling and reconfiguring the symbolic order and its historical sources. I would contend, nevertheless, that in cultural boundaries and frontiers, women's success in attaining recognition has been intimately linked with how they have drawn a new meaning of the 'public'. This is the subject of my book.

I take up the challenge Habermas set up in his 'Further Reflections on the Public Sphere' (1996), when he expressed the hope that further elaborations of public sphere theory 'could give cause for a less pessi-

mistic assessment and for an outlook going beyond the formulation of merely defiant postulates'.[12] Contrary to post-structuralist theories that conceive of speech and narratives as strategies of resistance only, my aim is to show how it is possible to conceive resistance and emancipation as something other than two different positions. Women have shifted from being victims – who can offer only resistance – to being owners of their own lives. Historical understanding of past narratives can give place to new meanings, allowing new definitions to be created in a positive and not only in a negative sense. With these new understandings comes the possibility of transformation. Women's efforts have made it possible to retell the story of the public sphere and the paradoxes of democratic theories. They have done so, I claim, not only by resisting but by asserting a utopian viewpoint that describes how gender plurality allows all individuals to flourish and how a more complex and multicultural public sphere is better suited to the embodiment of democratic ideals. This process of utopian enrichment occurs through what might be called the 'communicative power of solidarity'. This power expands the space for public discussion and creates an environment in which the cultural understandings of groups can interact and influence one another. As some critics have pointed out, the rationalism of Habermas links communication to integration. I claim that such a sphere is also a field of conflict, of contested meanings and of exclusion. It is because the public sphere is an arena where symbolic mediating processes shape the public's opinion that one has not only to address the consensual and normative aspects of opinion but also the interpretative struggles to resist domination and agonistic performances to attract the attention of other groups. The agonistic dimension of struggles is revealed in the narrative speech-acts themselves, for 'the self is an exclusively public phenomenon that only action can disclose'.[13] In Arendt's conception, narratives depend on the capacity to construct imaginative ways of holding the attention of others, of 'performing' differences in such a way that they embody the quality of plurality as it permeates the frames of the public sphere.[14] The channels by which new forms of solidarities are fuelled rely on the capacity of narratives to disclose previously unseen marginalization, exclusion and prejudice. There is competition over the public space for relocating those new meanings. My aim is to provide for a new theory of the public sphere as a concrete mediation in which justice connects to solidarity in a narrative fashion.

As in the case of Habermas, I am aware that many feminist criticisms have focused on Arendt's lack of interest in women's issues and on her 'traditionalist' view of politics, which are conceived by her critics as 'Aristotelian' or opaquely 'Heideggerian'. I wish to develop evidence to indicate that both charges are untrue. Arendt understood herself as an

'agonistic' thinker, a 'pariah', refusing to be classified by any particular tag. She resisted being called a philosopher, and used 'disclosive' terms to configure a new conceptualization of democracy and politics. Nor did she wish to give particular weight to her birth as a woman and a Jew. Nonetheless, I believe that she gave weight to both particularities in her own theoretical narratives, and that it was for this reason that her work provides a 'new beginning' – as a special kind of judgement – in the form of a new story for democracy after the moral collapse of the holocaust. Her example could be taken as suggesting a narrative of how the 'uniqueness' of a writer's position makes her account of human action meaningful, a point that such feminists as Bonnie Honig have described with significant clarity.[15] While it is also true that Arendt's vision of the public can appear as a 'traditional' or 'nostalgic' account of the relation between public and private life, through the interconnection between different traditions she makes her theory capable of responding to the major threats and challenges of contemporary societies. She provides for the most emphatic theory of plurality as a source of democratic societies, while, at the same time, her notion of plurality intertwines with a strong conception of the 'individual'. No one regarding 'plurality' as a basic condition of democracy can be called a conservative, especially one who gives such a significant role to human individuality. By understanding the role that narratives perform in the public sphere, Arendt is able to give an account of just how plurality and the uniqueness of individuals are embodied. It is in the political world of the public where 'the action he begins is humanly disclosed by the word, and though his deed can be perceived in its brute physical appearance without verbal accompaniment, it becomes relevant only through the spoken word which he identifies himself as the actor, announcing what he does, has done, and intends to do'.[16] In focusing in various chapters of this book on the elements that make Arendt one of the most relevant thinkers for contemporary democracy, I will show how she herself has become a 'narrative' for a new beginning for women.[17]

In the process of this new incorporation of Arendt, I hope to throw doubt on Dana Villa's assumption that any 'attempt to recast the public sphere in accordance with a universalistic model of practical reason (whether deontological or discursive) is invariably an attempt to eliminate the performative dimension of politics'.[18] Because my model provides for a theory of contested meanings in the symbolic order, as well as the communicative side of language, I can show how the performative and the consensual sides of speech-acts are interrelated. The rules governing political speech in terms of validity can now be seen as a specific interaction between two validity spheres, the moral and the aesthetic. The agonistic dimension refers back to the expressive sphere,