

## Arendt's Aporetic Modernism

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*Adam Rosen-Carole*

**Abstract:** Although Arendt's literary sensibilities incline toward classical German poetry, and although she explicitly eschews self-conscious self-presentation in her writings, a distinctly modernist writerly ethos surreptitiously courses through Arendt's work. Stuttering between narration and citation, interrupting its categorical self-confidence by exposing its overdrawn distinctions to unavoidable complications (e.g., by shadowing its privileged normative terms with perverse counterparts and further pursuing a counter-fetishistic destabilization of its normative orientation by shading its fundamental terms into intermediary semantic zones and dialectical inversions), indulging in eccentricity and experimentation while struggling against the temptation for writing to close in on itself and presume to model redemption, such writing everywhere testifies to a constitutive disorientation. Such disorientation, I will suggest, is both materially-historically conditioned and an immanent necessity of Arendt's work, and once understood as such, brings the significance and stakes of this work into view anew.

**Keywords:** modernism, narration, nihilism, fetishism

### I. Introduction

Broaching the question of Arendt's modernism is hardly an unfamiliar gesture in the scholarship. Under this heading, some commentators have focused on Arendt's anti-metaphysical cleaving to contingency, plurality, and the inaugural potential of natality. Others have stressed her prizing of conscientious individuation over social functionality and the importance of judgment to the accomplishment of such individuation. Still others have drawn attention to the plane of secular immanence projected by her inter-articulated conceptions of promising and power and to the negative dialectic of founding and refounding evident in her work on civil disobedience. But, perhaps, the most well-known of such discussions stresses Arendt's reluctant concession of nostalgia for agonistic Athenian democracy in the face of the challenges and concomitant rational potential of modern

political life. Engaging the details of these interpretations is not my primary concern here, though it is notable that all such commentators address the topic of Arendt's modernism at the level of thematic content. My suggestion in the following will be that Arendt's modernism is to be located not just in the content of her political thought but in the register of her writerly practice. Given the dominant trends in the reception of her work, such a suggestion, if not immediately deemed implausible, would seem to involve no small irony. For, at first blush, what if anything seems remarkable about Arendt's writing is its eminently unassuming character. Fragmentation, parataxis, dense allusion, poignant elision, and disjointed narration are certainly not prominent features of Arendt's writing. Indeed, to address the social contouring and political significance of Arendt's writerly modernism cannot but seem a fool's errand or worse: not just a matter of barking up the wrong tree but an egregiously abusive overinterpretation.

Certainly, Arendt's literary sensibilities incline toward classical German poetry, of which, in fact, she had a great deal memorized. She clearly seems to favor the transmissible insights of a Dante or an Augustine rather than the stuttering expressions of dialectical crisis pursued by a Proust, a Mallarmé, a Beckett, or a Woolf. Indeed, what writerly modernist could characterize poetry, as does Arendt, as *words to live by*? Although Arendt invokes and occasionally pursues sustained meditations on authors such as Conrad, Melville, Proust, Faulkner, and Kafka, her writings seem oriented by premises contrary to theirs. Rather than departing from, and then continuing to thematize and sustain, the anguish of collapsed literary conventions for the sake of resisting, on the one hand, too quick, and consequently aesthetically unconvincing, recuperations of social signs and narrative forms of intelligibility, and on the other hand, complicity with a mystifying image of coherent social bonds and life practices that such signs and forms would be taken to token, Arendt's writings are premised on the promise of understanding. They seek to transmit the joy of understanding, which is the joy of worldliness at once regained and renewed, rather than self-administer the shocks—the chaos and confusion—to which modern experience is unavoidably subject and aesthetically exploit art's enforced marginality in a program of masochistic homeopathy. Arendt's writings manifestly cleave to, seeking to make meaningful and thus orientative, the vicissitudes of experience, even, or especially, when this involves engaging atrocities so extreme and forms of social suffering so entrenched and opaque that they seem to exceed the measure of human judgment. Such writings manifestly seek to relieve epistemic and evaluative anxiety rather than amplify, interrogate, and channel it into turbulent form. Arendt writings succeed on their own terms when the demonic phantasmagoria emanating from rends in the fabric of self- and world-intelligibility are dispelled; when stories salvage

from oblivion the significance of singular lives; when sufferings prone to defensive repudiation, whether by means of socially enforced neglect or mystifying consignment to the irrational or to the merely factual, are elaborated in critical histories of the present that can serve as supports for the reactivation of subjectivity and solidarity under duress, return us to the horizon of our agency. In short, Arendt's writings may struggle under the pressure to understand but, it would seem, not under the pressure of language's inherent infelicities or emphatically modern liabilities.

To be sure, Arendt was not simply oblivious to modernist developments. Auden was an intermittent interlocutor, and Arendt wrote some wonderful essays on Brecht and Kafka. But as with her relationship to Benjamin, in such cases she seemed capable of genuinely appreciating and even approving of formal developments and corresponding political insights that are kept at arm's length in her own writings. Painterly and musical modernism are nowhere explicitly discussed; Arendt was extremely averse to Adorno; and she considered the darkness of the human heart impenetrable; thus, she considered the sorts of Freudian speculations that sponsor the modernist aesthetics of say, surrealism or Virginia Woolf, utterly implausible. And quite strangely, despite her interest in the history of revolutions, neither the events in the streets of Paris in the summer of '68 nor their political and intellectual aftermath show up in her reflections. Worse still for a discussion of Arendt's writerly modernism, Arendt explicitly resists self-conscious self-presentation. Rather than deploy signs of authorial presence to interrupt aesthetic delectation or the illusion of transparency, or reflexively underscore the intimacy of literary potentiation with social alienation, for instance, by means of writing that tends toward exhaustion and unraveling as it allows itself to get caught in its self-referential circuitry, tending toward listlessness, emptiness, and indulgent self-fascination, Arendt tells stories, extends legacies, provides illuminating etymologies, resists oblivion, judges. Her writings address the promise of understanding to readers presumably prepared to receive it.

In comfortable language, Arendt demonstrates time and again that we can make sense of our lives even when extraordinary pressures put our familiar forms of understanding and habits of evaluation out of play or render their reinvention a condition for their continued validity. Such writings judge, lest we lose confidence in our capacity to judge. Without a hint of the self-indulgent pathos of genius, they propose themselves as exemplary. Their palpable efforts to come to terms with political horror and tendentially self-occluding social catastrophe signal a *prima facie* resistance to nihilism that sets her writings apart from the dominant trends of modernism.

Nonetheless, in the following I will claim that a distinctly modernist writerly ethos surreptitiously courses through Arendt's work; furthermore,

that attending to her writerly modernism is the key to unlocking the significance and stakes of Arendt's central concepts; and more precisely, that the significance and stakes of her central concepts come into view only when understood as besieged and beleaguered mediations of social relations under duress, that is, mediations of the tendential dissolution of mutual interest about which, for all of her acute attention to world alienation, she remained in a way unknowing. In short, Arendt's central concepts are, in her idiom, powerless, and it is as an unknowing expression of such powerlessness that her thinking achieves its peculiar consistency and exerts its claim on the present. Ironically, if her central concepts are sites of imperiled resistance to the tendential dissolution of mutual interest which they unknowingly bear, or closer to her idiom, if such concepts can be understood as worldly residues of worldlessness, then the historical-material conditions for her writing form its constitutive blind spot. Or to give the claim one last gloss: statelessness is the extreme and thematically articulated expression of the disaster by which her writings are everywhere haunted, and in unknowing responsiveness to which her writerly modernism takes shape.

