2

Why Does Hannah Arendt Lie?

Or the Vicissitudes of Imagination

> And therefore Mountaigny saith prettily, when he inquired the reason, why the word of the lie should be such a disgrace, and such an odious charge? Saith he, "If it be well weighed, to say that a man lieth, is as much to say as, that he is brave towards God, and a coward towards men." For a lie faces God, and shrinks from man.
>
> —Francis Bacon, "Of Truth"

When explaining what she was doing, Hannah Arendt typically provided the term "storytelling."[1] The storyteller, Arendt writes in the essay "Truth and Politics," confronts the seeming arbitrariness of the facts presented, constructing certain configurations of "brutally elementary data" that eventually transcend the "meaning" of the chaos of sheer events; the task is to "tell . . . a story."[2] The writer and the historian share this task of bestowing meaning—the art of interpretation: "The transformation of the given raw material of sheer happenings which the historian, like the fiction writer (a good novel is by no means a simple concoction or a figment of

1. Hannah Arendt, *Men in Dark Times* (New York: Harcourt, 1968), 22; Arendt, *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (New York: Penguin Books, 1968), 14f.

2. Hannah Arendt, "Truth and Politics," in *Between Past and Future,* 227–64, here 239, 262; hereafter TP.

pure fantasy), must effect is closely akin to the poet's transfiguration of moods or movements of the heart" (TP 262).

The act of transfiguration is what distinguishes Arendt's historiography from the positivistic approach she disparages. Shackled by the curious double bind of seeking to interpret events to bestow meaning while upholding the imperative of telling the truth, Arendt as well as fiction writers faces the same accusation: "Fiction authors are always accused, [she writes,] of lying. And that is quite justified. We expect truth only from them (and not from philosophers, from whom we expect conceptual thought). Faced with such a demand, so terribly difficult to fulfill—how should one not lie?"[3]

How should Hannah Arendt not lie?

The Art of Lying

Facing the task of writing a history of totalitarian politics, including its tendency to rearrange the whole factual texture, that is, including the modern lie, Arendt mobilizes the traditional "art of lying" (TP 253). Both the traditional and the totalitarian/modern lie invoke a rearrangement of "factual data" that always appear or, until the arrival of the modern lie, appeared indestructible. The idiosyncrasy of the totalitarian lie is twofold. Its first difference from a traditional lie is the modern lie's all-encompassing scope. The traditional lie concerned "only particulars," by tearing "a hole in the fabric of factuality" rather than changing the whole context. By contrast, "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). Yet the mere falsification of factual truths alone does not constitute a lie; the falsification must be *intentional*. The second difference between a modern and traditional lie is that the traditional lie was "directed at the enemy and was meant to deceive only him" (TP 253).[4] The liar knew the difference between truth and falsehood and was aware of his own lying. What distinguishes the modern totalitarian lie from the traditional lie is the position of the liar: whereas the traditional lie was a *transitive* speech act and was directed away from the agent, the modern lie is primarily *reflexive* and ultimately an act of self-deception.

"The mere telling of facts leads to no action whatever: it even leads under normal circumstances toward the acceptance of things as they are," Arendt writes (TP 251). The sentence echoes Arendt's contention discussed earlier, namely that in *Origins* she faced the dilemma of reconstructing what she wishes to

3. Hannah Arendt, *Denktagebuch,* 2 vols. (Munich: Piper, 2002), 469; hereafter *DT.* All translations are my own unless otherwise noted.

4. "Statesmen and diplomats," Arendt writes, knew they were lying. "They were not likely to fall victim to their own falsehoods; they could deceive others without deceiving themselves" (TP 253).

destroy—totalitarianism—thereby facing the risk of condoning it. Her response to this dilemma was the employment of literary citations, proverbs, analogies, and above all, metaphorical language. Metaphorical language lends itself to a form of image making incommensurable with the self-coercive force of logical deduction fundamental to totalitarian politics. As we shall see, Arendt avails herself of the lie in a similar context in that lying, rather than embodying the "acceptance of things as they are," epitomizes a form of *performative action.* What is the performativity of the lie?[5]

Lying is action, and the liar's advantage stems from a position in the midst of it: "He says what is not so because he wants things to be different from what they are—that is, he wants to change the world." Arendt persistently associates the "art of lying" with action: the liar "is an actor by nature," she writes (TP 250). The implications are significant: "The deliberate denial of factual truth—the ability to lie—and the capacity to change facts—the ability to act—are interconnected; they owe their existence to the same source: *imagination.*"[6] The art of lying is a form of image making. The image, unlike "an old-fashioned portrait, is not supposed to flatter reality," but to offer a "full-fledged substitute" for it (TP 252). Yet, is the lie simply that? Does it not first and foremost describe a *capacity,* namely the capacity to produce images of alternative realities? Does it not, above all, denote the *ability* to imagine the world the way we would (or would not) like to change it?[7] The power, the political force of the lie, does not lie in the status quo of either this reality or that reality, but in the possibility of "an-other" reality, a potentiality for the transgression of the boundaries of "truth." It is thus that "our *ability* to lie—but not necessarily our ability to tell the truth—belongs among the few obvious, demonstrable data that confirm human freedom" (TP 250). It is thus that Arendt speaks of an "undeniable affinity of lying with action, with politics" (TP 258). It is therefore, finally, that "truthfulness has never been counted among the political virtues, because it has little indeed to contribute to that change of the world and of circumstances which is among the most legitimate political activities" (TP 251).[8]

