**"MEN IN DARK TIMES" BY HANNAH ARENDT**

One of the books that has traveled with me, from Vancouver to the Netherlands, to Cambodia and now to Montreal, is Hannah Arendt's Men in Dark Times. It's a book unlike her more renowned works, and its subject is other people and other lives. Published in 1968, Men in Dark Times Times is a collection of essays on writers and philosophers, from Erich Lessing and Walter Benjamin, to Bertolt Brecht, Hermann Broch and Isak Dinesen.For me, the book is about poetry and the writer, der Dichter. As Broch writes, "poetry, if it is to lead to the purification and self-identification of man, has to plunge into the depths of man's antinomies, quite in contrast to philosophy, which remains on the brink of the abyss." Arendt sets her sights on these antinomies--the paradoxes that inhabit us, and the disharmonies that shape our lives and our relationships with one another.   
In my own life, these antinomies have drawn me back, again and again, to storytelling. In stories we know that many truths can exist at once, say the truth of Zerline in Hermann Broch's anguished, brilliant masterpiece, Zerline's Tale, alongside the truth of her lover and her lover's lover. Zerline's motivations, innocent, malicious or mad, break against each other like glass fragments, no longer able to cohere but still part of the same entirety. Broch shows us, as Arendt says, how "storytelling reveals meaning without committing the error of defining it."  In Men in Dark Times, Arendt folds together narrative, criticism and rhetoric. First, there is the biography she is telling (Brecht, the genius, capable of telling us the most unwelcome truths, carving out his life from Augsburg to Svendborg to Santa Monica and finally to East Berlin), then literary criticism ("There is not a shred of sentimentality left in Brecht's beautiful and beautifully precise definition of a refugee: 'Ein Bote des Unglücks' "), and finally the rhetoric ("It was precisely this extraordinary intelligence, breaking like lightning through the rumble of Marxist platitudes, that has made it so difficult for good men to forgive Brecht his sins"). Through Brecht, through his plays, poetry, and the trajectory of his life, she focuses, bit by bit, on goodness. How did it come to pass, she asks, that a good man, no, the best of men, lived in comfort in East Berlin, under a regime that had killed his friends? Is it true that "it will be of greater consequence to leave behind you a better world than to have been good?"  These antinomies are what Arendt excels at illuminating, and she unfurls these contradictions with her particular savage intellect and her intense, moving compassion.  Often, these days, I worry about my own love of literature and my belief in the writing life. In Hermann Broch's acceptance of the "ultimate insufficiency of literature", I hear my own doubts magnified a thousand times over. Men in Dark Times remains in me like a corridor branching off to many unlit rooms, and in each room there is a person thinking to him or herself, a person creating work, a person in constant engagement with the ideas of others. The beauty of this book is, for me, that we are all in these rooms, and only in the discourse, in this passionate engagement, can we find our way to one another.