## II. Elements of Arendt's Writerly Modernism

The following may be considered the central elements of Arendt's writerly modernism. First, Arendt's texts stutter between narration and citation. A typical Arendtian text pursues a narrative elaboration of its central theses so coherently and comprehensibly as to strike the reader as being readily amenable to paraphrase. These are eminently teachable texts; dramatic narratives that lend themselves to dramatic reenactment. *The Human Condition*, for instance, is clearly a story about world alienation. It is with this topic that the book begins and ends. Its twin genealogies of the rise of the social and the interiorization of subjectivity do not presume sociological or historical validity. Rather, they seek to make sense of seemingly separate and inadequately attended yet central features of our present condition, including our interpretive and evaluative dispositions within it, and of the obdurate opacity of our suffering under it. Narrative elucidations of the meaning of events conducing to and sustaining the decay of worldly meaning is the way *The Human Condition*, like much of her writing, pursues its counter-reifying ambition, and so generates its palpable urgency. And like *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, and to some extent *On Revolution*, *The Human Condition* even reads somewhat like a detective novel: we start with the murder of a vaguely familiar yet unknown (i.e., uncanny) character—in Arendt's text, this would be plurality, action, or individuation; broadly, a "fully meaningful" human life—whose loss it is the task of the story to make increasingly gripping and increasingly wide in the scope of its significance as

the backstory of the fatality unfolds. As the investigation presses forward, a number of plausible culprits are considered, or else hinted at, and dismissed; and in this way an atmosphere of suspense and suspicion is generated. Finally, it ends up that the true culprit would not have been considered a plausible one at the beginning of the story—in part because of who we have become in the aftermath of the loss; the loss impedes our capacity to detect it—and the fate of the victim is bound up with dynamics much more complex and wide-ranging than could have been foreseen. As we learn that this fate was thoroughly implicated in complex historical legacies, swept up in forces of immense scope, and yet would not have come to pass were it not for specific, contingent events, the murder comes to feel at once fated and almost accidental: although it could have been otherwise, danger was never far off. While not all of Arendt's texts read like detective novels, they all have a story to tell and the moral of the story is, for the most part, the precarity of agency and politics, thus of meaning—their propensity to collapse under external pressures and so their ongoing need of renewal.

Nevertheless, one of the regular means by which such stories unfold introduces a hesitation, and accumulatively a wavering, into the narrative itinerary. A privileged medium of Arendt's narrative constructions is citation, which would not be remarkable in the least were it not for the ambiguity of authorial attitude it subtly though consistently introduces. It is notable that Arendt regularly gives expression to what are widely considered her central claims by means of citation. And not only that, citation is so prevalent in Arendt's work that the presumption that citation merely means to bring particularly apt expressions to bear on points Arendt deems especially worthy of remembrance withers under the weight of their uneconomical exorbitance. Arendt's citational proclivity extends well beyond mnemonic pragmatics, decorousness, and intellectual credentialing. While the frequency of citation in Arendt's writing might be dismissed as simply a rhetorical shortcut (no need to concern herself with phrasing if she is going to say what the cited passage already says) or an exercise in academic good conscience, upon closer inspection Arendt's citation-studded prose may give one pause, for it is often unclear exactly where Arendt stands with respect to the material she cites. *Her narrative voice is itself a figure in the text in need of interpretation.* This ambiguity is compounded by her seemingly contradictory attitudes toward similar issues in different moments of her work—an issue to which we will return. For now, the point is that Arendt's citations interrupt the smoothness of the narrative syntheses they at once facilitate. The minor material interruption of the narratives they punctuate provide pause sufficient to open a slender space of questioning, which is precisely the opening needed to notice the ambiguity of authorial attitude toward the content they convey. Arendtian citation is thick material mediation.

The slight stutter operated by citation is most evident when, as is sometimes the case, the citation bears on the point being developed yet remains off-balance in its context—relevant but incompletely assimilated. In such cases, the citation, so to speak, smells of the workshop. Consider, for instance, her repeated citing of Dante and Augustine to make decidedly secular points. A citation that contributes to narrative development *but can be seen doing so*, that fails to be seamlessly absorbed into the forms it yet yields (or yields to), might be considered an analogue of techniques of material self-reference by means of which modernist artworks interrupt their sliding into semantic transparency and formal integrity, that is, into semantic and syntactic coherence that, were it too coherent, would thereby become false, ideological, *mere* semblance.

At other moments in her writing, specifically when citation seems unnecessary, when there seems to be no reason not to paraphrase or just put the point directly, citation calls attention to itself by dint of its excessiveness, thereby interrupting, but briefly, the text's narrative momentum; generally, its upsweep into ideality. In such instances, little quotation marks become small bits of dead weight that draw attention down to the text, resisting just for a moment the passage into narrative or thetic ideality. While slight enough to be easily ignored (glossed over), the material residue that such citations may become by means of their signifying excess opens the space for a question about the author's attitude toward the meaning of the material they mediate. By means of their quiet blockages of the narratives they mediate, and so the points presumably pressed and perspectives elaborated by such narratives, Arendt's citations raise a question about her *judgment* of what is unfolding before our eyes. The slight disjunction between material and message that Arendt's citations make event resists the plentitude and immediacy of the symbol, bending her texts in the direction of allegory.

Even when the citations fit closely enough with the content of the claims pressed by means of them to avoid raising any red flags, it is their snugness of fit that may raise a question about Arendt's attitude toward the material. Why so much ventriloquism if the point she wants to make is one she wholeheartedly affirms? Why cite primary or secondary sources when the particular juncture of the historical narrative being developed is not particularly contentious? The excess of citation yields a moment of suspicion by raising such questions as, Who is speaking? From where? To whom? And to what end or ends? The presence of others' voices becomes a mumbling echo of another scene, a recurrent albeit each time fleeting gesture toward what becomes, accumulatively, an outrageously expansive intertextuality. Let us be clear: These citations draw along with them not so much their original addressees and agendas, but the bare residue of such, the simple fact of it. Precisely because unpacking the intertextual references such citations

put into play is unnecessary for the comprehension of Arendt's texts, because what these citations bear with them idles in the economy of an Arendtian narrative, the idling excess of citation becomes noticeable, indeed self-remarking, and thereby a quiet counter-pressure against the idealizing itinerary of the narrative and the presumption that the author's commitments and convictions are laid bare by it. Interrupting, but barely, the passages they yield, citations in Arendt's texts are remainders of non-identity in the identical; squandered or excessive forces in a textual economy unable to fully regulate its resources. The blockage they effect is too quiet to be considered an analogue of the formally ugly, but they do disrupt what otherwise might have been eloquence—the all too ample allure of beauty. Arendtian citation might then be considered an analogue of painterly abstraction.

Without providing secret passageways to judgments different from those the manifest content of the text proposes, or entirely undermining these judgments, the stagnation Arendt's citations introduce by virtue of their variable manners of excessiveness generates a textual stutter, the space-time of a shapeless question. They open a dimension of unaccountable inexpressivity and disorient the directionality of the text by multiplying its structures of address. Such citations make manifest a gap between material sign and social meaning, and thereby perhaps register a breakdown of compelling convention, of a *sensus communis*: They mark rather than repair the social rendering of sign and significance.

Once the question of authorial attitude is broached and amplified acuity to textual specificity demanded by citational exorbitance, a crucial feature of Arendt's *narrative* practice becomes perspicuous. Her judgments, which are so thoroughly implicated in her narratives, emerge so naturally from them, that it is often not certain whether or in what sense these judgments are *hers*. In this free indirect discourse (*style indirect libre*) the line is blurred between the narrator's voice and the voices narrated. While there is no denying that judgments that arise as commentaries on or inferences from the narrative material or in the voice of authors cited are often affirmed by Arendt, even warmly embraced, whether that implicit affirmation is sufficient to attribute them to her as considered convictions or declared opinions is an open question. Where exactly Arendt stands with respect to various judgments emerging within her narratives is not entirely certain, much less clear upon close inspection than it initially seems. Notably, the narrative voice that mediates these judgments, like the citations from which narrative content is so frequently forged, interrupts, while not simply thwarting, the presumption that they reveal the author's opinions, that narrator and author are one and the same. Perhaps such judgments do not so much disclose the author's principles or opinions as searchingly elaborate, test, or provocatively propose claims in which she is interested. The

suggestion that narratively embedded judgments do not necessarily disclose the author's commitments, reveal her *self* and is more strongly supported by those judgments emerging amidst her narratives that consideration of other sectors of her work strongly suggests that she is extremely reticent about, even directly opposed to. Which brings us to the next feature of her writerly modernism.