5. For a critical reading of Arendt's conception of lying, see Jacques Derrida, "History of the Lie," in *Futures: Of Jacques Derrida* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001), 65–98. On the broader question of truth and politics in Arendt, see also John Nelson, "Politics and Truth: Arendt's Problematic," *American Journal of Political Science* 22.2 (1978): 270–301; Patrick Riley, "Hannah Arendt on Kant, Truth and Politics," in *Essays on Kant's Political Philosophy,* ed. Howard Williams (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1992), 305–25; Dana Villa, *Arendt and Heidegger: The Fate of the Political* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 94–97; Theresa Man Ling Lee, *Politics and Truth: Political Theory and the Postmodern Challenge* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1997), 115–203.

6. Hannah Arendt, "Lying in Politics: Reflections on the Pentagon Papers," in *Crises of the Republic* (New York: Hartcourt, 1972), 5; hereafter abbreviated as LP. Unless otherwise noted, all italics in this chapter are mine.

7. A characteristic of human action, Arendt says, "is that it always begins something new, yet this does not mean that it is ever permitted to start *ab ovo,* to create *ex nihilo.* In order to make room for one's own action something that was there before must be removed or destroyed, and things as they were before are changed" (LP 5).

8. Whereas Arendt's notion of lying is inscribed by a distinct historical signature, Immanuel Kant, a rigorous theoretician of the lie, develops a much more formalistic concept of mendacity in "On a

Obviously, lying in the realm of politics can have devastating consequences, which Arendt underscores: "What is at stake here is [the] common and *factual reality itself,* and this is indeed a political problem of the first order" (TP 237). Lying is always defined by some sort of "denial of *factual truth*" (LP 5). Yet leaving it at that would mean missing the ambiguous nature of the "lie" and the pernicious nature of "truth."[9] For what should "factual truth" or "factuality" be? As noted in chapter 1, in "Truth and Politics," Arendt discerns two different notions of truth: rational truth and factual truth (TP 239, 249). Lying, Arendt says, is defined by the deliberate falsification of factual truths rather than the falsification of rational truths, the latter being located in the domain of ignorance, opinion, error, and so on (TP 232–37). Clearly, this distinction is fraught with difficulties and complexities: Is not the ascertaining of facts an act of interpretation? What does "storytelling" signify if not *doing* something with the raw data of factuality? What does it mean to narrate events if not to put them into a certain order, to tell them from a certain perspective, to choose them according to certain selection criteria? If there is reason to question what distinguishes factual and rational truths, the exclusive contiguity between "lying" and the falsification of "factual" rather than "rational" truth must be called into question.

Perhaps we can, if only to begin with, describe the problematic of lying by differentiating two dimensions: a "constative" or epistemological register (i.e., lying as a form of "untruth") and, more intricate and also more exciting, a "performative" or ethical register (i.e., the various motivations, intentions, maneuvers of deception, strategies of manipulation, and anticipated effects that are at the heart of every lie). Let us then embark on an excursion and explore the ethical efficacy of two Arendtian "lies," which, similar to phantasms, errors, mistakes, opinions, and so on, represent only one particular manifestation of the many detours of logic.

Supposed *Right* [*Recht*] to Lie Because of Philanthropic Concerns," in *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals,* trans. James Ellington (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1993), 63–67 (Kant, "Über ein vermeintes Recht aus Menschenliebe zu lügen," in *Gesammelte Schriften* [Berlin: Königliche Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1900], 8:423–30). For a compendium on the multifaceted phenomenon of lying, cf. Sissela Bok, *Lying: Moral Choice in Public and Private Life* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978). Harry Frankfurt examines the related issue of "bullshitting" in *On Bullshit* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005).

9. In particular, the fourth and fifth sections of Arendt's "Truth and Politics" read in parts like a manifesto for lying. The ambiguous nature that Arendt attributes to the lie retains, apart from its perversion in totalitarian politics, a certain nobility—as it also, albeit much less ambiguously, emerges in Benjamin's essay "Toward a Critique of Violence." Benjamin introduces the lie as an example of "pure means," as the lie is essentially nonviolent. He describes the prohibition of deception (*Betrug*) correspondingly as a *Verfallsprozess* (process of decline), testifying to the decreasing power of the order of right. According to Benjamin, the prohibition of fraud presents a penetration of the violent juridical sphere into the nonviolent sphere of language, which until then had not been contaminated by jurisdiction. Although Arendt tacitly dismisses her friend's treatise on violence in her own study *On Violence,* Benjamin's passages on the question of lying seem to have inspired Arendt; see, for example, TP 228f.: "Lies, since they are often used as *substitutes for more violent means,* are apt to be considered relatively harmless tools in the arsenal of political action."

