1

"The Odium of Doubtfulness"

Or the Vicissitudes of Arendt's Metaphorical Thinking

> All thinking [is] metaphorical.
>
> —Hannah Arendt, *Denktagebuch*

Pondering the question of "style" in historiographical narration, Hannah Arendt notes: "The question of *style* is bound up with the *problem of understanding* which has plagued the historical sciences almost from their beginnings."[1] What is the "style" of Arendt's monumental *Origins of Totalitarianism,* the text we are primarily concerned with here? And how does its efficacy relate to the problem of *understanding* totalitarianism? In her response to political philosopher Eric Voegelin, one of the first reviewers of *Origins,* Arendt elaborates on her decision to, as it were, allocate more historiographical legitimacy to the valences of metaphorical thinking than to statistical scientificity. After conceding that she failed "to account for a rather unusual approach . . . to the whole field of political and historical sciences," she hypostatizes the merits of metaphorical thinking on the basis of a central

1. Hannah Arendt, "A Reply," *Review of Politics* 15.1 (1953): 76–84, here 79; hereafter abbreviated as R. Unless otherwise noted, all italics in this chapter are mine. For a nuanced discussion of the anachronism of Arendt's "style," see Seyla Benhabib, *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt* (Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000), 86–95. See also Julia Kristeva, *Hannah Arendt,* trans. Ross Guberman (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001).

metaphor employed in *Origins,* that of the concentration camp as a place of "Hell" (R 79). To recapitulate the context briefly, Arendt distinguishes three types of concentration camps, each corresponding to one of the three basic Western conceptions of life after death: Hades, Purgatory, and Hell. *Hades,* Arendt explains, is represented by those "relatively mild" camps for displacing "undesirable elements of all sorts—refugees, stateless persons, the asocial and the unemployed." After those so-called displaced-persons camps, she lists the Soviet Union's labor camps, metaphorized as *Purgatory,* "where neglect is combined with chaotic forced labor." *Hell* "in the most literal sense," is embodied by those camps perfected by the Nazis "in which the whole of life was thoroughly and systematically organized with a view to the greatest possible torment" (*O* 445, *E* 918f.).[2]

Arendt frequently turns to the Nazi extermination camps, the site of Hell, as it is here that both the nature of human beings, on the threshold between life and death, and the nature of totalitarian regimes can be studied.[3] Arendt also dwells on the metaphor of Hell in explaining her rather idiosyncratic style vis-à-vis possible approaches in line with the positivistic paradigm. "Hell" is a biblical metaphor with a distinct moral connotation. Arendt explains that she parted quite consciously with the tradition of *sine ira et studio* (without indignation or partisanship), for describing a phenomenon like the extermination camps without indignation would mean to deprive them of an inherent dimension. Rather than suggest detached scholarly rigor, it would imply the dismissal of an integral element of these camps. The Nazis' extermination camps existed "in the midst of human society." "To describe the concentration camps *sine ira,*" Arendt writes, "is not to be 'objective,' but to condone them; and such condoning cannot be changed by a condemnation which the author may feel duty bound to add but which remains unrelated to the description itself" (R 79). Since all that happened took place among human beings, and since human beings are by definition ethical beings, who, in contradistinction to animals, assume an understanding of justice, the question of ethics is *intrinsic* rather than one applied to the phenomenon of the camps. There cannot be an apt description of the camps that does not apprehend them as an occurrence in the human world, and as such the phenomenon requires an inherently ethically charged approach rather than settled fervor.

2. See Hannah Arendt, *Elemente und Ursprünge totaler Herrschaft: Antisemitismus, Imperialismus, Totalitarismus* (Munich: Piper, 1986); and Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt, 1968); hereafter abbreviated as *E* and *O,* respectively. Hannah Arendt wrote and published *The Origins of Totalitarianism* first in English in 1951; it appeared in German four years later. The German edition, however, is not a translation *sensu stricto* but is revised, rhetorically sharpened, and often elaborated. All citations are therefore based on the German edition. Whenever possible, I have consulted the English edition for translations; all other translations are my own.

3. Arendt's trifurcated model of Hades, Purgatory, and Hell, of course, does not take the difference between concentration and death camps within Germany itself into account—a distinction that she, however, repeatedly problematizes in interviews. See also Wolfgang Sofsky, *The Order of Terror: The Concentration Camp,* trans. William Templer (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996).

What one therefore faces is not merely a methodological problem but a political and philosophical one.[4] "The problem originally confronting me," Arendt writes, "was simple and baffling at the same time: all historiography is necessarily salvation and frequently justification" (R 77). Such vindicatory impulse, she suggests, is inherent in any putatively "objective" chronology and can hardly be overcome through "the interference of value-judgments," which makes the historiographical account appear sentimental, moralistic, or biased. She deems the "extraordinarily poor" scholarly literature on the history of anti-Semitism a case in point: it exemplifies the attempt "to write in a destructive way," yet "to write history for purposes of destruction is somehow a contradiction in terms" (R 77). This quandary of writing historically about totalitarianism, which one may feel engaged to destroy rather than conserve, is the fundamental challenge Arendt faces. Her metaphorical language is an attempt at a response to this challenge, a response insofar as metaphors such as "Hell" precisely do not merely reconstruct Nazism within its own judgmental efficacy, give meaning to events, and construct historical continuity, thereby ultimately condoning it. Arendt tells the history of totalitarianism in another language, another logic, a logic incompatible with that of Nazism. Rather than basing her argument exclusively on "questionnaires, . . . statistics, or the scientific evaluation of these data," she feels that an all-too-heavy reliance on the explanatory power of such quantitative material eventually means prolonging the logic of Nazism or, more generally, the biopolitical logic of totalitarian politics.[5] Instead of succumbing to the language and logic of numbers, a logic that, in regard to the politics of totalitarian extermination, entails a distinct moment of *complicity,* Arendt's way out of the methodological dilemma lies in creating an-*other* language, an-*other* logic, a logic allowing for an ethical *stance* (*Haltung*). As we shall see, it is not solely the thematic dimension but, beyond that, the specific performative configuration of Arendt's metaphorical language and her language in general that establishes a certain incommensurability with the dynamics of totalitarian systemization.

Between Past and Future

There is a Hasidic tale that reads as follows:

> When the Baal Shem had a difficult task before him, he would go to a certain place in the woods, light a fire and meditate in prayer—and what he had set out to perform

4. "Questions of method, on the one side, and of general philosophical implications on the other . . . of course belong together" (R 76f.).

5. Hannah Arendt, "Understanding and Politics," in *Essays in Understanding, 1930–1954: Formation, Exile, and Totalitarianism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1994), 307–27, here 323 n. 1. In "On the Nature of Totalitarianism," Arendt writes: "With the introduction of completely alien and frequently nonsensical categories of evaluation into the social sciences, they have reached an all-time low. Scientific accuracy does not permit any understanding which goes beyond the narrow limits of sheer factuality, and it has paid a heavy price for this arrogance, since the wild superstitions of the twentieth century, clothed in humbug scientism, began to supplement its deficiencies" (in *Essays in Understanding,* 328–60, here 339).

> was done. When a generation later the "Maggid" of Meseritz was faced with the same task he would go to the same place in the woods and say: We can no longer light the fire, but we can still speak the prayers—and what he wanted done became reality. Again a generation later Rabbi Moshe Leib of Sassov had to perform this task. And he too went into the woods and said: We can no longer light a fire, nor do we know the secret meditations belonging to the prayer, but we do know the place in the woods to which it all belongs—and that must be sufficient; and sufficient it was. But when another generation had passed and Rabbi Israel of Rishin was called upon to perform the task, he sat down on his golden chair in his castle and said: We cannot light the fire, we cannot speak the prayers, we do not know the place, but we can tell the story of how it was done. And, the story-teller adds, the story which he told had the same effect as the actions of the other three.[6]

This little tale leads us into the center of Hannah Arendt's thought and her doings as a historian and political theorist. Hannah Arendt's art is that of storytelling, and since she knew what Rabbi Israel of Rishin knew, namely that storytelling has "the same effect as . . . actions," since she in fact knew that storytelling is nothing but action, and that action, respectively, can only be conceptualized as such through narrative, we may ask, from a slightly different angle now, How can one tell a story, the story of totalitarianism, without reconstructing it, without reconfiguring it as a continuum of past, present, and future, without, after all, justifying it? Hannah Arendt's response to this dilemma was one much indebted to Walter Benjamin, whose "Theses on the Philosophy of History" she had edited for the English Schocken edition, and whose understanding of history and history telling as fragmentary permeated her own oeuvre:

> I have clearly joined the ranks of those who for some time now have been attempting to dismantle metaphysics, and philosophy with all its categories, as we have known them from their beginning in Greece until today. Such dismantling is possible only on the assumption that the *thread of tradition* is broken and we shall not be able to renew it. Historically speaking, what actually has broken down is the Roman trinity that for thousands of years united religion, authority, and tradition. The loss of this trinity does not destroy the past. . . . What has been lost is the continuity of the past as it seemed to be handed down from generation to generation. . . . What you then are left with is still the past, but a *fragmented* past, which has lost its certainty of evaluation.[7]

That "the thread of tradition is broken," that it is *irrevocably* torn is a diagnosis Arendt appropriates from Benjamin: "Walter Benjamin knew that the break in tradition and the loss of authority . . . were irreparable," she writes. Arendt's

6. Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1995), 349f.; see also Annabel Herzog, "Illuminating Inheritance," *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 26.5 (2000): 1–27, 1–2.

7. Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind* (New York: Harcourt, 1978), 1:212, first italics mine.

formula for this break of tradition is that of the "gap between past and future" within which we live.[8] Benjamin accounted for the postulated rupture in tradition with a fragmentary form of narration, and there is no doubt that this style had considerable impact on Arendt's own writing. Rather than constructing history as a continuous sequence of victories as would be found in most official historiography, Arendt's style is susceptible to the impasses and often traumatic ruptures of historical narrative, its event-like structure, its inconclusive logic.[9] "The continuum of history is that of the oppressors." "The history of the oppressed is a discontinuum,"[10] Walter Benjamin writes. That only a fragmentary style of historiography could tell and resuscitate the stories of the victims, and that this kind of resuscitation constitutes a form of narrative justice, a retroactive justice to those deprived of their voices, is an understanding Arendt owes to Benjamin.

Yet what does it mean to narrate history fragmentarily? Benjamin understood that the "break in tradition and the loss of authority" were irreversible, and he determined that "*he had to discover new ways of dealing with the past*" (*M* 193). Arendt credits Benjamin with mastery in the art of citation, and brilliance when he discovered "that the transmissibility of the past had been replaced by its citability" (*M* 193). It goes without saying that whereas Benjamin initially had planned for a montage of citations with respect to *Origin of the German Mourning Play* as well as *The Arcades Project,* Arendt never entertained such ambitions. At the same time, Arendt's storytelling is remarkable for its rich implementation of metaphors, analogies, proverbs, anecdotes, and literary citations—a style we shall explore in what is to come, a style, to be sure, often discredited in Arendt's role as a political thinker.[11]

8. Hannah Arendt, "Walter Benjamin," in *Men in Dark Times* (New York: Harcourt, 1968), 153–206, here 193; hereafter abbreviated as *M*. See also Arendt, *Menschen in dunklen Zeiten* (Munich: Piper, 1989), 185–242; Arendt, *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (New York: Penguin Books, 1968), 3, 11.

9. On this nexus between Arendt's and Benjamin's respective understanding of storytelling, see Benhabib, *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt,* 91–95.

10. Walter Benjamin, "Paralipomènes et variantes des *Thèses 'Sur le concept de l'histoire,'*" in *Écrits français,* ed. Jean-Maurice Monnoyer (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), 352, quoted in Shoshana Felman, *The Juridical Unconscious: Trials and Traumas in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 31.

11. Isaiah Berlin derided Arendt's work, revealing a certain chauvinistic bias: "I do not greatly respect the lady's [*sic*] ideas, I admit.... She produces no arguments, no evidence of serious philosophical or historical thought. It is all a stream of metaphysical free association. She moves from one sentence to another, without logical connection, without either rational or imaginative links between them" (Berlin, *Conversations with Isaiah Berlin,* ed. Ramin Jahanbegloo [London: Peter Halban, 1992], 82). On Arendt's art of storytelling in general and its historiographical implications in particular, see Kai Evers, "The Holes of Oblivion: Arendt and Benjamin on Storytelling in the Age of Totalitarian Destruction," *Telos* 132 (2005): 109–20; Maurizio Passerin d'Entrèves, *The Political Philosophy of Hannah Arendt* (London: Routledge, 1994), 3–9 and 28–34; Agnes Heller, "Hannah Arendt on Tradition and New Beginnings," in *Hannah Arendt in Jerusalem,* ed. Steven Aschheim (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 19–32; Barbara Hahn, "Wie aber schreibt Hannah Arendt?" *Text und Kritik* 166/167 (2005): 102–13; Barbara Hahn, "Hannah Arendt: Wege ins politische Denken," in *Frauen in den Kulturwissenschaften: Von Lou Andreas-Salomé bis Hannah Arendt,* ed. Barbara Hahn (Munich: C. H. Beck, 1994), 262–77; Sebastian Hefti, "Zwischen Welt Sprache: Denkbilder und Hannah Arendts Schreibwerkstatt," *Text und Kritik* 166/167 (2005): 114–24. On the significance of poetic thought for Arendt's political theory, cf. Susannah Yough-ah Gottlieb, "'Seit jener Zeit.' Hannah Arendt und ihre Literaturkritik," *Text und*

Metaphorical Thinking

"What is so hard to understand about Benjamin," writes Arendt, "is that without being a poet he *thought poetically* and therefore was bound to regard the metaphor as the greatest gift of language" (*M* 166). Arendt was no poet, yet there is no question that she thought poetically and in particular, metaphorically.[12] In *Origins* she speaks of "bugs," "grasshoppers" and "lice," "mosquitoes" and "flies," "soap" and "pimples," an "iron band," "fences," "cornfields," and "chess," a "desert," a "heart," "poison," an "onion," "dogs," and so on. Arendt ponders the question of metaphorical thinking, including her own metaphorical thinking, in the *Denktagebuch* (Thought Journal), published in 2002.[13] The beginning of Arendt's notations for the *Denktagebuch* in 1950 coincides with the last working stage of *Origins.* While *Origins* is a book saturated with metaphorical language, the scattered remarks in the *Denktagebuch* expound a theory of metaphor. What is the relation between Hannah Arendt's thinking about metaphor in the *Denktagebuch,* on the one hand, and the metaphorical thinking about totalitarian politics in *Origins,* on the other?

Arendt repeatedly develops her thoughts on metaphorical thinking from a position of *defense.* For instance, in an entry titled "On the difficulties I have with my English readers," she stands up for Walter Benjamin's—and en route for her own—metaphorical thinking against "the linguistic 'philosophers'" of her day, who "*analyse* everyday speech" but do "not *clarify*" it: "For instance: I said that Benjamin thinks poetically, i.e., in metaphors. Thus far everything okay. But I then raise the question of what is a metaphor . . . and what does a metaphor achieve. . . . These considerations, according to our English friend, have nothing to do with a profile of Benjamin" (*DT* 771; English in the original).

Arendt's discontent with Anglo-linguistic philosophy is reflected in her repudiation of what she characterizes as "thesaurus philosophy," an understanding of

---

Kritik 166/167 (2005): 138–49; Marie Luise Knott, "Hannah Arendt liest Franz Kafka 1944," *Text und Kritik* 166/167 (2005): 150–61; Thomas Wild, *Nach dem Geschichtsbruch: Deutsche Schriftsteller und Hannah Arendt* (Berlin: Matthes & Seitz, 2009); Thomas Wild, "Kreative Konstellationen: Hannah Arendt und die deutsche Literatur der Gegenwart; Ein Überblick und eine Wirkungsanalyse am Beispiel Rolf Hochmuths," *Text und Kritik* 166/167 (2005): 162–73. For an almost comprehensive anthology of the essays and reviews Arendt wrote about literary texts, see Hannah Arendt, *Reflections on Literature and Culture,* ed. Susannah Young-ah Gottlieb (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007).

12. To be sure, notwithstanding her studies with Martin Heidegger and Karl Jaspers, Arendt was not a philosopher. In fact, she herself raised this claim vehemently. "In my opinion I have said good-bye to philosophy once and for all. . . . There is a kind of enmity against all politics in most philosophers, with very few exceptions. . . . I want no part in this enmity, . . . I want to look at politics, so to speak, with eyes unclouded by philosophy" (Arendt, "'What Remains? The Language Remains': A Conversation with Günter Gaus," in *Essays in Understanding,* 2). While the failure of philosophy in the face of the horrors of the twentieth century triggered Arendt's unequivocal refusal to identify with philosophical thinking, her fascination with the power of metaphorical thinking seems to be yet another moment for this defiance of systematic and systematizing thinking.