The second feature of Arendt's writerly modernism to which I would like to draw attention is the way her texts interrupt their conceptual self-confidence by exposing their overdrawn distinctions to unavoidable complications and undertake sustained discussions of phenomena that exceed, complicate, and to an extent confound the conceptual orientations they elaborate. While its significance has yet to be explored, this feature of Arendt's writerly modernism has been noted by a number of prominent commentators. Peg Birmingham, for instance, notes that "At the end of *The Human Condition* Hannah Arendt reveals that not all has gone as expected in her analysis of the distinction between the *vita contemplativa* and the *vita activa*, a distinction that at the beginning of the text is sharp: the *vita contemplativa* is characterized by the quiet and silent gaze of *nous*, while the *vita activa* is characterized by its restless activity within the world of appearances. Yet at the conclusion of the text, she quotes a curious sentence that Cicero ascribed to Cato: 'Never is a man more active than when he does nothing, never is he less alone than when he is by himself.' The sentence is curious insofar as it is about thinking. The end of "*The Human Condition*, then, apparently unravels its beginning—a beginning that made a firm distinction between the life of action and the life of contemplation: thinking is now recognized as an activity and one, moreover, that is not essentially solitary."<sup>1</sup> While illuminating, Birmingham's example fails to bring to the fore the extent to which, and the sometimes remarkable rapidity with which, Arendt's claims yield to qualifications, reservations, or direct contradictions and inversions. For instance, in the space of a sentence Arendt characterizes action as both greatness and danger,<sup>2</sup> the decay of tradition as at once an unburdening and an uprooting. Sometimes the unsettling of conceptual confidence is less explicit. For instance, while *The Human Condition* strongly suggests (without ever directly declaring) that a necessary condition for human self-realization, for a "fully meaningful life," is a balanced involvement in labor, work, and action, and *The Origins of Totalitarianism* likewise gives the strong impression that there are basic conditions that must be satisfied for a life to be a human one, in *The Human Condition* Arendt also

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<sup>1</sup> Peg Birmingham, "Hannah Arendt: The Activity of the Spectator," in *Sites of Vision: The Discursive Construction of Sight in the History of Philosophy*, ed. by David Michael Kleinberg-Levin (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1999), 384.

<sup>2</sup> Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future* (New York: Penguin, 1993), 63.



claims that *anything that touches the human thereby becomes a condition*, which is to expand the concept of a condition to the point where the notion of *basic conditions* or *minimum necessary conditions* for a human life becomes implausible, indeed evaporates. That these complications are sometimes less than explicit, and when direct, often emerge at some distance from the concepts or claims they qualify or contradict, will be of concern later. Coming back to Birmingham for the moment, what is potentially misleading in her description of the unraveling of the initially stark opposition of the *vita contemplativa* and the *vita activa* is that this unraveling would seem to be an anomaly, a surprising and “curious” complication rather than a fundamental feature of Arendt’s writerly practice. And even with respect to Birmingham’s example in particular, it is not just the *ontology* of thinking that yields to qualifications, but its value as well. While there is no denying that *The Life of the Mind* means to retrieve the value of thinking from relative suppression within the action-orientation of *The Human Condition* and *On Revolution* and emphasize its contribution to a meaningful and minimally moral life, thereby challenging the adequacy of the categorical tripartition operative in *The Human Condition* (the architectonic of labor, work, and action) and its condensation into the binary of preemptory biological urgency and disclosive freedom/public happiness in *On Revolution*, as we will shortly see, even in *The Life of the Mind* thinking is characterized as a dangerous enterprise, capable of perverse permutations and indeed of becoming a vehicle for the destruction of the very values it might have realized.

A more capacious but still extremely limited acknowledgement of the consistent complicating of overwrought distinctions in Arendt’s texts and therewith their immanent undermining of their categorical self-confidence comes from Mary Dietz in her contribution to the *Cambridge Companion*, “Arendt and the Holocaust.” Labor, work, and action, she notes:

each presupposes a multiplicity of interconnected elements that defy attribution in terms of a settled meaning or unified synoptic picture. The concept of labor or *animal laborans*, for example, is the sum of the following multifarious elements: the blessing of life as a whole, nature, animality, life processes, (human) biology, (human) body, (human) metabolism, fertility, birth, reproduction, childbirth, femaleness, cyclicality, circularity, seasons, necessity, basic life needs (food, clothing, shelter), certain kinds of toil, repetition, everyday functions (eating, cleaning, mending, washing, cooking, resting, etc.), housework, the domestic sphere, abundance, consumerism,

privatization, purposeless regularity, the society of jobholders, automation, technological determinism, routinization, relentless repetition, automatism, regularization, non-utilitarian processes, dehumanizing processes, devouring processes, painful exhaustion, waste, recyclability, destruction (of nature, body, fertility), and deathlessness. The concept of work or *homo faber* is the sum of the following multifarious elements: the work of our hands, the man-made world, fabrication, (human) artifice, (human) creativity, production, usage, durability, objectivity, building, constructing, manufacturing, making, violation, maleness, linearity, reification, multiplication, tools and instruments, rules and measurement, ends and means, predictability, the exchange market, commercialism, capitalism, instrumental processes, utilitarian processes, objectifying processes, artificial processes, vulgar expediency, violence, predictability, deprivation of intrinsic worth, degradation, disposability, destruction (of nature, world), and lifelessness.<sup>3</sup>

While both capacious and succinct, Dietz's account of the intermediary semantic zones and evaluative gradients across which Arendt's central concepts span fails to do justice to the consistency with which Arendt's texts confound the categorical orientations they elaborate and complicate the claims they urge. Understandably, Dietz opts for the drama of detailing polysemy and evaluative volatility precisely there where Arendt's concepts seem most stable and univocal; and all the better for the drama, these are among the most well-known of Arendt's concepts. But it is not only Arendt's most characteristic claims that shade into intermediary, and at the limit, contradictory semantic zones and give way to value inversions; *nearly all her judgments do*. For instance, while throughout *The Human Condition* in particular, as well as in a number of other works, Arendt suggests that public happiness—i.e., participation in forums in which matters of common concern are established and negotiated with regard to their institutional elaborations—is a necessary condition for a “fully meaningful” life, and in *On Revolution* claims this directly, her testimony concerning her limited engagement in conventional politics and longstanding disinclination for it cuts against the claim that a life divorced from politics is to that extent a life

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<sup>3</sup> Mary Dietz, “Arendt and the Holocaust,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Hannah Arendt*, ed. by Dana Villa (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 96-97.

deprived of meaning. As she once said publicly, “there are other people who are primarily interested in doing something. I am not. I can very well live without doing anything. But I cannot live without trying to understand whatever happens.”<sup>4</sup> Even in the text where she most emphatically presses the claim that public happiness is a necessary condition for a fully meaningful life, namely, *On Revolution*, she qualifies it extensively, at one point directly retracting it.