Pavlov's Dog

A central moment in Arendt's anthropological philosophy (or her philosophical anthropology) is the concentration camp as the site where the nature of totalitarianism as well as the essential nature of human beings is made manifest. The objective of this "ghastly experiment," Arendt writes, is that "of eliminating, under scientifically controlled conditions, spontaneity itself as an expression of human behaviour and of transforming the human personality into a mere thing, which under different conditions will always act the same" (*O* 438, *E* 908).[10] When a human being is deprived of juridical and moral personality and ultimately loses all individuality, what remains is the figure of the undead or the living dead, a being reduced to the degree of corporeal presence—the *Muselmann* in camp jargon.

Arendt mobilizes the analogy of Pavlov's dog within her larger discourse on the figure of the undead. The point of Ivan Petrovich Pavlov's experiment was that a previously irrelevant stimulus (a bell) assumed significance as a result of the association with a conditional stimulus (food) and thus precipitated a conditioned response (salivation). This phenomenon, referred to as classical conditioning, is tantamount to the elimination of spontaneity and the substitution for conditioned behavior as seen in the camps, according to Arendt. "*Under normal circumstances* [*Unter normalen Umständen*] this can never be accomplished, because spontaneity can never be entirely eliminated. . . . It is only in the concentration camps that such an experiment is at all possible, and therefore they are . . . *the guiding social ideal* [*das richtungsgebende Gesellschaftsideal*] of total domination in general" (*O* 438, *E* 908). On the one hand, she attributes a normative power to the concentration camps by referring to them as "the *guiding principle* [*das richtungsgebende Gesellschaftsideal*] of total domination." Yet, at the same time, she claims that "under *normal* circumstances [the total conditioning of human behavior] can never be accomplished, because spontaneity can never be entirely eliminated."[11] Georg Jellinek subsumes the

10. 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 *E* and *O,* respectively.

11. Carl Schmitt probes more fully into the intricate nature of this problem. "In mythical language, the earth became known as the mother of law. This signifies a threefold root of law and justice. First, the fertile earth contains within herself, within the womb of her fecundity, an inner measure, because human toil and trouble, human planting and cultivation of the fruitful earth is rewarded justly by her with growth and harvest. Every farmer knows the inner measure of this justice. Second, soil that is cleared and worked by human hands manifests firm lines, whereby definite divisions become apparent. Through the demarcation of fields, pastures, and forests, these lines are engraved and embedded. Through crop rotation and fallowing, they are even planted and nurtured. In these lines, the standards and rules of human cultivation of the earth become discernible. Third and last, the solid ground of the earth is delineated by fences, enclosures, boundaries, walls, houses, and other constructs. Then, obviously, families, clans, tribes, estates, forms of ownership and human proximity, also forms of power and domination, become visible. In this way, the earth is bound to law in three ways. She contains law within herself, as a reward of labor; she manifests law upon herself, as fixed boundaries; and she sustains law above herself, as a public sign of order. Law is bound to the earth and related to the earth" (Schmitt,

problem under the pithy formula of the "normative power of the factual,"[12] and Jürgen Habermas explores it in *Between Facts and Norms.*[13] Clearly Arendt is aware of the problem yet elides it—lest she might have to bury all hope with respect to the ineradicability of human spontaneity. The systematic perversion of human life, the elimination of man's freedom to act, remains an abstractum. Arendt indeed conjures up a certain projection, hope, and imagination when she states that the elimination of human spontaneity is utterly impossible under "normal circumstances." Fully aware of this maneuver of deception, she writes: "*Actually* [*In Wahrheit*] the experience of the concentration camps *does show* that human beings can be transformed into specimens of the human animal" (*O* 455, *E* 934). In *Origins,* such moments of deception recur quite frequently. Arendt intentionally allows for flagrant inconsistencies, paradoxes, or tensions in her speech act and generates certain wish fulfillments and imaginations that—"actually" (*in Wahrheit*)—contradict her own analysis. It is also in this vein that, as part of her exploration of the totalitarian phenomenon, Arendt implements the biblical tale of Lazarus.

Lazarus

About the "mass production of corpses" Arendt writes: "The end result in any case is inanimate men, i.e., men who can no longer be psychologically understood, whose return to the psychologically or otherwise intelligibly human world closely resembles the resurrection of Lazarus" (*O* 441, *E* 912f.). She is concerned here with the "terrible abyss that separates the world of the living from that of the living dead." She is, more concretely, concerned with the question of testimony—how camp inmates can supply a series of remembered occurrences that seem incredible to both inmates and audience. This impossibility of authentic testimony, the impossibility of survivors identifying with the experiences they recount, leads Arendt to conclude: "The reduction of a man to a bundle of reactions separates him as radically as mental disease from everything within him that is personality or character. When, like Lazarus, he rises from the dead, he finds his personality or character

The Nomos of the Earth in the International Law of the "Jus Publicum Europaeum," trans. G. L. Ulmen [New York: Telos, 2003], 42). Cf. also Christian J. Emden, "Carl Schmitt, Hannah Arendt, and the Limits of Liberalism," *Telos* 142 (Spring 2008): 110–34; William Scheuerman, "Revolutions and Constitutions: Hannah Arendt's Challenge to Carl Schmitt," *Canadian Journal of Law and Jurisprudence* 10.1 (1997): 141–61; Andreas Kalyvas, "From the Act to the Decision: Hannah Arendt and the Question of Decisionism," *Political Theory* 32.3 (2004): 320–46.