13. Hannah Arendt, *Denktagebuch,* 2 vols. (Munich: Piper, 2002); hereafter abbreviated as *DT.* All translations are my own unless otherwise noted.

language as she finds it in *Roget's International Thesaurus,* where entries are listed conceptually, not defined but ordered and catalogued with respect to the "greatest possible 'variety of associations.'"[14] The impasse, in Arendt's view, is that, according to this conception of language, themes and topics are guided by certain "ideas" and, consequently, hierarchically arranged. Underlying this organizing principle is the puzzling "notion that words 'express' ideas which I supposedly have prior to having the words." In contradistinction to this perspective, Arendt deems languages the very basis of ideas: "It is more than doubtful that we would have any 'ideas' without language" (*DT* 771). Given this backdrop, Arendt, time and again, vindicates her methodology in the face of her American critics: "*Times Literary Supplement* reviewer complains of my 'ideology'; what he means is my thinking that transcends mere description. Or: similes and metaphors" (*DT* 771; English in the original). Out of a certain frustration with the school of analytical philosophy she concludes: "What this adds up to is that the whole notion of thinking a matter *through* is alien to English 'philosophy'" (*DT* 771).

"The metaphor," Arendt maintains, "is what links thought and writing. What is called a metaphor in fiction is, in philosophy, called a concept. Thought creates its 'concepts' from the visible to designate the invisible" (*DT* 728).[15] The metaphor's role here is that of a "transference" in the sense of the Greek *metapherein* (to transfer), the transference of an abstract, imageless thought from a supersensuous, inconceivable sphere to a sensuous, more conceivable one. "The metaphor's role: linking (as-if) the visible with the invisible" (*DT* 728). Notably, the metaphor is not to be situated in either the sphere of the sensuous or the sphere of the supersensuous. Its indispensable role in (philosophical) thought results precisely from its power to relate the two. "Language, by lending itself to metaphorical usage, enables us to think, that is, to have traffic with non-sensory matters, because it permits a carrying-over . . . of our sense experiences. There are not two worlds because metaphor unites them," Arendt writes in *Thinking,* the first volume of *The Life of the Mind.*[16] In *Origins,* then, the supersensuous corresponds to the "modern lie" of totalitarianism, a lie so big, a totality so total, that the possibility of argumentative critique appears to have evaporated.[17] At this point, only the linguistic transference of the perfect ideology of totalitarianism into a language perceivable in its immediacy seems to allow for "understanding."

14. Preface to *Roget's International Thesaurus,* 3rd ed. (New York: Crowell, 1962), viii, quoted in Arendt, *DT* 770.

15. "Was Denken und Dichten verbindet, ist die Metapher. In der Philosophie nennt man Begriff, was in der Dichtung Metapher heisst. Das Denken schöpft aus dem Sichtbaren seine 'Begriffe', um das Unsichtbare zu bezeichnen."

16. Arendt, *Life of the Mind,* 1:110.

17. Hannah Arendt, "Truth and Politics," in *Between Past and Future,* 227–64, here 253; hereafter abbreviated as TP.

"The Odium of Doubtfulness"

The linguistic "transference" of the metaphor leads Arendt to Immanuel Kant: "Ad metaphor:…They always have to guide us, '*where the understanding lacks the guiding threads of indubitable proofs*' [*wo dem Verstande der Faden der untrüglichen Beweise mangelt*] (*Universal Natural History and Theory of Heaven*)" (*DT* 674).[18] The Kantian *überall…"wo dem Verstande der Faden der untrüglichen Beweise mangelt,"* to be sure, concerns not only the sphere of "Universal Natural History and Theory of Heaven" but also, as Arendt remarks in another entry in her journal, expressly "human affairs" (*menschlichen Angelegenheiten*) (*DT* 767).[19] Incidences of the horrific, *wo dem Verstande der Faden der untrüglichen Beweise mangelt,* then, culminate in the third part of Arendt's book on totalitarianism.

> *Common sense* [*Der gesunde Menschenverstand*] reacted to the horrors of Buchenwald and Auschwitz with the plausible argument: "What crime must these people have committed that such things were done to them!"; or, in Germany and Austria, in the midst of starvation, overpopulation, and general hatred: "Too bad that they've stopped gassing the Jews"; and everywhere with the skeptical shrug that greets ineffectual propaganda. (*O* 446, *E* 919f.)

Frequently Arendt will instigate the metaphorical transference of the supersensuous into the sensuous, the invisible into the visible. Repeatedly, she will launch a translation of the unimaginable *(Unvorstellbare),* unbelievable (*Unglaubliche*), implausible (*Unglaubwürdige*), inconceivable (*Unfassbare*), into the purportedly more graspable language of the sensuous.[20]

---

18. "Ad Metapher:…Sie müssten uns überall leiten, 'wo dem Verstande der Faden der untrüglichen Beweise mangelt' (*Allgemeine Naturgeschichte und Theorie des Himmels*)"; here translated by Ian C. Johnstonhttp://www.mala.bc.ca/~johnstoi/kant/kant2e.htm (accessed February 13, 2007). "The metaphor provides the 'abstract,' imageless thought with an intuition drawn from the world of appearances whose function is to…undo, as it were, the withdrawal from the world of appearances that is the precondition of mental activities" (Arendt, *Life of the Mind,* 1:103).

19. "Das Unsichtbare: die 'Bilder' der Einbildungskraft, die in die Kontemplation und die Identifizierung von Wahrheit und Anschauung führen, und die 'Begriffe', welche die Sprache vorgibt. Die letzten sind immer aus dem Bereich der menschlichen Angelegenheiten gewonnen, die ersteren beziehen sich auf 'Gegebenes', Natur, Universum etc." For a more comprehensive discussion of Arendt's theory of metaphor, see Sigrid Weigel, "Dichtung als Voraussetzung der Philosophie: Hannah Arendts Denktagebuch," *Text und Kritik* 166/167 (2005): 125–37, here 133; cf. Weigel, "Hannah Arendts Passagenwerk: Das *Denktagebuch* als deutschsprachiges Palimpsest zum Werk der amerikanischen Philosophin," *Weimarer Beiträge* 50.1 (2004): 117–21.

20. The question of metaphor is, needless to say, also discussed in Arendt's long essay on Benjamin, where she rather unadventurously describes the metaphor as a correspondence "which is sensually perceived in its immediacy and requires no interpretation.…Since Homer the metaphor has borne that element of the poetic which conveys cognition; its use establishes the *correspondences* between physically most remote things" (*M* 166, Arendt's italics). The metaphor describes, according to Arendt (and, as we shall see, also within the topography of Arendt's own speech act), the paradox of a fiction that makes "reality" more graspable and "directly…concrete" not in spite of but because of its poetic mediation (165). It makes conceivable that which otherwise would remain trans-parent, *durch-schaubar* (see-through)

How exactly are we to understand this process of a linguistic transference as put forth in *Origins*? What defies understanding (*das dem Verstand sich Widersetzende*) finds an example in the species of the "human animal" (*O* 455, *E* 934). The "preparation" of this species can be divided into three stages: the *first* essential step is "to kill the juridical person in man.... This was done by putting certain categories of people *outside* the protection of the law" *(O* 447, *E* 922). Arendt speaks here of those people who became "as outlawed in their own country as the stateless" (*O* 451, *E* 928). Yet what does "stateless" or the "killing of the juridical person in man" mean; how are we to *imagine (vor-stellen*) it? Arendt translates it into the language of an image: those deprived of the "so-called Rights of Man" are turned in like a dog without a name: for of course "a dog with a name has a better chance to survive than a stray dog who is just a dog in general" (*O* 287, *E* 562).[21] Perhaps because dogs are deemed man's best friend, the stray dog must pose as a case in point here. While the *second* stage in the "mass production" of living corpses is the murder of the moral person in man, the *third* step refers to the killing of man's individuality, the uniqueness shaping a human being (*O* 453, *E* 931).[22] For this third stage Arendt, perhaps unsurprisingly, again employs the image of a dog, though this time it is Pavlov's dog, whose fame in the history of behavioral biology rested on the transmutation of its unconditioned reflexes for the sake of conditioned reflexes—which, according to Arendt, meant the killing of precisely that which defines life, namely spontaneity. In the language of images we are thus facing the juxtaposition of one dog and another dog, yet "just a dog in general," the disenfranchised person, still seems to be in a better position than a perverted dog, the undead, the dehumanized human being in the camps. Pavlov's dog describes the paradox of an inanimate living being, a "living corpse," and since this state of no longer being human appears

---

and as such *unanschaulich* (not concrete), not perceivable, that is, not susceptible to reason, *Vernunft,* which etymologically derives from the verb *vernehmen* (to perceive, to hear).