Examples of such qualifications, reservations, and contradictions abound, accumulatively contributing to an impression that Arendt is, so to speak, categorically incapable of sustaining a judgment, let alone a coherent conceptual and evaluative orientation. The impression is not one of fickleness or fastidiousness, as if Arendt suffered from some sort of pathological suggestibility or overenamorment with nuance, but rather of an inarticulate pressure or elusive disquietude that prevents her claims from consolidating, her texts from reposing in themselves or mutually reconciling. Without a hint of high dialectical drama, which is to say, in an entirely untheatrical way, but also without the subtle grace and nimbleness that would make such complications and contradictions seem intentional, perhaps pedagogically motivated or otherwise strategic (say, expressions of a profound phenomenological sensibility, as with Benjamin), Arendt’s concepts and claims accede to ambiguities, denials, and value inversions, that is, to a fundamental restlessness.

Consider Arendt’s claim that every life can be narrated; thus, every life is singularly significant, indeed historical insofar as history is composed of stories of singular beings who stretch each in their own way from birth to death. Ever since it has come to function as a premise in readings such as those pursued by Adriana Caverero that infer from it an expansive, indeed boundless understanding of the political, and thus deliver to us an Arendt who can be read against herself on the issue of her reputed agorocentric elitism, the claim that every life is narratable has attained much notoriety. Yet even this now characteristic Arendtian claim is qualified repeatedly, albeit, as with most such qualifications, tacitly and at a certain distance from the more assertive articulations of the claim qualified. “Whenever an event occurs that is great enough to illuminate its own past,” Arendt claims, “history comes into being. Only then does the chaotic maze of the past happenings emerge as a story which can be told, because it has a beginning and an end.”<sup>5</sup> If “past happenings” are ordinarily a “chaotic maze,” as the text quietly implies, and

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<sup>4</sup> Hannah Arendt: *The Recovery of the Public World*, ed. by Melvyn Hill (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1979), 303.

<sup>5</sup> Hannah Arendt, “Understanding and Politics (The Difficulties of Understanding),” in *Essays in Understanding, 1930-1954: Formation, Exile, and Totalitarianism* (New York: Schocken, 1994), 319.

if “history comes into being” only with the dawning of an event “great enough to illuminate its own past,” then history, which is to say, emphatic human significance, and the narratable lives of which history is composed, are rare. Far from affirming that each life, let alone the multitude of events of which each life is composed, expresses an irreplaceable, narratively relatable, and so presumably principle-disclosive, thus socially significant individuality, a meaning that makes a claim on others’ attention if there is to be meaning at all, Arendt here verges on a vision of monumental history in which the rare disclosive power of exceptional events redeems the chaos and confusion of the mundane, filtering otherwise chaotic happenings through its interpretive matrix whereby they become meaningful moments in privileged narrative. As she says in *Between Past and Future*, “the subject matter of history is ... the extraordinary.”<sup>6</sup>

In a related vein, in some very well-known passages Arendt gives voice to a conception of the political as both expansive and ubiquitous. Politics would seem to include whatever transpires between any individuals linked in a web of appearances. Any remotely meaningful encounter that leaves a residue of a relationship is political. Yet elsewhere, and again in an understated way, Arendt contradicts the claim, suggesting that the political is highly rarified, limited to expressive self-disclosure in the context of institutionally secure contexts of public deliberation. Adding to the complexity, Arendt occasionally implies that the political can be characterized as neither ubiquitous nor rarified because it is not a proper concept but historical through and through; in short, what counts as political will depend on context, and this introduces an unsurpassable ambiguity in the counting of matters political through which its ubiquity or rarity would be established. Consider the following passage from *The Life of the Mind*: “at these moments, thinking ceases to be a marginal affair in political matters. When everybody is swept away unthinkingly by what everybody else does and believes in, those who think are drawn out of hiding because their refusal to join is conspicuous and thereby becomes a kind of action. The purging element in thinking, Socrates’ midwifery, that brings out the implications of unexamined opinions and thereby destroys them—values, doctrines, theories, and even convictions—is political by implication.”<sup>7</sup> Here, so little is the political conceived as self-same, let alone autonomous, that it seems to involve not a distinctive action but a different reception of that which otherwise has no claim to a political character. Or as Arendt says elsewhere:

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<sup>6</sup> Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 43.

<sup>7</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978), 445-6.

Life changes constantly, and things are constantly there that want to be talked about. At all times people living together will have affairs that belong in the realm of the public—'are worthy to be talked about in public.' What these matters are at any historical moment is probably utterly different. For instance, the great cathedrals were the public spaces of the Middle Ages. The town halls came later. And there perhaps they had to talk about a matter which is not without interest either: the question of God. So, what becomes public at every given period seems to me utterly different.<sup>8</sup>

Here the public and political are not just mutable but absolutely equivocal, without proper place or content.

Not only the consistency with which Arendt's claims yield to complications and contestations but the manner (the timing and spacing) of these complications and contestations is notable. Most often, these complications are either tacit or direct yet deferred, set off at such a distance from the claims they complicate that they may easily go unnoticed. Tacit and deferred complications are difficult to detect, which suggests that they are not simply intended as nuances, elements of a pedagogical program of incremental sophistication. Indeed, they may not be intentional at all but rather indices of an unknowingness that is perhaps as significant a feature of Arendt's writings as her set pieces and stated positions. Such tacit and deferred complications place demands on the reader for an acuity and presentness to the text(s) that they make extraordinarily difficult to discharge—demands that Arendt herself regularly fails to satisfy. The profusion of tacit complications would keep the reader mildly suspicious and in suspense, paradoxically expecting the unexpected, were they readily detectable; but since they are not—they are far less dramatic and far less frequently sustained than the claims they qualify—the demand they bear is an exceptionally weak one, easily overwhelmed by the attractions of the manifest textual drama and the much more readily identifiable claims staked out. Compared with, say, the emphatic rehabilitation and rethinking of judgment, natality, plurality, power, public happiness, and the like, the urging of critical caution is remarkably muted. Likewise, deferred complications place a demand on the reader to hold in mind the whole of Arendt's work precisely in order to remain mindful of its nonresolution into a consistent and coherent whole; yet because they are so distant from, and often less prominently pronounced and sustained than the claims they

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<sup>8</sup> Arendt, *Recovery of the Public World*, 316.

qualify, their interruptive force and the demand for an impossible syncretism this force mediates is manifestly outmatched by the attractions of the claims and conceptual orientations it would unsettle.

Jointly, tacit and deferred qualifications which are less subtle sophistications of initially overstated points than sites of conflict, ambiguity, and impasse in texts incapable of ideal resolution may be considered weak means of resistance to impulses to identification. Insofar as they interrupt the presumptive identity of the concepts, theses, and judgments they elaborate, Arendt's texts impede identification with their claims and with the narrator of these claims. In effect, they show the narrator to be as unreliable as the narrative content, diminishing the attractiveness of both to identificatory investment. Yet the mediation of such resistance is weak and wavering, easily swamped by interest in the unique and promising positions Arendt's texts manifestly stake out; and this is very much to the point. The texts' weak and wavering expressions of resistance to identity and identification, their mumbling mediation of demands for demystification, impedes any confidence that this resistance will be effective. The weak, barely articulate nature of these demands for demystification is precisely what causes them to reverberate upon themselves; by virtue of their weak self-interruptive force, the texts forego of any fetishism of the nonidentical. To anticipate a point to which we will return, Arendt's texts refuse to model redemption. By giving weak voice—stuttering and faltering expression—to demands for resistance rather than propose themselves as exemplary instances of resistance, as if what is merely aesthetic in them could be emulated politically, taken up in collective practice, they refuse the mystifications of aesthetic ideology: refuse to paper over of the gap between aesthetically modulated resistance and political transformation and thus mystify the tendential eclipse of the political. The residues of resistance these writings bear express necessarily inchoate—because disoriented—longings for social and political transformations they know not how to achieve. Not even within the arena of their textuality are these texts confident in their capacity to resist a false totality. Call this their anti-aesthetic aesthetic: *they receive and bear from sources they are unable to fully specify longings for transformations they know themselves unable to effect even aesthetically and which they seek to release from their infelicitous aesthetic rehearsals into a collective political practice they know does not exist*. The unknowingness of Arendt's writings with respect to themselves images our unknowingness about how we might effect political change under conditions of tendential mutual disinterest. Arendt's texts are not allegories of reading capable of containing at a higher level the disruptions and unanticipatable complications they enact. Their aesthetic discomposure is the signal of their relentless yet subdued refusal of consolation.