12. *Allgemeine Staatslehre* (Bad Homburg: Gentner, 1966), 337f.

13. See Jürgen Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy,* trans. William Rehg (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press), 2001. Habermas writes: "Informal public opinion-formation generates 'influence'; influence is transformed into 'communicative power' through the channels of political elections; and communicative power is again transformed into 'administrative power' through legislation. This influence, carried forward by communicative power, gives law its legitimacy, and thereby provides the political power of the state its binding force" (Habermas, "Three Normative Models of Democracy," *Constellations* 1.1 [1994]: 8).

unchanged, just as he had left it" (*O* 441, *E* 913). Arendt, of course, alludes here to the subject of the miracle recounted in the Gospel of John (11:41–44), in which Jesus performs Lazarus's resurrection. But what significance could the Lazarus tale have as an *analogy* ("closely resembles" [*auf das genaueste gleicht*]) in the context of Arendt's argument?

> On his arrival, Jesus found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days. Bethany was less than two miles from Jersualem, and many Jews had come to Martha and Mary to comfort them in the loss of their brother. When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went out to him, but Mary stayed at home. "Lord," Martha said to Jesus, "if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask." Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." Martha answered, "I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day." Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" "Yes, Lord," she told him, "I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who was to come into the world." (John 11:17–27)

It is significant that Martha acknowledges Jesus, who had already gained miraculous fame by healing a man born blind (John 9:1–25), as the Messiah.

> Jesus,…deeply moved, came to the tomb. It was a cave with a stone laid across the entrance. "Take away the stone," he said. "But, Lord," said Martha, the sister of the dead man, "by this time there is a bad odor, for he has been there four days." Then Jesus said, "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?" So they took away the stone. Then Jesus looked up and said, "Father, I thank you that you have heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I said this for the benefit of the people standing here, that they may believe that you sent me." When he had said this, Jesus called in a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" The dead man came out, his hands and feet wrapped with strips of linen, and a cloth around his face. Jesus said to them, "Take off the grave clothes and let him go." (John 11:32–44)[14]

The miraculous raising of Lazarus from the dead leads many Jews to accept Jesus as the promised redeemer, the *christos,* as the word for "messiah" in the Greek New Testament is translated. Whereas the Lazarus tale does elucidate the dissociation of the corporeal and "personality" or "character," Arendt's decision to compare Lazarus to the survivor, who, although once "[reduced] to a bundle of reactions," finds his personality unchanged, irritates (*O* 441, *E* 913). The central point of the biblical account, of course, is not Lazarus's revival from the dead but Jesus's appearance as the *christos,* the redeemer. The analogy of Lazarus is bewildering because

14. *The Holy Bible, Containing the Old Testament and the New Testament* (Colorado Springs: International Bible Society, 1983).

a messiah did not redeem any of the six million victims of the Holocaust. Arendt's analogy is profoundly disconcerting in that it insinuates a sacrificial subtext into the genocide, one, to be sure, asserted by the word "Holocaust" itself, which—being a compound of the ancient Greek *holos* (whole) and *kaustos* or *kautos* (burnt)—refers to a sacrifice "wholly consumed by fire." In contradistinction to this nominal constitution of the massive killing as a sacrifice for the gods, the Hebrew "Shoah" ("pillar of fire," a reference to Exodus) dispenses with the sacrificial connotation.

Why, then, does the analogy of Lazarus appear, which seems disconnected from Arendt's subject? The miraculous resurrection of Lazarus became the foundation of a community of Christian faith, which defined itself on the basis of collective experiences such as the witnessing of miracles. By contrast, the "resuscitation" of the undead in the concentration camps, or, with respect to the analogy, the miracle of their resurrection, was not followed by the founding of a community. Arendt's envisioned "political community or party in a narrower sense" (*O* 441, *E* 913), an initiative hoped for and *imagined* by Arendt stemming from the experiences of Holocaust survivors, did not occur. It seems, therefore, that Arendt deceptively evokes this imagined realm, one actually motivated by a hope of whose hopelessness she knows:

> The attempts to build up a European elite with a program of intra-European understanding based on the common European experience of the concentration camps have foundered in much the same manner as the attempt following the first World War to draw political conclusions from the international experience of the front generation. In both cases it turned out that the experiences themselves can communicate no more than nihilistic banalities. (*O* 441f., *E* 913)

On the one hand, Arendt asserts the impossibility of such a political community or party. At the same time Arendt, performatively, seems to refuse to bury her hopes for such a community; she reinstates her political vision—and this is the implicit ethical dynamic behind the inclusion of this analogy—through the tale of resurrection (and community foundation), a lie inspired by a wish, a lie as wish fulfillment, a wish fulfillment in the sense of a political hope for the future. Yet, is not this precisely the political potential of the lie?