21. For Arendt's famous analysis of the perplexities of human rights and their historically fateful connection to the declining nation-states, see part 2, chap. 9 of *Origins,* "The Decline of the Nation-State and the End of the Rights of Man." As early as 1843, Karl Marx grappled with the complex question of human rights in his scandal-provoking essay "The Jewish Question," eventually disputing the Jewish or any people's alleged rights to particular rights (Marx, "The Jewish Question," in *The Marx-Engels Reader,* ed. Robert Tucker [New York: Norton, 1978], 26–52).

22. Arendt's zoological terminology for those deprived of their individuality is manifold: it ranges from "bugs," "grasshoppers," "lice," "mosquitoes," and "flies" to "dogs" and "cattle." What all these metaphors share is the reference to an anonymous population of biopolitically administered human material: "Not...men and women, children and adults, boys and girls"—that is, not representatives of mankind, but beings "brought down to the lowest common denominator of organic life itself, plunged into the darkest and deepest abyss of primal equality, like cattle, like matter, like things that had neither body nor soul, not even a physiognomy upon which death could stamp its seal" (Arendt, "The Image of Hell," in *Essays in Understanding,* 197–205, here 198). Arendt's zoological metaphors describe the *deindividualized* status of the individual in totalitarian ideology, the status of "the abstract nakedness of being human" (*O* 299, *E* 619). See also Frederick Dolan, "The Paradoxical Liberty of Bio-Power: Hannah Arendt and Michel Foucault on Modern Politics," *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 31.3 (2005): 369–80; Dana Villa, "Totalitarianism, Modernity, and the Tradition," in *Hannah Arendt in Jerusalem,* ed. Steven Aschheim (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 124–48; Margaret Canovan, "Arendt's Theory of Totalitarianism: A Reassessment," in *The Cambridge Companion to Hannah Arendt,* ed. Dana Villa (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 24–43.

inconceivable to Arendt even *after* its metaphorical transference, she translates it yet again into another image, the metaphor of the marionette:

> For to destroy individuality is to destroy spontaneity, man's power to begin something new out of his own resources, something that cannot be explained on the basis of reactions to environment and events. Nothing then remains but *ghastly marionettes with human faces, which all behave like the dog in Pavlov's experiments,* which all react with perfect reliability even when going to their own death, and which do nothing but react. This is the real triumph of the system. (*O* 455, *E* 614)

When the dehumanized human being, the figure of the undead, is translated into the image of marionettes *behaving like* Pavlovian dogs, what then is taking place rhetorically is a double displacement. To recall Kant's formula: metaphors "must always guide us in such cases where the *understanding* lacks the guiding threads of *indubitable proofs* [wo *dem Verstande* der Faden *der untrüglichen Beweise* mangelt]." Arendt writes about the Nazi concentration camps: "Despite *overwhelming proofs* [Trotz *überwältigender Beweise*], the odium of doubtfulness [das Odium der Unglaubwürdigkeit], with which the reports from concentration camps were initially met, always remains attached to each person who reports on them" (*E* 908). The paradox Arendt faces is thus the following: despite all evidence the phenomena of the camps appear to defy understanding, appear insusceptible to the faculty of reason (*Verstand*): "What common sense [der gesunde Menschenverstand] and 'normal people' refuse to believe is that everything is possible. We attempt to understand elements in present or recollected experience that simply surpass our powers of understanding" (*O* 441).[23] Reason cannot accept certain realities despite their being "proven" beyond doubt. It deems "reality"—and we shall use these terms here only provisionally—a "fiction," yet since in totalitarian ideologies "reality" and "fiction" can no longer be discerned, "reason," as it were, forsakes humanity, and the only response provoked is a "skeptical shrug": "The films which the Allies circulated in Germany and elsewhere after the war showed clearly that this atmosphere of insanity and unreality is not dispelled by pure reportage. To the unprejudiced observer these pictures are just about as convincing as snapshots of mysterious substances taken at spiritualist séances" (*O* 446, *E* 920).

These films made about the "mass manufacture of corpses" appear like a "propaganda *trick*" meant to deceive the spectator (*O* 446, *E* 920). Despite all evidence, "'*understanding lacks the guiding threads of indubitable proofs.*'" How are we to understand this paradox?

23. "Was der gesunde Menschenverstand, was 'normale Menschen' nicht glauben, ist, daß alles möglich ist. Die größte Schwierigkeit, die einem angemessenen Verstehen des totalitären Phänomens entgegensteht, ist diese *Stimme des Unglaubens,* die in jedem von uns sitzt und uns mit den Argumenten des gesunden Menschenverstandes schlecht zuredet" (*E* 911f.).

The "Discovery" of the Lie

Arendt considers the "discovery" of the lie one of the Nazis' greatest "achievements," in that the immensity of their crimes guaranteed that the murderers, who "proclaim their innocence with all manner of *lies,*" will be more readily believed than the victims, whose "truths" offend any sane listener's common sense:

> Hitler circulated millions of copies of his book in which he stated that to be successful, a lie must be enormous, i.e., when you are not content to lie about individual factual data within a factual context that is left intact, whereby the intact facts already uncover the lie, but instead *cast such a web of lies around the entire factuality that all the individual constituent facts replace the real by a fictional world, coherent in itself.* (*O* 439, *E* 909f.)

Arendt speaks here of an "entire factuality," a "real" world substituted for a "fictional" world—an analysis that in the later essay "Truth and Politics" (1967) leads her to classify totalitarianism as a "modern lie": "The modern political lies are so big that they require a complete rearrangement of the whole factual texture—the making of another reality, as it were, into which they fit without seam, crack or fissure" (*TP* 253). The modern lie thus epitomizes the paradox of a lie so enormous that, in a narrow sense, it no longer can be called a "lie." For what distinguishes the "lie" from an "error" or a "mistake" is of course its *intentionality,* the deliberateness of the falsification. In the case of self-deception this intentionality is no longer given. At the same time Arendt's nominal classification of the modern lie does, as we shall see, harbor some explanatory potential for the phenomenon of collective mendacity.[24] To be sure, the concept of the modern lie, the notion of self-deception, is more than just an accompaniment to ideology. Arendt speaks about the question of ideology at length, attributing to it the analytic force of a modern, all-encompassing lie.[25] While her motivation for this interpretive symbiosis will gradually emerge, for now we shall follow her on the argumentative path of ideology.

24. Benjamin calls this feature of societal mendacity "objektive Verlogenheit" (objective mendacity) and deems it a phenomenon that "dominates world-historically in our time." In "Remarks on 'Objective Mendacity'" (written about 1921) he explains: "Warum 'objektive' Verlogenheit? 1) Sie herrscht objektiv weltgeschichtlich in dieser Zeit. Alles was nicht ganz groß ist, ist in unser Zeit *unecht.* 2) Es ist nicht die subjektiv, vom Einzelnen klar verantwortete Lüge. Sondern dieser ist 'bona fide'." (Why "objective" mendacity? [1] It dominates objectively, world-historically in these times. Everything not great is considered unreal in our time. [2] It is not the subjective lie for which the individual would have to take responsibility. Rather, he is "bona fide.") Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften,* ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1977), 6:60. For a discussion of the question of objective mendacity, see Peter Fenves, "Testing Right," *Cardozo Law Review* 13 (1991/92): 1099–1113.

25. In the situation of an all-encompassing state of lying, the teller of factual truths, "in the unlikely event that he survives," now is in the position the liar was in before; and it is thus that "even in Hitler's Germany and Stalin's Russia," Arendt writes, "it was more dangerous to talk about concentration and extermination camps, whose existence was no secret, than to hold and to utter 'heretical' views on anti-Semitism, racism, and Communism" (TP 251, 236).

What distinguishes totalitarian ideology from authoritarianism, tyranny, despotism, and the like is its disjunction from reality. If we try to fathom the word "ideo-logy," we are generally dealing with the *logos* of an *idea*. The pseudoscientific character of all ideologies, Arendt says, is based on the presupposition that an idea or a body of ideas—such as "Jews are inferior"—can be the subject matter of a science, as animals are considered the subject matter of zoology (see *O* 468, *E* 962). What we must ask time and again is, What is the linguistic reality or referentiality of totalitarian domination vis-à-vis the linguistic reality or referentiality of Arendt's presentation of totalitarian domination?[26]

Ideological thinking, Arendt says, is a form of political thinking and can be described by three elements:

1. Ideologies raise a claim to *total explanation*. Thus totalitarian historiography appropriates past, present, and future according to its pseudoscientific idea.[27]
2. Ideological thinking becomes *independent of experience;* it becomes emancipated from "the reality that we perceive with our five senses" and insists on a "truer" reality, of which we become aware only through a "sixth sense," acquired through ideological indoctrination.
3. Ideological thinking follows a *coercively logical procedure* that starts from an axiomatic premise and deduces everything else from it; that is, "it proceeds with a consistence that exists nowhere in the realm of reality" (*O* 470f., *E* 965).