Sometimes, however, complications are introduced in a way that is neither exactly tacit nor deferred but rather so incredibly rapid that there is no time to take their toll. The immediacy of these complications outpaces the time of reflection; their textual ramifications and general significance seems as little attended by Arendt as they are available to her readers. For instance, Arendt says of the decay of metaphysics that it “would permit us to look on the past with new eyes, unburdened and unguided by any traditions.”<sup>9</sup> Note the quick, easy to glance over juxtaposition, indeed the crashing conjunction of motifs of liberation and abandonment, promise and disorientation. The unburdening effected by the demise of tradition is also a disorienting uprooting, a loss of guidance. Here we witness normative terms (emancipation and nihilistic disorientation) colliding with a breathless immediacy. The altogether meager “and” is hardly capable of mediating the terms between which it is stuck. There is no space for breathing in this conjunction, no time for thinking; the immediate apposition of “unburdened” and “unguided” is jarring, giving rise to a slight shock that repels reflective mediation, induces the reader to simply move on. It is precisely the immediacy of their colliding that suggests that the tension or contradiction of emancipation and disorientation is not available to mediation, that there is no way to soften the blow, to tally gains and losses, or to calculate a response. In effect, the experience of disorientation thematically addressed is redoubled by its feeble and confused reflective uptake. We are left unknowing. Yet what comes through this hypertense conjunction is an experience of collapse but not despair, perhaps even a breath of hope. Unburdened by tradition, we are still in some way oriented by the past, still “look on the past” and thereby project a future, albeit without guides or “banisters.” The demise of tradition may result in an irreparable loss of the past that tradition had preserved and therewith the futures onto which it may have opened; but to look on the past “unburdened and unguided” is still to be keyed to the past, to experience the past as yet promising a future—perhaps one that can come into view only now, “with new eyes.” Indeed, to be “unguided by any traditions” is perhaps not to be outside of tradition altogether but rather to experience a certain freedom to reinvent or renew tradition(s) if what this lack of guidance “would permit us” to do is “look on the past with new eyes.” The chaos and confusion of a present unable to appeal to “any traditions” as it projects and purses a future is not to be minimized; the future projected may be but a stale repetition of a present disoriented because it has squandered its past. But the past is still the past, the text suggests—indeed a bit hyperbolically, in a way that echoes Arendt’s manic denial in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*—that the stories of those who suffer may be sucked into “holes of oblivion.” And our eyes,

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<sup>9</sup> Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, 10.

while differently focused, are at least “permitted” to look upon it. The past, then, is not entirely past; it still may claim the attention of the present even if all we can make out as we gaze upon it are broken legacies and latencies now lost: the pale ghosts of the past we have become. “[U]nburdened and unguided by any traditions,” it is unclear whether we are at the end of history or the beginning, what she calls in *Between Past and Future* “the beginning of a beginning.”

The wavering of Arendt’s texts with regard to their most well-known, orientational claims is most explicit when such claims are explicitly evaluative. Arendt’s texts consistently shade their privileged normative terms into intermediary semantic zones and shadow them with perverse counterparts. Although Arendt’s judgments are frequent and decisive, her texts seem unable to sustain a judgment. With respect to the shadowing of central normative terms with perverse counterparts, consider, for instance, Arendt’s notion of principles: examples of principles include “honor or glory, love of equality, which Montesquieu called virtue, or distinction or excellence ... but also fear or distrust or hatred.”<sup>10</sup> Or consider her notion of public life. While participation in deliberations concerning matters of common concern is, according to Arendt, a condition for a fully meaningful life, even the pinnacle of such a life, a flourishing public life, she suggests, requires an agonistic spirit that may devolve into self-glorifying, social status-seeking ambitions. Interest in outdoing others for the sake of mere reputation may corrode from within and eventually usurp interest in the *res publica*. Merely appearing to outshine others in order to enhance one’s reputation would be the dialectical devolution of public spirit into an instrumentalization, and so a loss, of the political, which is at once an instrumentalization, and so a loss, of the self. Because subjectivity is intersubjectively mediated, or in Arendt’s terms, because self-disclosure through speech and deeds is routed through webs of appearances (the interpretive responses of a plurality of others), efforts to become the author of one’s story displaces action by work, the world by spectacle, the *res publica* by a fetishized sociality. In her considerations of the spirit of the laws, Montesquieu may be in the foreground but the dark shadows of Machiavelli and Rousseau are never far off.

Likewise, anticipating Habermas on the quasi-transcendental necessity of sincerity for public-political life, but cutting against Habermas’ hypostatization of the political as an empirico-transcendental postulate, Arendt claims that public life requires sincere advocacy of opinion, that is, expressions of genuine conviction, yet suggests that the sincere advocacy of opinion may devolve into its opposite if conditions allow it to become enshrined as ideology. It is this worry, I take it, that lies behind Arendt’s

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<sup>10</sup> Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 152.



seemingly strange, presumably way overwrought claim in *Between Past and Future* that many opinions are to be preferred to truth, even were there such a thing in matters political. Like much of the reception of Arendt's work, responses to this peculiar line are split between overenamored affirmation and facile dismissal. As far as I am aware, the only readers who take note of it explicitly are those too ready to receive it, namely, those who applaud Arendt for establishing opinion as an intrinsic *and unconditional* good, a viable secular successor for theologically or metaphysically cast notions of the Good. Inoculated against the spectacular strangeness of this locution by their eagerness to affirm the unconditional validity of a secular intrinsic good and thus make it a true match for its theological and metaphysical forebears, such readers project a horizon of fetishism onto Arendt's text, belying their claims to have discovered in it a fully secular good. To others, this line is too surprising, indeed rather shocking. Consequently, it is dismissed as rhetorical excess. Perhaps subtending both the anxious affirmation and the facile neglect of the manifest hyperbole with which Arendt underscores the value of opinion is a shared reticence to contend with the historicity of the political that it suggests. While the referential extension of "the political" is a contentious issue in Arendt scholarship, in part because Arendt was unclear and seems to have changed her mind about where and when politics transpires, presumably, *the meaning of the political* is the stable and central point in Arendt's thinking. "Debate," Arendt declares in *Between Past and Future*, "constitutes the very essence of political life."<sup>11</sup> Yet if the public expression opinion, the basic medium of political life, can under certain conditions unwittingly contribute to the anti-political ascendancy of ideology, then nothing about politics can be confidently expressed in categorical terms. The political is again revealed as irreducibly equivocal. With this in view, it is perhaps less surprising than many commentators have found it that Arendt occasionally advocates withdrawing from public life, e.g., when this amounts to complicity with evil; only seemingly contradictory that, especially in her later work, she stresses the political value of thinking rather than opposing politics and thought; and much less of an issue than many commentators have supposed that she sometimes stresses action and sometimes judgment as the basic element of politics. Politics does not partake of the elemental. While the prominent positive valence of the political coupled with the insistence on its intermittence and tendential eclipse by the social makes it an object of longing, its equivocality subtly suggests our incapacity to specify that for which we long, making of our unknowingness a diagnostic register of our suffering. To anticipate a theme to which we will return, by making of the political an object of inchoate longing, Arendt's texts

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<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 241.

frustrate. Frustration may indeed be a medium through which they give convoluted expression to demands they cannot directly press.