"They Could Always Have Been Otherwise"

Hannah Arendt cannot undo what history has done. The point of the lie, however, which takes the form of comparing the survivors to Lazarus, resides in its inherent *possibility* to imagine "an-*other*" reality. Arendt writes a book not for the past but about the past for the future. The domain of all action, all speech action, including lying, lies in the future. "Not the past—and all factual truth, of course, concerns the past—or the present, insofar as it is the outcome of the past, but *the future is open to action*" (TP 258). The future is open to speech action, narrative action, and

even historiography, as paradoxical as it may appear. According to Arendt, historians typically reject this state of affairs: "*If it is the well-nigh irresistible temptation of the professional historian to fall into the trap of necessity and implicitly deny freedom of action,* it is the almost equally irresistible temptation of the professional politician to overestimate the possibility of this freedom and implicitly condone the lying denial, or distortion of facts" (TP 250f.). It is Arendt's vacillation between these two poles of history writing and political intervention that produces the ambiguities in her performance: Arendt does not condone the "distortion of facts" (is not all narrative a "distortion of facts"?), yet she also does not condone the denial of the potentiality of facts, their inherent possibility for action:

> Newness is the realm of the historian, who—unlike the natural scientist, who is concerned with ever-recurring happenings—deals with events which always occur only once. This newness can be manipulated if the historian insists on causality and pretends to be able to explain events by a chain of causes which eventually led up to them. . . . *Whoever in the historical sciences honestly believes in causality actually denies the subject matter of his own science.* . . . He denies by the same token the very existence of events which, always suddenly and unpredictably, change the whole physiognomy of a given era.[15]

"Belief in causality," Arendt writes, is the historian's way of denying human freedom, that is, "the human capacity for making a new beginning."[16] In contradistinction to the accumulation of data for the sake of a causal, allegedly "truthful" reconstruction, Arendt considers her own historiography a quest for meaning that will never produce unequivocal results.[17] Arendt knows "reality is different from,

15. Hannah Arendt, "Understanding and Politics," in *Essays in Understanding, 1930–1954: Formation, Exile, and Totalitarianism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1994), 307–27, here 318f. n. 13. "Causality . . . is an altogether alien and falsifying category in the historical sciences. Not only does the actual meaning of every event always transcend any number of past 'causes' which we may assign to it . . . but this past itself comes into being only with the event itself. Only when something irrevocable has happened can we even try to trace its history backward. The event illuminates its own past; it can never be deduced from it. Whenever an event occurs that is great enough to illuminate its own past, history comes into being" (318f.). Benjamin heavily influenced the conception of history that emerges from these and other passages. Arendt describes this conception of historiography as "*Ereignis- und Elementen-Theorie*" (theory of events and elements) (*DT* 105). It is a theory that seizes meaning from the constellations of separated and juxtaposed fragments, thereby corresponding to the realities of the "elements of totalitarian domination" to which *Origins*' German title speaks—elements that "suddenly crystallize into fixed and definite forms." The moment of sudden crystallization rules out the potentialities of any occurrence and concretizes an event, and it is only "the light of the event itself which permits us to distinguish its own concrete elements from an infinite number of abstract possibilities" (Arendt, "Understanding and Politics," 325 n. 12). "An event belongs to the past, marks an end, insofar as elements . . . are gathered together in its sudden crystallization; . . . an event belongs to the future, marks a beginning, insofar as this crystallization itself can never be deduced from its own elements, but is caused invariably by some factor which lies in the realm of human freedom" (326 n. 16).

16. Arendt, "Understanding and Politics," 325 n. 13.

17. Cf. Arendt, "Understanding and Politics," 307.

and more than, the totality of facts" (TP 261). At the same time, she does not relinquish her rigid differentiation between factual truth and rational truth, and it is this resistance, this blindness to her own insights, that makes an understanding of Arendt's historiography so difficult. On the one hand, she insists: "Even if we admit that every generation has the right to write its own history, we admit no more than that it has the right to rearrange the facts in accordance with its own perspective; we don't admit the right to touch the factual matter itself" (TP 238f.). On the other hand, Arendt leaves no doubt that for the teller of history, there is no real alternative to engagement with the factual matter itself. All storytelling is composed of any number of factual truths; each narrative, no matter whether "truth" or "lie," seeks meaning (sometimes "false" meaning); each attempt to understand (or to mislead someone or oneself) is some sort of construction or interpretation of "facts." Does not such interpretation always rely on certain principles of selection that allow the telling of a story in one fashion rather than another? Yet, these principles themselves are surely not factual data, as Arendt concedes (see TP 238). Moreover, is not the question of what the facts of a given event or a series of events are, the question of testimony, fraught with complexities? Arendt's *Denktagebuch* states: "Kierkegaard said that the world kills the truth—Socrates, Jesus—, a dangerous claim because then, of course, every liar can appeal to it. *This leads us to the heart of the problem. How can we decide what truth is?*" (*DT* 618). Arendt leaves her question unanswered, not because she believes that there is no truth, I think, but because there is no answer. Instead, she provides an ethical imperative: "We are free to change the world and to start something new in it" (LP 5).[18] The price for this freedom to act—which includes narrative action and also lying—is that the outcome could have been different. "Facts have no conclusive reason whatever for being what they are; they could always have been otherwise, and this… contingency is literally unlimited" (TP 242). Whereas most historiography provides the impression of a conclusiveness of events—a sequence of factual data in such and such a way—any sequence could have occurred differently and only retrospectively appears predetermined. The reason for this is that, in Arendt's words, "reality…kill[s], by definition, all other potentialities…inherent in any given situation" (TP 243).