How can Arendt expound totalitarian thinking without reconstructing it? The totalitarian-ideological element of the *emancipation from reality and experience* (2) directly corresponds to the thematic of the totalitarian lie and finds an illustration in Arendt's metaphor of the onion. First in *Origins* (1951) and then in the essay

26. "What we call ideology," Paul de Man writes, "is precisely the confusion of *linguistic* with natural reality, of *reference* with phenomenalism" (De Man, "The Resistance to Theory," in *The Resistance to Theory* [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986], 11).

27. Arendt illustrates the pseudoscientificity of ideologies through the analogy between the pseudoscientific technique of totalitarian propaganda and the pseudoscientific technique of advertisement. She analogizes totalitarian propaganda with "the advertisement columns of every newspaper . . . by which a manufacturer proves with facts and figures and the help of a 'research' department that his is the 'best soap in the world.' It is . . . true that there is a certain element of violence in the *imaginative* exaggerations of publicity men, that behind the assertion that girls who do not use this particular brand of soap may go through life with pimples and without a husband, lies the wild dream of monopoly, the dream that one day the manufacturer of the 'only soap that prevents pimples' may have the power to deprive of husbands all girls who do not use his soap" (*O* 345, *E* 733f.). What matters with respect to Arendt's speech act is that the discussed complexities of advertisement for dreaming girls with pimples and without husbands epitomize an analytical discourse *about* National Socialist propaganda without succumbing to its language or logic. The analogy constitutes a segment in Arendt's historiography of totalitarian politics, but it also remains strangely immune due to its idiosyncratic semiotic referentiality.

"What Is Authority?" (1961),[28] Arendt compares the organization of the total system with the structure of an onion (cf. *O* 366f., *E* 856; *O* 413, *E* 717f.; *O* 430, *E* 891, and A 98–100). While authoritarian governments structure their power like a pyramid, tyrannies destroy the intervening layers between top and bottom, so that the top remains suspended over a mass of completely equal individuals. By contrast, the totalitarian onion, in whose center the *Führer* is located, is specific in that all the political movement's extraordinarily manifold parts are related in such a way that each represents the façade in one direction and the center in the other; each plays the role of a normal outside world for the more extreme layer below and the role of radical extremism for the next layer toward the outside. As a result, the movement provides for each layer the fiction of a normal world. The representatives of each layer of the totalitarian onion come to believe that their convictions differ only in degree from those of other people, and they are unlikely ever to *realize* the abyss that separates their own world from what surrounds it. "The onion structure makes the system organizationally shock-proof against the *factuality of the real world,*" Arendt writes (A 99f.). What is "the factuality of the real world"?

In "Truth and Politics," written in response to the controversy caused by the publication of *Eichmann in Jerusalem,* Arendt speaks of two notions of truth. Following Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, she distinguishes "rational truth," describing a *necessary* context ("two times two is four"), from "factual truth," denoting a *contingent* context (in the sense of George Clemenceau: no one can or will ever say that on August 4, 1914, Belgium invaded Germany) (see TP 239). Leaving the complexities involved here in suspense, it appears that the totalitarian onion makes the system organizationally shockproof against reality within the purview of a contingent discourse, the discourse of "raw facts."[29] That is, the reality initially considered "true" by those who live in the onion, in the reality of the totalitarian fiction—a reality based on racial-biological axioms, for instance—will eventually succumb to the imperviousness of the totalitarian system against experienced "facts," as the representatives in each of the onion's layers will be infiltrated by the ideological fiction disseminated by the sovereign and his propaganda apparatus from the onion's center. How are we to *imagine* this detachment from "reality"?

The ideological principle of the emancipation from experienced realities and the creation of an ideologically "truer" reality does not involve the abandonment of our five senses. Rather, it implies supplementation with a sixth sense, taught by

28. Hannah Arendt, "What Is Authority?" in *Between Past and Future,* 91–141; hereafter abbreviated as A. See also Jean-François Lyotard, "Survivant," in *Lectures d'enfance* (Paris: Galilée, 1991), 78.

29. Lyotard convincingly puts forth a psychoanalytic reading of the Arendtian notion of reality: "Le totalitarisme est ainsi un vast organisme '*pare-excitation,*' comme disait Freud. . . . Le réel est à comprendre comme *le fait* du désir et non comme *un fait* établi dans le domaine de référence d'un discours cognitif" ("Survivant," 78; Totalitarianism is . . . a vast system of "para-excitation," as Freud would say. . . . The real is to be understood as *the fact* of desire and not as *a fact* established in the referential sphere of a cognitive discourse).

the educational institutions, a sense injecting "secret meaning" into every political event and public act (*O* 471, *E* 965). The mendacity of the Stalinist dictum that the Moscow subway is the only one in the world, for instance, does not automatically mean that the existence of a subway in Paris is not perceived per se (*O* 350, *E* 742f.). Yet it does mean, and it is here that the sixth sense is required, that the "factual truth" can be reprogrammed according to the totalitarian logic that Stalin will "prove" the correctness of the assertion that there is a subway in Moscow and only there by simply destroying all the others. This "method of infallible prediction," alluding to the *third* element of ideological thinking, namely the principle of absolute logicality, signifies the assimilation of reality to the totalitarian lie or, in Arendt's words, "supreme contempt for all facts and all reality" (*O* 385, *E* 965). It entails, more generally, an equation of power and truth; it presupposes the conviction that "fact depends entirely on the power of man who can fabricate it" (*O* 350, *E* 806). Distinctions such as those "between truth and falsehood, between reality and fiction," collapse at this point. Facts are not given but wanted, and only as such, as a grammatical future anterior, given: only Moscow has a subway, for the Paris subway *will have been destroyed.* And a slogan like "Jews are inferior" is hence a totalitarian-ideological truth, a truth in which an eidetic maxim of action is already inscribed: "Jews must be exterminated."

Metaphor and Truth

An ideology's reality is in a certain sense always identical with the referentiality of its images. The lie that the Moscow subway is the only one in the world exemplifies the falsification of a truth, the truth of an image, for which the ambiguity of language allows: "Nothing reveals the peculiar *ambiguity of language*—in which alone we can establish and say the truth, through which alone we can actively remove truth from the world and which, in its necessary polished smoothness, is always in the way of finding the truth—more distinctly than the metaphor" (*DT* 46).[30] We have truth only in the ambiguity of language. Yet what does this mean? The contention articulated in this journal entry, titled "The Metaphor and the Truth," according to which the ambiguity ("Viel*deut*igkeit"), interpretability (*Deut*barkeit), that is, the meaning (Be*deut*ung) of language—"in which alone we can establish the truth"—seizes its intelligibility from metaphors, returns in more concise form: "All thinking [is] metaphorical" (*DT* 728). What emerges from this sentence, one of the most epigrammatic in the *Denktagebuch,* is the understanding that metaphorical thinking and philosophical thinking do not merely relate to each other

30. "In nichts offenbart sich die eigentümliche Vieldeutigkeit der Sprache—in der allein wir Wahrheit haben und sagen können, durch die allein wir aktiv Wahrheit aus der Welt schaffen können und die in ihrer notwendigen Abgeschliffenheit uns immer im Weg ist, die Wahrheit zu finden—deutlicher als in der Metapher."

like the two sides of a medal, as the transference of a thought from the supersensuous sphere into the sensuous, more conceivable sphere. Rather, the entry makes the much more profound claim—a claim Arendt insinuates without ever fully spelling it out—that all thinking is figurative and that reality is always the reality of images.[31] This means that truth *as such* remains always unreachable; it is always only the result of a mediation with the result of an *image,* the image of a "truth" or, as in the context of totalitarian politics, the image of an enormous falsehood, a "lie." The images of truths and the images of lies all of a sudden no longer appear remote from one another. "Truth" alone remains out of reach; Arendt illustrates this understanding by calling on the Enlightenment thinker Gotthold Ephraim Lessing:

> Lessing's magnificent "Sage jeder, was ihm die Wahrheit dünkt, und die Wahrheit selbst sei Gott empfohlen" ("Let each man say what he deems truth, and let truth itself be commended unto God") would have plainly signified, Man is not capable of truth, all his truths, alas, are δόξαι, mere opinions, whereas for Lessing it meant, on the contrary, Let us thank God that we don't know *the* truth. (TP 233f., Arendt's italics)[32]

The way from here to Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason,* in which reason is led to discern its own limitations, is not far.