As a brief parenthesis, consider in this context Arendt's resonant, indeed alarming silence regarding mediation generally. She is not only unclear about the referential extension of her terms, about how, for instance, the categories of labor, work, and action apply to various practices. More tellingly, "action" means imprescriptable mediation insofar as it involves the inventiveness of both the one who initiates and those who take up that initiative—in short, the condition for action is plurality and plurality means the spontaneous and unprecedented uptake of spontaneous and unprecedented initiatives. Likewise, there is no blueprint that *could* be applied to the development of a council system insofar as a council system is the spontaneous institutional expression of singular experiences of solidarity. In view of the silence they keep regarding mediation, a silence perhaps preserved rather than betrayed by the historical and arguably phantasmatic nature of their textual elaboration, Arendt's central concepts begin to seem like variations on *Bilderverbot*, enactments of an aniconic imperative and thus forms of resistance to precipitous confidence in our power to project a future of healing from a present of suffering.

Arendt's discussions of thinking display a similar propensity to loudly proclaim the virtues of that which, more quietly and at a certain distance, she shows to be problematic, indeed worrisome and dangerous, even an impediment to the very values it might have realized. Thinking yields considered judgments, openness to others, and contributes to character development; it yields meaning and orientation, binds a self to itself by binding that self to its past, its experiences, and as such it may function as a moral emergency break. It is to these positive aspects that Arendt is most frequently attentive. Yet thinking can also dissolve conventions and certainties. Socrates' thought, Arendt notes, had a "destructive, undermining effect on all established criteria, values, measurements for good and evil, in short on those customs and rules of conduct we treat of in morals and ethics."<sup>12</sup> It is "dangerous and resultless" insofar as it can equally be a conduit for cynical withdrawal into a sense of self-confident superiority for having peered into the abyss, thus a conduit for self-amplifying skepticism or nihilism.<sup>13</sup> While it may yield orientation, it may also dissolve worldly orientation: "The business of thinking is like the veil of Penelope; it undoes every morning what it had finished the night before."<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, 434.

<sup>13</sup> Hannah Arendt, "Thinking and Moral Considerations," in *Social Research: Fiftieth Anniversary Issue* (Spring/Summer 1984), 24; Hannah Arendt, *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, ed. by Ronald Beiner (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 38.

<sup>14</sup> Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, 45.

So too with the value of the new. While natality is described in glowing terms, there are certainly novel developments that Arendt unequivocally denounces. Most obviously, the “horrible originality” of totalitarianism<sup>15</sup> which, she says, “exploded our traditional categories of political thought (totalitarian domination is unlike all forms of tyranny and despotism we know of) and the standards of our moral judgment (totalitarian crimes are very inadequately described as ‘murders’).”<sup>16</sup> Likewise, nuclear fission, Arendt underscores, is an emphatically novel development, which like action, initiates a series of unpredictable consequences. While Arendt frequently stresses the value of spontaneity and sets it against the boredom and misery of an over-administered social status quo, *Origins of Totalitarianism* is clearly an account of elements crystallizing spontaneously, in a way that could not be foreseen, into totalitarian rule.

In comparison with the insane end-result—concentration camp society—the process by which men are prepared for this end, and the methods by which individuals are adapted to these conditions, are transparent and logical. The insane mass manufacture of corpses is preceded by the historically and politically intelligible preparation of living corpses. The impetus and, what is more important, the silent consent to such unprecedented conditions are the products of those events which in a period of political disintegration suddenly and unexpectedly made hundreds of thousands of human beings homeless, stateless, outlawed and unwanted, while millions of human beings were made economically superfluous and socially burdensome by unemployment.<sup>17</sup>

Even the notion of a good in itself, of which action and judgment are presumably expressions, is problematized by the long shadow cast by its perverse double: the decidedly non-utilitarian character of the camps.

[I]t is not only the non-utilitarian character of the camps themselves—the senselessness of ‘punishing’ completely innocent people, the failure to keep them in a condition so that profitable work might be extorted

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<sup>15</sup> Arendt, “Understanding and Politics,” 309.

<sup>16</sup> Hannah Arendt, “A Reply to Eric Voegelin,” in *Essays in Understanding*, 405.

<sup>17</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. rev. (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1968), 447.

from them, the superfluousness of frightening a completely subdued population—which gives them their distinctive and disturbing qualities, but their anti-utilitarian function, the fact that not even the supreme emergencies of military activities were allowed to interfere with these ‘demographic policies.’ It was as though the Nazis were convinced that it was of greater importance to run extermination factories than to win the war.<sup>18</sup>

It is essential to note just how undramatic Arendt’s detailing of such dialectical inversions tends to be. What would be a dramatic chiaroscuro effect if immediately juxtaposed becomes a slight strain on conviction, a nagging uneasiness or unplaceable perplexity, by virtue of the distance ordinarily maintained between Arendt’s emphatically extolled terms and their dangerous doubles. Dialectical devolutions are never so far off that the concepts they perversely permute are effectively insulated from their unsettling reverberations, yet they tend to emerge at a sufficient distance to secure their esteemed counterparts against suspicion. The space between the textually prominent, positively construed concepts and their less noticeable gradations and negations grants to the former the time of their promise, the unencumbered articulation necessary for the force of their claims to be felt. By dint of their deferral, complications allow for the experience of promise pitched to the point of exigency; thus, when they arrive, they tend to be registered as a dim frustration or a gnawing uneasiness rather than a direct negation that would sweep away a once promising claim. Disturbing what might have been sleepy identification with, that is, a too immediate enthusiasm for, the promising conceptual orientations the texts elaborate, the muted dissonance introduced by deferred complications is just strong enough to allow the experience of promise to shade into a suspicion of seduction and then, perhaps, a worry about one’s availability to it. Thereby a question may be raised about the adequacy of the orientation the text projects with respect to the problematics it addresses. The initially retroactive, then anticipatory suspicion of seduction may affect a mild counter-fetishistic detachment and thereby preserve our availability to frustration, that is, to both the promise of the text and its non-fulfillment by the resources it has at its disposal. To suffer frustration is to be preserved for a future that Arendt’s texts cannot but demand yet certainly cannot foresee in the manner of a series of steps from here to there. To suffer such frustration is to undergo the

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<sup>18</sup> Hannah Arendt, “Social Science Techniques and the Study of Concentration Camps,” in *Essays in Understanding*, 233.

promise of her work as projecting a future that the enthusiasm her work elicits is both necessary for and an impediment to.

What begins to become clear is not just that values are unlimitedly available to corruption and perversion, that principles offer no security, thus that the gods are truly dead. Contingency, plurality, and the consequent urgency of judgment are important motifs in Arendt's work, but something more seems at stake in the complications, contortions, and internal contestations her texts repeatedly if unknowingly enact. Were the point merely to induce attention to contextual, these immanent impasses would not be so subdued and spaced out; these convolutions and anti-idealizing interruptions, so opaque. By shading its fundamental terms into intermediary semantic zones and dialectical inversions and interrupting its narrative upswEEP with desublimating elements, Arendt's texts quietly, indeed unknowingly, conduct a counter-fetishistic destabilization of their normative orientation, thereby giving indirect expression to the desiccated sociality that makes their reticence with regard to their normative authority mandatory. Were this writing to wholeheartedly accede to the normative impulses it elaborates, presume to action guidance, it would presume a public available to and capable of normative redirection despite its repeated and insistent thematization of world alienation—the tendential privatization of subjectivity and its colonization by consumerism; the eclipse of the political by the radiant rise of the social; the withering of interest in and of institutions capable of implementing collective deliberation—or it would presume a poetic power to elicit such an audience, to sovereignly interpellate a public for whom its interventions would carry authority, either way concealing and perhaps further consolidating the sufferings that motivate its outrage and reorienting efforts in the first place. To presume a public available to and capable of normative redirection would not just contradict the fundamental terms of its social diagnosis; it would mystify the social order it indicts by affirming false latencies. Whatever the force of its denouncement, writing that affirms itself as readymade route to recovery thereby affirms the world it indicts on the grounds of its place in it. When the material—institutional and desirative—conditions for collective deliberation and self-determination have collapsed under the weight of administered interests, when the political is tendentially eclipsed by the rise of the social, full-throated voicings of exemplary authority, confident claims to speak in “a representative voice,” are fated to ideological collusion. In such times, resistance to aesthetic heroism is a condition for writing that carries conviction that remains capable of resonating with its addressees. When conditions conspire to make normative injunctions into facile manipulations, manifest powerlessness becomes the medium of a continuing claim on the present, an echo of freedom sounding the depths of its suppression. Or in the words with which Arendt

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opens *The Life of the Mind*, which is an epigraph drawn from Heidegger: "Thinking does not bring knowledge as do the sciences. Thinking does not produce usable practical wisdom. Thinking does not solve the riddles of the universe. Thinking does not endow us directly with the power to act."