To fall into the historian's "trap of necessity" of denying "freedom of action" would mean to grant Nazism the logical consistency it claims; it would espouse

18. This freedom to act is, according to Arendt, the manifestation of the freedom entailed in each new birth; it is the unprecedentedness of the event of "natality." See esp. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 175–247. On Arendt's interwoven concepts of "natality," "action," and their common denominator, namely "freedom," cf. Ronald Beiner, "Action, Natality, and Citizenship: Hannah Arendt's Concept of Freedom," in *Conceptions of Liberty in Political Philosophy,* ed. Zbigniew Pelczynski and John Gray (London: Athlone Press, 1984), 349–75; George Kateb, "Political Action: Its Nature and Advantages," in *The Cambridge Companion to Hannah Arendt,* ed. Dana Villa (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 130–50; Patricia Bowen-Moore, *Hannah Arendt's Philosophy of Natality* (London: Macmillan, 1989), esp. 42–68.

its innate claim to a higher form of legitimacy that, inspired by the law of Nature itself, can do away with positive conceptions of legality. The ideological mind-set that inhibits the potentiality of saying A and therefore settles on B serves no purpose other than to "divert the mind and blunt the judgment for the multitude of other . . . *possibilities*" (LP 12). By contrast, Arendt's entire act of writing appears to undermine the compulsion of totalitarian logicality. It dares to imagine, to imagine the possibility of the noneradicability of human spontaneity, and the founding of political parties or groups based on the experience of the Holocaust.

Two Keys

Imagining that the impeccable logic of totalitarian reasoning can be "cracked," that its rational immunity can be undercut, is the third lie discussed here, which is based on the metaphors of two keys. It is an image that evokes the problematic contiguity of method and the problem of understanding. In a review of *The Black Book: The Nazi Crime against the Jewish People,* Arendt writes: "*The Black Book* fails because its authors, submerged in a chaos of detail, were unable to understand or make clear the nature of the facts confronting them."[19] In other words, the authors failed to cull any explanatory substance from the vast amounts of data; they exhibited a certain inability to understand. It is this context in which Arendt's own conceptual approach to the question of understanding must be situated. In an interview, she states: "What is important for me is to understand. For me, writing is a matter of seeking this understanding, part of the process of understanding."[20] For Arendt, understanding is procedural in nature; a thought process: "Understanding, as distinguished from having correct information and scientific knowledge, is a complicated process which never produces unequivocal results. It is an unending activity."[21] Every page in *Origins* is ultimately part of this larger project of understanding. The intricacy of understanding and the subsequent travails of dispelling the systematology of totalitarian politics are rooted in their logical consistency:

> Whereas the totalitarian regimes are thus resolutely and cynically emptying the world of all structures of meaning [alle Sinnzusammenhänge] with which we normally operate and within which we normally act, they impose upon it at the same time a kind of supersense which the ideologies actually always meant when *they pretended to have found the key to history or the solution to the riddles of the universe.* Over and above the

19. Hannah Arendt, "The Image of Hell," in *Essays in Understanding,* 179–205, here 197f.

20. Hannah Arendt, "'What Remains? The Language Remains': A Conversation with Günter Gaus," in *Essays in Understanding,* 1–23, here 3. On the vexed relationship between truth, facts, storytelling, and understanding in Arendt, see Lisa Disch, "More Truth Than Fact: Storytelling as Critical Understanding in the Writings of Hannah Arendt," *Political Theory* 21.4 (1993): 665–94; Christina Thürmer-Rohr, "Verstehen und Schreiben—unheimliche Heimat," *Text und Kritik* 166/167 (2005): 92–101.

21. Arendt, "Understanding and Politics," 307f.

> senselessness of totalitarian society is enthroned the ridiculous supersense of its ideological superstition. (*O* 457, *E* 939)