---

31. That metaphors are not reserved for the realm of poetic thinking but that indeed all thinking is metaphorical was suggested by Nietzsche—not by chance—in a piece "on *truth* and *lie*": "The 'thing in itself' (which is precisely what the pure truth, apart from any of its consequences, would be) is likewise something quite incomprehensible to the creator of language.... To begin with, a nerve stimulus is transferred into an image: first metaphor. The image, in turn, is imitated in a sound: second metaphor.... We believe that we know something about the things themselves when we speak of trees, colors, snow, and flowers; and yet we possess nothing but metaphors for things—metaphors which correspond in no way to the original entities." These thoughts on the relationship between metaphor, truth, and lie led Nietzsche, like Arendt, to the assumption of a conceptual exchangeability of fiction and reality: "What then is truth? A movable host of metaphors, metonymies, and anthropomorphisms: in short, a sum of human relations which have been poetically and rhetorically intensified, transferred, and embellished, and which, after long usage, seem to a people to be fixed, canonical, and binding. Truths are illusions which we have forgotten are illusions; they are metaphors that have become worn out and have been drained of sensuous force" (Nietzsche, "On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense," in *Epistemology: The Classic Readings,* ed. David Cooper, trans. Daniel Breazeale [Oxford: Blackwell, 1999], 180–95, translation modified).

Paul de Man, in turn, pushes Nietzsche's identification of truth as metaphor yet further by speaking of Nietzsche's "lie that the metaphor was in the first place. It is a naïve belief in the proper meaning of the metaphor without awareness of the problematic nature of its factual, referential foundation" (De Man, *Allegories of Reading, Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust* [New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1982], 110f.). Eventually, "a text like *On Truth and Lie,* although it presents itself legitimately as a demystification of literary rhetoric remains entirely literary, rhetorical, and *deceptive* itself" (113). Similarly, we will need to explore the truthfulness or deceptiveness of the writing of Hannah Arendt, whose reliability as a writer on totalitarian politics and modern lying will prove more ambiguous than she wants us to believe.

32. On Arendt's reception of Lessing, see Sara Eigen, "Hannah Arendt's 'Lessing Rede' and the 'Truths' of History," *Lessing Yearbook* 32 (2000): 309–24.

The Question of Law and the Law of Metaphor

What, according to Arendt, is the law *in* totalitarian politics, what is the law *of* totalitarian politics, and what, eventually, is the law of Arendt's speech act in this very context? "Far from wielding its power in the interest of one man," Arendt writes, totalitarian rule "is quite prepared to sacrifice everybody's vital immediate interests to the execution of what it assumes to be *the law of History or the law of Nature.* Its defiance of positive laws claims to be a higher form of legitimacy which, since it is inspired by the sources themselves, can do away with petty legality" (*O* 461f., *E* 947). Not only does totalitarian rule not appear arbitrary, but it purports to establish the rule of justice ("the law of History or the law of Nature") on earth, thus constituting a higher form of legitimacy than that of positive law.[33] Indeed, positive law can never bring about justice in any concrete, singular case; it is always doomed to fail in the face of the irreconcilability of law and justice. By contrast, totalitarian lawfulness, enacting the "laws of Nature," does not even attempt to translate them into normative categories of "right" and "wrong" for individual citizens but relates them directly to humanity, eventually seeking to produce a *human species embodying the law.*[34]

The jurisprudential matrix clearly lies at the bottom of Hannah Arendt's theorization of totalitarian politics, yet beyond her statements, what, we may ask, is she really doing? Beyond the juridical dynamics, what kind of *rhetorical* dynamics does she attach to formulas such as the "fences of laws" and the "iron band of terror"?

> Die Tyrannis begnügt sich mit der Gesetzlosigkeit; der totale Terror setzt an die Stelle der *Zäune des Gesetzes* und der gesetzmässig etablierten und geregelten *Kanäle menschlicher Kommunikation* ein *eisernes Band,* das alle so eng aneinanderschließt, dass nicht nur der *Raum der Freiheit,* wie er in verfassungsmässigen Staaten zwischen den Bürgern existiert, sondern auch die *Wüste der Nachbarlosigkeit* und des gegenseitigen Mißtrauens, die der Tyrannis eigentümlich ist, verschwindet, und es ist, als *seien alle zusammengeschmolzen in ein einziges Wesen von gigantischen Ausmassen.* (*E* 957f.)[35]

Arendt says that totalitarian terror "eliminate[s]…the capacity of man to act" (*O* 467, *E* 961). Yet isn't her language precisely that—a demonstration of her

33. Cf. also Hannah Arendt, "Franz Kafka: A Revaluation, on the Occasion of the Twentieth Anniversary of His Death," *Partisan Review* XI/4 (1944): 412–22.

34. Hannah Arendt, "On the Nature of Totalitarianism," in *Essays in Understanding,* 340.

35. "Total terror is so easily mistaken for a symptom of tyrannical government because totalitarian government in its initial stages must behave like a tyranny and raze the boundaries of man-made law. But total terror leaves no arbitrary lawlessness behind it.…It substitutes for *the boundaries and channels of communication* between individual men a *band of iron* which holds them so tightly together that it is as though their plurality had disappeared into *One Man of gigantic dimensions.* To abolish the *fences of laws* between men—as tyranny does—means to take away man's liberties and destroy freedom as a living political reality; for the space between men as it is *hedged in by laws,* is the living space of freedom. Total terror uses this old instrument of tyranny but destroys at the same time also the lawless, *fenceless wilderness* of fear and suspicion which tyranny leaves behind. This *desert*…is no longer a living space of freedom" (*O* 465).

capacity to act? The long sentence quoted here seems at least as remarkable with respect to what it performs as to its content. Arendt repeatedly infringes on the rules of good rhetorical style by relating different metaphors *to one another,* evoking a stylistic dissonance correlating to a certain dis-logic. The chorale of "fences of laws" and "channels of communication," "iron band," "desert of fear," and the "One Man of gigantic dimensions" precipitates an enormous stylistic as well as political amplitude—but certainly no homogeneity or systematization, and least of all a "reconstruction" of the history of totalitarian systems. Fear, Arendt says, is the characteristic feeling within totalitarian regimes: "[Furcht] bleibt . . . die alles durchdringende Stimmung, die das *Herz* jedes einzelnen *verwüstet,* so wie Mißtrauen . . . die Beziehung aller Menschen einander *vergiftet*" (*E* 961).[36] What the calculated unpredictability of Arendt's counterenactment, what the multiplication of images, appears to invoke is precisely the epistemic control of the totalitarian phenomenon. This happens not by employing metaphors as analytic tools; what comes to the fore, rather, is the pleonastic figurative logic of Arendt's presentation *itself:* the metaphors appear to be manifesting an end *in themselves.* "Desert," "heart," and "poison" are central constituents in the political theory of Hannah Arendt.

To be sure, it would be problematic to attribute a subversive force to the narrative implementation of metaphors per se. Totalitarian systems have frequently invoked disease imagery to constitute and characterize an enemy. "As was said in speeches about 'the Jewish problem' throughout the 1930s, to treat cancer, one must cut out much of the healthy tissue around it."[37] Arendt herself alludes to the limits of metaphorical thinking when it comes to making the inconceivable conceivable. "The danger," she notes in *Thinking,* the first volume of *The Life of the Mind,* "lies in the overwhelming evidence the metaphor provides by appealing to the unquestioned evidence of sense experience."[38] Hans Blumenberg, in his *Paradigmen zu einer Metaphorologie,* traced very common figures of speech through the history of Western thought and thereby, "almost incidentally," Arendt writes,

> discovered to what an extent typically modern pseudo-sciences owe their plausibility to the lacking evidence of data. His prime example is the consciousness theory of psychoanalysis, where consciousness is seen as the peak of an iceberg, a mere indication on the floating mass of unconsciousness beneath it. Not only has that theory never been demonstrated but it is undemonstrable in its own terms: the moment a fragment of unconsciousness reaches the peak of the iceberg it has become conscious and lost all the properties of its alleged origin. (*Life of the Mind,* 1:113)[39]

36. "[Fear] remains . . . the all-pervasive feeling that lays *waste* to the *heart* of every individual, just as mistrust . . . *poisons* the relationship of all human beings with each other."

37. Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1978), 64f.

38. Arendt, *Life of the Mind,* 1:113.

39. See Hans Blumenberg, *Paradigmen zu einer Metaphorologie* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1998).

The evidence of the iceberg metaphor is so overwhelming that any need for demonstration appears superfluous. Leaving aside a discussion of Arendt's problematic distinction between "science" and "pseudoscience," the gist of her argument—which, of course, holds equally for the thought systems of great philosophers and metaphysicians—is the following: whereas empirical sciences are based on "real" experiences and need to account for exceptions to the rule, in the systematic order of mental constructs, the consistency of metaphorical thought seems to epitomize an end in itself. Metaphors may well allow for an *imagination* of the unknowable. But the epistemic appropriation of the unknowable always stops halfway, and the "ineffable" can never be fully handed over to us.