By resisting its confidence in the remedies and critical perspectives it proposes, in their capacity to rationalize, resolve, realize, reclaim, reconstruct, or reinvigorate the meaning of modernity, and by refusing a stable normative vision and therewith the intimation of its coherent practicability, that is, by interrupting identification with the normative perspectives these writings pursue, their claim to exemplary authority, such counter-fetishistic writing inscribes the impasses of the present as irremediable by any means at our disposal, thereby suggesting that we are as unknowing with regard to how to redress our stagnant, tendentially self-concealing suffering, what she calls the boredom of abundance, as are Arendt's texts with regard to their internal operations.

It is not incidental that revolutionary councils are always figured as spontaneous irruptions: figures of the anachronistic *par excellence*. Nor perhaps does Arendt's imaginative blending of Homeric distinction and Athenian democracy merely signal philological feebleness. That the Greco-Roman past she sets against the oversocialized unsociability of the present *never was*, that her images of antiquity are manifestly utopian constructions, is perhaps to the point. If, following Benjamin's account in the *Trauerspiel*, allegory is an idea that differs from itself with each iteration, its successive forms becoming redundant as each contingent construction binds its efficacy to its reworking of materials familiar at some specific time and place, then Arendt's writings, especially in their moments of normative enthusiasm, might be considered allegories anticipating their anachronism. Their advance anticipation of their obsolescence *is*, in part, their usefulness in the present.

The lasting impasses inscribed in and by the indeterminacy, perverse permutations, and reciprocal contestations of normative content figures the "grim" present as unavailable to determinate negation (that is, to sublation in the strong sense) insofar as any strategies conceivable within the present, thus sufficiently continuous with it to be politically plausible, will bear such impasses into the future, making them all the more stinging and difficult to negotiate as they become increasingly less intelligible as a result of the confidence with which their remedy is proposed. Call this a writerly resistance to parable.

Now, there is no doubt that returning us to the horizon of our agency is central to Arendt's project, hence her repeated targeting of metapolitical reductions (to History or metaphysics) and instrumentalizations (via residually liberal capitalism, consumerism, interest group politics, conscience) of the political; and there is no question that she considered

power (collective initiative) capable of overwhelming strength—e.g., the civil rights movement, the American Revolution, to a limited extent the American opposition to the war in Vietnam. In her writings, there is not the faintest hint of a cynical repudiation of our prospects for removing concrete injustices and thereby furthering progressive political legacies. But what the counter-fetishistic dimension of her writings suggests is that the realization of genuine values or implementation of undeniably important initiatives is liable to repeat and perhaps retrench the very dangers it presumes to resolve; that with respect to the future, we are necessarily unknowing. That, however, puts the point too formally, for at issue is not the absolute exposure of the future as such but the specific liabilities of futures projected by a present of mutual disinterest (merely instrumental interest). So, to be more precise, Arendt's counter-fetishistic writing, by unsettling the value horizons it projects, suggests that no horizon that can be projected from the present—our present—can be unconditionally affirmed because so doing would both capitulate to and conceal the dissolution of mutual interest and of the institutional mediations that might make of dissent something other than lyrical; it would be an extorted reconciliation. To vary a phrase with which Arendt was no doubt familiar, danger lies in the saving power. To resist the reduction of denunciatory and demanding normative perspectives into actionable programs or “warm recommendations” is to resist the domination effected by the present's manner of inheritance of the past, that is, the groping enthusiasm that blinds itself to the aporias it inherits. Self-impeding or -interrupting normative suggestions give expression to a necessarily ineloquent dissatisfaction, thus, a necessarily groping desire for transformation.

Between past and future is a present of suffering that disfigures the proposals for its remedy. Arendt's texts resist both nostalgic fantasies of return to conditions well lost and irrecoverable anyhow, and utopian fantasies of a future that will have impossibly leaped over its own shadow. If she was not aware of *how* her texts conduct this resistance, the idea is one she explicitly affirms. As she says, “the thread of tradition is broken and ... we shall not be able to renew it”;<sup>19</sup> “What you are left with is still the past, but a *fragmented* past, which has lost its certainty of evaluation .... It is with such fragments from the past, with their sea-change, that I have dealt”;<sup>20</sup> “all efforts to escape from the grimness of the present into nostalgia for a still intact past, or into the anticipated oblivion of a better future, are in vain.”<sup>21</sup>

Yet in giving voice to the unacceptable as unacceptable—this being the difference between somewhat inchoate protest and teeth-gashing yet

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<sup>19</sup> Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, 212.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, ix.

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ultimately quiescent despair—Arendt's writings refuse to indulge impulses to despair; and this leads us to the fourth element of Arendt's writerly modernism.

Arendt's texts indulge in eccentricity and experimentation while resisting the temptation for writing to close in on itself and presume to model redemption. With respect to the eccentricity of her writings, consider her idiosyncratic rehabilitation of ancient Greek and Roman political experiences; her concentration on action and meaning rather than security, order, and administration; her insistence that the life of the mind matters for political thought; her highly unusual account of the origins and meaning of totalitarianism and of Eichmann's banal evil-doing; the prominent place of treatments of literature in her historical phenomenology of totalitarianism; or her meditations on marginal figures both in *Between Past and Future* and in the vast preponderance of her book reviews. Her work is certainly not traditional political philosophy, nor exactly political journalism; it has certain essayistic features but is more narratively continuous and constrained in its imaginative variations of its subject matter than are essays. In response to a question about where she locates herself on the liberal-conservative spectrum, she denies the significance of the question and says that such questions will not help us get at the central issues of the day. With respect to the experimental features of her writing, consider the methodological anomaly of her historical phenomenologies; her continual reworking of her basic conceptual schemes (the categorical tripartition of *The Human Condition*—labor, work, and action—becomes the binary of preemptory biological urgency and public happiness in *On Revolution*) and searching expositions of her central concepts; and her highly imaginative reconstructions of Grecian and Roman experiences. While narratively inclined, Arendt's texts are somewhat loosely compiled, veering toward parataxis while remaining centered on their primary themes. They are forever testing different perspectives on their subject matters, altering the angle of vision and even the judgments rendered. Yet as eccentric and experimental as they may be, Arendt's writings resist the temptation to coil tightly around themselves and precipitously bask in their counter-fetishistic accomplishments, their preservation of the muted insistence of the non-identical, or contemplate only their paralysis and the catastrophes to which it testifies. Refusing both self-satisfied intransitivity (modeling utopia) and "melancholic immersion" (retreat into reified interiority), either way a desperate, extorted urge to affirm enforced abjection, these writings relentlessly refuse consolation. They do not presume to be an alternative to reality, an aesthetic restitution of what reality wants for. On the contrary, by sustaining of both transitive and intransitive, normative and self-critical dimensions—call this their irresolute modernism—they forswear any claim



to aesthetic self-sufficiency and so the intimation that the resistance and reorientation they accomplish textually are in any way adequate. Ironically, only in view of their de-fetishizing dimensions can the utterly conventional features of Arendt's writings—relatively consistent categorical orientation, citations yielding (to) narrative meaning, and so forth—come into view as a site of the texts' recursive self-application of its insistent negativity, its negative dialectic moment. It is the preponderance of such conventional features, their saturation of the textual foreground that prevents counter-fetishistic gestures from giving way to picturesque disorder, a fetishization of fragmentation.