If totalitarian societies' claim of total consistency can be taken literally, they become the "nuclei of logical systems" in which everything necessarily follows once the first premise is axiomatically accepted. This claim "to have found the *key* to history" is also reflected in the juridical self-conception of the National Socialist state: the word "law" denotes the law of the movement of Nature. This law of movement is a Darwinian law of inclusion and exclusion—the exclusion of everything "unfit to live" (*O* 465, *E* 951). "In this sense the word 'law' was already used by ideologies, i.e., by those nineteenth-century *Weltanschauungen* which, based on a premise, claimed to hold in their hand *the key to all that had ever occurred*" (*E* 950). In the face of this juridical and generally ideological self-image of totalitarian systems, Arendt, committed to normative paradigms of constitutional state politics, now seeks to prove the deficiency of totalitarian logic. Yet it is precisely the foundation for such a critique that appears to have evaporated, for "all structures of meaning [alle Sinnzusammenhänge] with which we normally operate and within which we normally act" are eradicated. It is in this vein that she writes: "For those engaged in the quest for meaning and understanding, what is frightening in the rise of totalitarianism is not that it is something new, but that it has brought to light the ruin of our categories of thought and standards of judgment."[22] She also writes: "The paradox of the modern situation seems to be that our need to transcend both preliminary understanding and the strictly scientific approach springs from the fact that we have lost our tools of understanding. Our quest for meaning is at the same time prompted and frustrated by our inability to originate meaning."[23] Arendt offers further variations of this sentence that describe the same peculiar dilemma: the totalitarian system claims to "have found the *key* to history or the solution to the riddles of the universe." Thus, all philosophical arguments that Arendt adduces against this claim appear to be in vain, as far as her constative elaborations are concerned: "In this sense, the difficulty of understanding totalitarian politics and the institutions of total power is…that they are 'logically' too uncompromising in drawing the conclusions inherent in their ideologies" (*E* 938). This awareness notwithstanding, Arendt claims—and this is where she "lies"—to possess a "key to understanding" herself. In chapter 10 of *Origins,* Arendt discusses the temporary alliance between the mob and the elite as *the* central dynamic in totalitarian movements, deeming it the "essential key" to the understanding of totalitarianism (*O* 326, *E* 703):

> The disturbing alliance between the mob and the elite, and the curious coincidence of their aspirations, had their origin in the fact that these strata had been the first

22. Ibid., 318.
23. Ibid., 313.

> to be eliminated from the structure of the nation-state and the framework of class society.... For the ruthless machines of domination and extermination, the masses of co-ordinated philistines provided much better material and were capable of even greater crimes than so-called professional criminals, provided only that these crimes were well organized and assumed the appearance of routine jobs. (*O* 337, *E* 720f.)[24]

The alliance between the mob and the elite epitomizes, according to Arendt, a formula elucidating the crucial dynamics of totalitarian government; it presents "*an essential key* to the understanding of totalitarian movements ... [regarding] their connection with the mob" (*O* 326, *E* 703). Arendt qualifies this pronouncement by pointing out that "one can only use this key [Dieses Schlüssels kann man sich nur dann bedienen] if one bears in mind that neither the elite nor the mob play an actual role in the totalitarian apparatus of domination.... They are essential only for the understanding of the general historical situation" (*E* 703). She writes somewhat vaguely, and it reads as if the discovery of the key must immediately be vindicated and put in perspective. Yet, in her subsequent discussion, Arendt does not revoke the idea that "this key ... can be used" (*E* 703). What becomes apparent here is another moment of deception. Arendt imagines that a solid basis exists from which to attack the "not really refutable" (*schwer zurückweisbar*) systematic nature of totalitarian domination—this insurmountable total logic that "make[s] too much sense" and "is too consistent" (*O* 457, *E* 938). Arendt, who knows better, invokes the pretense that the modus operandi of Fascist government—despite its "sensible and logical" qualities within its own framework—could, in the course of more than a thousand pages, be proven somehow inadequate, dubbed tenuous, and attacked via democratic constitutional politics:

> The quest for the *nature* of totalitarianism is no longer a historical (and certainly not a sociological or psychological) undertaking; it is, strictly speaking, a question for political science, which, if it understands itself, is *the true guardian of the keys which open the doors to the problems and uncertainties* of the philosophy of history.[25]

Arendt's wish for understanding is thus directly metaphorized: the key of totalitarianism "to ... the solution to the riddles of the universe" is immediately juxtaposed with Arendt's own imaginative key "which opens the doors to ... the philosophy of history," including that of totalitarian domination—key versus key. The capacity of this imagination is Arendt's actual performative intervention:

24. The attraction of totalitarian movements for the elite results "not simply from Stalin's and Hitler's mastery in the art of lying but rather from their ability to organize the masses in such a way that their lies could turn into reality" (*E* 714). The big lie of the regime and the "masses' desire for a fictitious world" complement one another and only as such allow for the alliance between the mob and the elite (*E* 714–18).

25. Arendt, "Understanding and Politics," 326 n. 17, italics in original.

"Imagination alone enables us to see things in their proper perspective.... This kind of imagination... actually is understanding."[26]

Why Does Hannah Arendt Lie?

"To understand something which has ruined our categories of thought and our standards of judgment," Arendt resorts to imagination.[27] Only imagination can restore those standards of judgment, the "structures of meaning" (*Sinnzusammenhänge*) that totalitarianism has destroyed, for imagination or, more generally, image making enables us to "see things in their proper perspective"; imagination enables us to understand, and "the result of understanding is *meaning,* which we originate... insofar as we try to reconcile ourselves to what we do and what we suffer."[28] Arendt's lies, the images she projects, allow for meaning that totalitarian politics seemed to have obliterated once and for all.