Despite the danger of metaphorical thought, Arendt's storytelling, one may say, appears to generate a curious double movement: on the one hand, the hyperbolic mobilization of metaphorical language, allegedly "explaining" the dynamics of totalitarianism, reads as an ongoing attempt to "destroy" totalitarianism; on the other hand, the very manifestation of her own narrative freedom, fraught with stylistic moments of the spontaneous, appears to enact the very individuality of which the living dead in the camps, reduced to Pavlovian dogs, were deprived. Arendt defies the deprivation of her voice by actualizing and dramatizing her role as a speech actor, implacably insisting on her living presence.

In this context one is, beyond the discourse of metaphors and analogies, likely to stumble across the many proverbs and the pronounced discourse of idioms and colloquial expressions in *Origins.* Arendt does not show scruples in orchestrating a round dance of sayings like "From planing come shavings," "He who says A must also say B," "Two times two is four," "You can't make an omelette without breaking eggs," and so forth in the inconclusive last chapter of her book on totalitarianism. What manifests itself here is a reality, the reality of "proverbs and idioms of everyday language" (*M* 168). Yet toward what end? The "art of taking proverbial and idiomatic speech literally," Arendt writes, "enabled Benjamin—as it did Franz Kafka, in whom figures of speech are often clearly discernible as a source of inspiration…to write a prose of…singularly enchanting and enchanted closeness to reality [verzauberte Realitätsnähe]" (*M* 168). This "enchanted closeness to reality" seems to be a poetic effect invoked by metaphors as much as by idiomatic and proverbial speech. Philosophical-conceptual sobriety, that is, an alleged *plain* closeness to the "reality" of totalitarianism, appears to be less amenable to understanding than *verzauberte Realitätsnähe.*

He Who Says A Must Also Say B

Arendt illustrates the third characteristic element of totalitarian thinking—the coercive force of logicality—not only through metaphors and analogies but also through the idiomatic saying "He who says A must also say B": "Here too, it has been shown that the vernacular was, in its own way, excellently prepared for this new kind of politics. Just like Stalin, Hitler had always had a special preference

for buttressing his arguments with an 'He who says A must also say B' logicality" (*O* 472, *E* 968). "He who says A must also say B" means, according to the Duden dictionary, "He who begins something must go on with it (and if necessary also accept unpleasant consequences [und auch unangenehme Folgen auf sich nehmen])."[40] What suggests itself as rather naive in Duden's encyclopedic world—in that he who says A must "take unpleasant consequences upon *himself*"—denotes a diabolic euphemism standing for the murderous logicality of ideological reasoning. "Deductive thought's inherent coercive force, which ideologies turn into such excellent preparatory means for the coercive force of terror regimes, is extremely well expressed in 'He who says A must also say B,' because *here it is evidently identical with our fear* of embroiling ourselves in contradictions and, through such contradictions, losing ourselves" (*O* 473, *E* 968f.).

Whence does this "fear of contradicting ourselves" spring? The force of "He who says A must also say B" lies in assuming that contradictions make everything meaningless, that meaning and consistency are the same. The coercive force of total logicality ensures—on the basis of an axiomatic premise A—a stringent consistency that one will never find in reality. "The only counter-principle against this force and against the fear of contradicting ourselves," Arendt writes,

> lies in human spontaneity, our capacity to begin. Freedom as an inner capacity of man is identical with the capacity to begin. . . . Over the beginning, no logic, no cogent deduction can have any power, because its chain presupposes, in the form of a premise, the beginning. No necessary argumentation ever has any power over the beginning, because it is never derivable from some logical chain of reasoning, indeed, has to be assumed in all deductive thought, to bring about the inevitable. For that reason, the logic of "He who says A, must also say B" is based on the uncompromising exclusion of all experience and thought which, in itself, somehow starts to experience and imagine the new. (*O* 473, *E* 969f.)

The logical force of ideological reasoning is to forestall the chance that someone begins to think, think anew, that is, that someone says A rather than following the cogent deduction of parroting B and C and so on until the end of "the murderous alphabet" (*O* 472). To be sure, he who says A *can* by all means decide to say B, and this, as long as it does not succumb to an outer compulsion, may very well signal one's freedom to act. The point is, whatever may guarantee meaning, consistency does not guarantee it. Not raising a claim to consistency, though perhaps one to meaning, we now shall take the chance of saying A and then B, A-rendt and then B-recht.

40. See Duden, *Redewendungen: Wörterbuch der deutschen Idiomatik* (Mannheim: Bibliographisches Institut/Brockhaus, 2002), 11:25.

In his play *He Who Says Yes / He Who Says No,* Brecht sets a counterexample to the "murderous alphabet" of ideological reasoning: he sets an example with respect to the play's plot, but also, allegorically, with respect to his own writing process: *He Who Says Yes* was written in 1930, and *He Who Says Yes / He Who Says No* was written in 1931—yet not in the form of a consecutive succession. Rather, Brecht—in response to critical feedback from the pupils of the Karl Marx Elementary School in Berlin Neukölln with whom the script had been discussed—rewrote the play. *He Who Says Yes / He Who Says No,* as a result of the revision of *He Who Says Yes,* thus became included in the fourth issue of the (at that time still unpublished) 1931 edition of *Versuche.* Brecht knew: "He who says A need not necessarily say B. He may realize that A was wrong."[41] The 1930 version was "not right,"[42] and for that reason Brecht prepared a revised version of *He Who Says Yes,* now titled *He Who Says Yes / He Who Says No*—and he let only the later version pass.

A boy starts with his teacher and other students on a journey through the mountains to get medicine for his mother. Custom ordains that he who falls ill should not ask the expedition to turn back on his account; instead, he ought to agree to be hurled into the valley.[43] In *He Who Says Yes* during the climbing, the boy falls ill and thus gets killed:

> The friends took the jar / And, sighing for the sad ways of the world / And its bitter law / Hurled the boy down / Foot to foot they stood together / And blindly hurled him down / None guiltier than his neighbor / And flung clods of earth / And flat stones / After him.[44]

In *He Who Says No* the boy does not consent to the old custom:

> "The answer I gave was wrong, but your question was even more wrong. He who says A need not necessarily say B. He may realise that A was wrong.... As for the old Great Custom, I see no rhyme or reason in it. What I need is a new Great Custom to be introduced at once, to wit, the Custom of rethinking every new situation."[45]

41. Bertolt Brecht, *He Who Says Yes / He Who Says No,* in *The Measures Taken and Other Lehrstücke,* trans. Wolfgang Sauerländer (New York: Arcade, 2001), 78. See also Brecht, *Der Jasager und der Neinsager: Vorlagen, Fassungen, Materialien,* ed. Peter Szondi (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1966).

42. "I think that bit about custom is not right," ten-year-old B. Korsch said in a discussion between Brecht and the pupils. In response to the general feedback, Brecht modified the drama and added *He Who Says No* with a deviating ending, a "new Custom." For the protocol of this discussion, see *Der Jasager und der Neinsager,* 59–63. For a detailed comparative analysis of both versions of the play, see Peter Szondi's commentary in Brecht, *Der Jasager und der Neinsager,* 103–12.

43. See also Barbara Hahn, *Hannah Arendt: Leidenschaften, Menschen und Bücher* (Berlin: Berlin Verlag, 2005), 27.

44. Brecht, *He Who Says Yes / He Who Says No,* 69.

45. Ibid., 78f.

The teacher raises concerns that shame and disgrace will be heaped on the boy if he turns back. But the students do not allow shame or disgrace to deter them from "doing the reasonable thing," and so they carry the boy back to the village, thereby introducing a new custom:

> The friends took the friend / And initiated a new Custom / And a new law / And brought the boy back. / *Side by side they walked together* [*Seit an Seit gingen sie zusammengedrängt*] / Towards calumny / Towards ridicule, with their eyes open / None more cowardly than his neighbour.[46]

While the old "Great Custom" corresponds to the cogent logicality of ideological reasoning, the "Custom of rethinking every new situation" epitomizes Arendt's philosophy of the beginning.[47] The "new law" allows for a new beginning, and it guarantees the liberation from the throttling nooses of the old Great Custom. To be sure, those students walking "side by side" follow their own newly developed ethical views, they are *zusammengedrängt* not in the sense of an outer compulsion, not squeezed together toward one amorphous body, but in the sense of a political community. The impetus for community formation does not resemble the compulsion of total terror in which individuals are pressed together until the space *between* them is destroyed and everyone has lost contact with everyone else. It does not refer to what Arendt describes as the "iron band" of terror, which squeezes people together until they are a homogeneous mass in the sense of the Hobbesian Leviathan, deprived of the ability for political *inter*-action, embodying "only one single human being" (*O* 474, *E* 975). The "new law" correlates with what Arendt calls "the fences of laws," laws that simultaneously protect human freedom and guarantee the continuance of a society, a pluralistic society in the sense of the Latin *inter-esse*.