In relentlessly distancing her storytelling from any sort of "falsification" or "distortion" of factual matter, Arendt succumbs to a kind of positivism that fundamentally contradicts her entire mission of a different historiography—a contradiction at the heart of her unconventionality. Correspondingly, she insists on the force of the traditional lie, a force that appears dubious when confronted with the modern lie (TP 231–39). It is not beyond imagination that she herself deemed this insistence her biggest lie. "Reality," Arendt writes, "is different from, and more than, the totality of facts and events, which, anyhow, is unascertainable. Who says what is—λέγει τὰ ἐόντα—always tells a story, and in this story the particular facts lose their contingency and acquire some humanly comprehensible meaning" (TP 261f.). Arendt turns to Isak Dinesen's dictum that "all sorrows can be borne if you put them into a story or tell a story about them" (TP 262). She moves from Dinesen to Hegel: "To the extent that the teller of factual truth is also a storyteller, he brings about that 'reconciliation with reality' which Hegel, the philosopher of history *par excellence,* understood as the ultimate goal of all philosophical thought, and which, indeed, has been the secret motor of all historiography" (TP 262). The motor of all historiography is reconciliation with what we suffer. Is not Arendt's art of lying precisely that? Are not the imaginations of a political community based on the experience of the Holocaust, the imagination of human spontaneity being ineffaceable, the imagination of the possibility of a political critique of totalitarian politics moments in the quest of a human being for understanding in a world that appears to have foreclosed precisely such possibility?

As paradoxical as it may sound, does not that which has been described as Arendt's "lies" eventually testify to her *integrity?* Does not her discourse, with all its

26. Ibid., 323.
27. Ibid., 318.
28. Ibid., 309.

tensions, contradictions, ruptures, impasses, images, and imaginations, testify to a certain truthfulness in that she presents things as they appear in her perspective, the perspective of a thinker trying to reassemble the "commonly inhabited world that has broken apart"? The intellectual efficacy of so-called objectivity finds its complement in "the disinterested pursuit of truth"—in the German translation, *dieser Haltung, der es nur um die Wahrheit zu tun ist* (TP 262f.).

Of course, any process of seeking the "truth"—that is, any process of understanding—must be based on some form of representative thinking; it must consider different viewpoints. Writes Arendt: "I form an opinion by considering a given issue from different viewpoints, by making present to my mind the standpoints of those who are absent; that is, I represent them" (TP 241). Yet understanding is not tantamount to "objectivity," at least not if objectivity involves "counting noses and joining a majority." "To understand" denotes the capacity for what Kant calls an "enlarged mentality," which enables individuals to judge.[29] "To understand" always also means "to judge."

* * *

Lying, the possibility of imagining, is a strange enterprise. But, as Arendt says, "understanding is a strange enterprise," too.[30] Imagination is "part of the dialogue of understanding for whose purposes mere knowledge erects artificial barriers."[31] Imagination, according to Wordsworth, "is but another name for . . . clearest insight, amplitude of mind, / And Reason in her most exalted mood."[32] Raising then the question posed at the outset—Why does Hannah Arendt lie?—the answer would probably be, because she wants to understand and judge the history of totalitarianism rather than reconstruct it; she wants to make it politically understandable and judgeable; she embarks on a political intervention, knowing that this intervention cannot undo history, but perhaps—and this is the power of imagination—can change the future. Hannah Arendt lies because she wants to "change the world" (TP 250).

"Current moral prejudice," Arendt writes, "tends to be rather harsh in respect to . . . lying, whereas the often highly developed art of self-deception is usually regarded with great tolerance and permissiveness" (TP 255). She shares neither the permissiveness toward self-deception nor the "prejudice" against the traditional lie. Arendt finds support here in Dostoevsky's *Brothers Karamazov.* In the famous scene in the monastery, the father, a chronic liar, asks the Staretz: "And what must I do to gain salvation?" The Staretz replies: "Above all, never lie to yourself!" (after

29. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment,* after TP 241.
30. Arendt, "Understanding and Politics," 322.
31. Ibid., 323.
32. William Wordsworth, *The Prelude,* book 14, lines 190–92, after Arendt, "Understanding and Politics," 323.

TP 254f.) As long as the one who lies remains aware of the distinction between truth and falsehood, the individual and the world deceived are, in the words of the Staretz, not beyond salvation. In the words of Arendt, who so often tells us about the world while commenting on her own writing: "He lied, but he is not a liar" (TP 255). She lied, but she is not a liar. Not a confession, but a concession, perhaps.

* * *

Melancholy masks the end of "Truth and Politics," this curious analysis of lying as action, political action. Arendt contends that the political sphere, "its greatness notwithstanding," is limited by "those things which men cannot change at will" (TP 263f.). It is the art of *imagination,* the ability to conjure up images of hopes and dreams, that allows us to get our bearings in the world.[33] "Conceptually, we may call truth what we cannot change; metaphorically, it is the ground on which we stand and the sky that stretches above us" (TP 264).

33. Arendt, "Understanding and Politics," 323.