Loneliness and Solitude

The outer compulsion of terror destroys the space, the freedom and thus the relationships *between* human beings, eventually precipitating the paradoxical condition of the isolation of those squeezed together. "The destruction of plurality

46. Ibid., 79.

47. For a careful analysis of Arendt's broader reading of Brecht, see Hahn, *Hannah Arendt,* here esp. 26–33; see also Thomas Schestag, *Die unbewältigte Sprache: Hannah Arendts Theorie der Dichtung* (Weil am Rhein: Engeler, 2006). On Arendt's philosophy of the beginning, see, among others, Doren Wohlleben, "Narrative (-) Initiative. Das 'Rätsel des Anfangs' als ethisches und poetologisches Konzept in Hannah Arendts *Denktagebuch* und ihrer Vorlesung *Über das Böse,*" in *Narration und Ethik,* ed. Claudia Öhlschläger (Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 2009), 53–63; Ludger Lütkehaus, *Natalität: Philosophie der Geburt* (Kusterdingen: Die Graue Edition, 2006); Margarete Durst, "Birth and Natality in Hannah Arendt," *Analecta Husserliana* 79 (2004): 777–97; Alison Martin, "Natality and the Philosophy of Two," *Selected Studies in Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy* 28 (2002): 134–41; Fernando Bárcena, "Hannah Arendt: Una poética de la natalidad," *Revista de Filosofía* 26 (2002): 107–23.

leaves every individual with the feeling *of being left totally on their own.*" Loneliness is the politically instrumentalized feeling of totalitarian government, a feeling, to be sure, not to be confused with the state of the *flâneur* as Benjamin found it in Charles Baudelaire. The loneliness Arendt talks about is one in which human beings, individuals themselves, are deserted by themselves. "It is not good that man should be alone" Luther says; a lonely man "always deduces one thing from the other and thinks everything to the worst."[48] Luther, "whose experiences in the phenomena of solitude and loneliness probably were second to no one's," understood that the coerciveness of logical deduction can befall with all its mighty power only the one who is lonely. The experience of loneliness is inextricably linked with the compulsory process of deduction, a "curious connection" discovered by totalitarian regimes and used toward their own ends. "In loneliness, the only things that appear to remain indubitably certain are the elementary laws of the compellingly evident, the tautology of the sentence: 'He who says A, must also say B' or 'two times two is four'" (*O* 477f., *E* 976–78).[49]

The feeling of loneliness is, according to Arendt, the main feature of "that crisis . . . in which all of us everywhere live today [jener Krise . . . , in der wir heute alle und überall leben]" (*E* 971). It is in this vein that she had initially planned the title *The Burden of Our Times* for what we know as *The Origins of Totalitarianism.* This is why she brings into being so copious an edifice of images contaminating and obliterating totalitarian politics within the context of its presentation. It is thus that this performative work of destruction appears most excessive over the last pages, commenting on the "conditions under which we exist today," conditions still "threatened by [the] devastating sand storms" of totalitarian politics (*O* 478, *E* 978). Arendt's discourse here indeed seems possible only after a rather abrupt caesura, a double paragraph, and a new beginning, a beginning resulting less from the argumentative context than from her personal situation as a writer, less a thematic caesura than an overly motivated manifestation of her own capacity to act, to begin, to say A (see *O* 474, *E* 971).

Arendt's entire art of interpretation and citation oddly appears to set itself against the systematology of her research object, a politics not historicizable from a temporal distance but, once again, epitomizing a feature of "the crisis of our

48. Martin Luther, *Erbauliche Schriften,* after Arendt, *O* 477, *E* 976.

49. The force of total terror on the one side, which presses individuals together and "supports them in a world which has become a wilderness for them," and the coercion of deductive reasoning on the other, "which prepares each individual in his lonely isolation against all others," correspond to each other and depend on each other to sustain the movement's dynamic. Just as terror, "even in its pre-total, merely tyrannical form, ruins all relationships" between human beings, so the coercive logicality of "ideological thinking ruins all relationships with reality" (*O* 473f., *E* 970). At this point, the lying world of consistency, as conjured up by totalitarian movements, "*is more adequate to the needs of the human mind than reality itself,* in which, through sheer imagination, uprooted masses can feel at home and are spared the never-ending shocks which real life and real experiences deal to human beings and their expectations" (*O* 353, *E* 748f.).

time" (*O* 478, *E* 978). She comments on her art of interpretation and citation in a most remarkable entry of her *Denktagebuch* in November 1969: "Interpreting, citing—but only to have witnesses and friends [Das Interpretieren, das Zitieren—doch nur, um Zeugen zu haben, auch Freunde]" (*DT* 756). Saint Augustine, Benjamin, Brecht, Montesquieu, Hobbes, Kant, Kafka, Isak Dinesen, Heidegger, Luther, Luxemburg—"witnesses and friends."[50] Arendt, the Jew in exile, during the writing of *Origins* spatially and temporally distant from the world she had to leave, writing in a language foreign to her. Everyone who writes a book works in solitude. This does not necessarily imply that she or he is lonely. Arendt distinguished between solitude and loneliness.[51] While he who is lonely is deprived of the company of his equals and even deserted by himself, the one in solitude is "by himself." The solitary person still is in dialogue with himself; he does not lose contact with the world of his fellow people "because they are represented in the self" with whom he leads the internal dialogue (*O* 476, *E* 976f.). But Arendt also speaks of the "danger" of solitude turning into loneliness. In one of the perhaps most autobiographical sentences at the very end of *Origins,* Arendt describes loneliness as a feeling that comes into being "when, for whatever historical-political reasons, this shared lived world falls apart and the interwoven, interlinked people are suddenly thrown back upon themselves" (*E* 977). This sentence is, curiously enough, only in the German edition, only uttered in Arendt's mother tongue. Like so many, Arendt is also thrown back upon herself—a moment to which

50. The 2006 volume containing the correspondence between Benjamin and Arendt provides ample evidence of their friendship during their exile in France, a friendship that on Arendt's, but also on Benjamin's, part seemed to lack no passion: "My knights' steeds whinny with impatient anticipation to knap with your knights' steeds [Meine Springer wiehern bereits vor Ungeduld, sich mit den Ihren herumzubeißen]" (Detlev Schöttker and Erdmut Wizisla, eds., *Arendt und Benjamin: Texte, Briefe, Dokumente* [Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 2006], 129); cf. also the Hannah Arendt Papers at the Library of Congress, http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/P?mharendt (accessed February 13, 2007); Detlev Schöttker and Erdmut Wizisla, "Hannah Arendt und Walter Benjamin: Stationen einer Vermittlung," *Text und Kritik* 166/167 (2005): 42–57.

By contrast, Brecht, Benjamin's friend, was a witness, but certainly no friend of Arendt; numerous critical remarks throughout her oeuvre and especially the long essay on Brecht testify to Arendt's disapproval of the poet's political involvement in the Socialist project in the GDR (Arendt, "Bertolt Brecht: 1898–1956," in *M* 207–49).

51. "All thinking, strictly speaking, is done in solitude and is a dialogue between me and myself; but this dialogue of the two-in-one does not lose contact with the world of my fellow-men because they are represented in the self with whom I lead the dialogue of thought. The problem of solitude is that this two-in-one needs the others in order to become one again: one unchangeable individual whose identity can never be mistaken for that of any other. For the confirmation of my identity I depend entirely upon other people; and it is the great saving grace of companionship for solitary men that it makes them 'whole' again, saves them from the dialogue of thought in which one remains always equivocal, restores the identity which makes them speak with the single voice of one unexchangeable person." By contrast, "what makes loneliness so unbearable is the loss of one's own self which can be realized in solitude, but confirmed in its identity only by the trusting and trustworthy company of my equals. In this situation, man loses trust in himself as the partner of this thought and that elementary confidence in the world which is necessary to make experiences at all. Self and world, capacity for thought and experience are lost at the same time" (*O* 476, *E* 977). On the concept of dialogical thinking, see also Arendt, *Life of the Mind,* esp. the first volume, *Thinking*.

numerous entries in the *Denktagebuch* testify, no less than the moving essay "We Refugees." Given this background, we may have to see the performance of *Origins* with its sometimes overabundant implementation of other voices, other dialogical partners, also as a search for witnesses and friends, the struggle of one forced into exile with her unforeseen personal circumstances.