Arendt's texts are hardly as straightforward as the consensus of her commentators—even those attentive to the contradictions, tensions, and problematic zones of her texts—would lead us to believe. Reading Arendt is a demanding undertaking. Following her texts means enduring and keeping track of unstable normative attitudes and unpredictable tensions; it means experiencing the promise of understanding and of political guidance—a moment of seduction, interpellation, and identification, indeed often a moment of accession to fantasy—as well as the nonfulfillment of that promise, the relentless but quiet complicating and undercutting of the orientation afforded. Thus, to follow her texts requires that one remain sufficiently invested in their promise—sufficiently seduced—to keep the moments of orientation and disorientation, renewal and reservation, from coming apart and devolving, respectively, into facile affirmative enthusiasm and capitulating despair in the guise of aesthetic self-satisfaction. To follow her texts is thus to keep ourselves available to frustration. Arendt's texts are somewhat frustrating and *must be* if they are to preserve us for a future they cannot foresee, certainly cannot motivate on their own, yet cannot but demand. Our frustration becomes the medium for the furtherance of demands these writings cannot coherently envision yet cannot concede; it is thus an alternative to both ameliorism and fantasy. While the demands we could level, precisely because we can level them, are insufficiently demanding, either betrayals or fantasies, frustration preserves the exigency of protest from resolving into immediately actionable yet merely palliative programs or implausible imaginary projections. These are texts to be suffered.

Together, the various elements of Arendt's writerly modernism suggest that Arendt's seemingly straightforward style is itself but a moment of an unremittingly ironic textuality, the lead-up to the complication or negation, and so frustration, of what it so eloquently lays out. Arendt's manifestly "down to earth," oftentimes quasi-journalistic style is a medium of abstraction: a medium in which implausible, unworkable, even unformulatable, thus socially abstract content is conveyed, thus a medium in which world-alienation is ironically inscribed. The eminent readability of

Arendt's prose is belied by the textual contortions and confusions everywhere evident upon closer inspection. If irony is the pairing of expectation and frustration, then irony is indeed Arendt's medium—not her medium of choice, to be sure, but the medium in which her writings accomplish themselves most fully. Arendt's aporetic modernism is the accomplishment of sustained syncopation.

### III. The Social-Mimetic Content of Aesthetic Form

What resounds in Arendt's rhetorical convolutions, her conceptual and normative confusions, is a social-mimetic diagnosis of the intersubjective and institutional conditions that impede, debilitate, or disfigure judgment and action, and at the level of textuality, work against a more full-throated voicing of her normative vision. Let us be clear: It is not that Arendt had, and held in reserve as if to protect under cover of privacy, a normative vision that due to various social prohibitions she could not risk expressing publicly. Her situation is not analogous to that of, say, Spinoza. Rather, her normative vision was condemned to fracture and fragmentation by the want of adequate conditions for its expression, specifically, by the want of entrustment to interlocutors invested in, and because afforded institutional channels for its implementation, capable of deliberating, matters of common concern. "Works and deeds, events and even words, through which men might still be able to externalize ... the remembrance of their hearts," Arendt claims, "have lost their home in the world."<sup>22</sup> Arendt's texts suffer from the want of a robust public sphere, for it is circulation in the public sphere (in the emphatic sense) that transmutes mere ideas into opinions. If a want of solidarity, of intersubjective and institutional uptake, fractures what might have been a compelling normative vision into mutually complicating or contesting claims tending toward both exaggeration and quiet self-critical deflation, then *the material conditions for expression are not external to spiritual content but constitutive of that content, form and deform it*. Ironically, although Arendt is perhaps best known for rehabilitating and rethinking the existential-political value of judgment, she could almost never consolidate a judgment. Though certainly one of the more committed writers (in the Sartrean sense) in recent memory, she could almost never commit to—unreservedly elaborate and sustain—a judgment or conceptual framework.

In part, that Arendt's conceptual orientations and evaluations remain forever unconsolidated signals the consistency of her writings with the normative commitment to plurality they directly declare. Cognitive and evaluative diversity that remains on the near side of disarray because it is

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<sup>22</sup> Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 44.

restricted to developing different perspectives on topics of common concern is the textual consequence of having internalized a vast plurality of judgments. However, a certain nervousness is perhaps detectable in Arendt's advance deliverance of her claims to diverse perspectives, her rather hyperbolic performance of plurality. Overabundant citation, relentless differential evaluation, and conceptual unsteadiness are certainly textual manifestations of plurality, forms of resistance to thematic, narrative, and normative unity. But in virtue of their profusion and exorbitance, one may wonder whether they anxiously enact that which they fear will not be forthcoming: namely, a diversity of concerned responses to the matters under discussion, a public sphere. So, extraordinary and excessive are Arendt's enactments of plurality that one comes to wonder whether the ongoing staging of plurality is not to some extent but a spectacle, thus a performative denial of that to which it would attest, and by means of this performative denial, a social diagnosis that could not be fully voiced. Unhappily, and especially when or to the extent that the voices or opinions expressed idle, the relentless accession to plurality resonates with the self-consuming temporality of the spectacle. Frequently fleeting or at least wanting for sustained thematic development, just capable of puncturing the text's conceptual or normative self-confidence, the voices that arise to interrupt the too smooth surface of the text flicker, fade, and are replaced. Rapidly. The nonidentical is eerily interchangeable.

If and to the extent that the ongoing performance of plurality in Arendt's texts anxiously heads off the disaster of public indifference (or relegation to merely academic interest) to which it is fated given the want of intersubjective and institutional conditions for her normative claims to count emphatically as judgments, opinions, or actions by being judged and responded to, taken over as law or principle, by others capable of collectively deliberating matters of common concern, then what seems a self-relinquishing opening to the opinions of others is a perverse performance of narcissistic control. It is perhaps not incidental that the alternative views and voices that repeatedly emerge are rarely developed. The textual fantasy of limitless plurality conducted through the proliferation of its phantoms registers, in the mode of denial, the *need* of plural voices, along with the expectation that they will not be forthcoming or not of the right sort. To some extent, this is plurality as semblance, a panicky insistence on the presence of what is long lost or perhaps little more than a fantasy in the first place. The point here is a Kantian one: The condition for genius, the Kantian analogue of Arendt's notion of judgment and action as yielding novel meaning, is succession; if the new rule the work portends is not taken up, instituted through the faithful yet equally original responses of compelling

successors, then, effectively, there has been no new rule, or in Arendt's idiom, no action or judgment.

Of course, Arendt has always had readers, and to some extent a readership. But a readership is as little a public, in the robust sense, as communities of taste or shared ethical sensibilities are replacements for politics; and Arendt knew this. It is the unknowing elaboration of this insight that inflects every text she wrote. It is not incidental that the ancient Greek polis, long lost and irrecoverable anyhow, if not something of a fantasy in the first place, is Arendt's vision of an instituted public sphere; nor is it incidental that she draws attention to the domination involved in maintaining that institution, that is, to the legal injunction to take sides in every factional dispute, the compulsion to participation. Tellingly, her image of a functional public sphere is manifestly dysfunctional and set in the remote past. In contrast to Sartre, who claims in *What is Literature?*, that literature is an adequate institution for inducing judgment, by which he means self-disclosive and in part self-determinative freedom, Arendt, while clearly tempted by that thought, could never fully go in for it.

Arendt's objective or writerly *complicity* with the nihilistic forces of oversocialized unsociability is her realism, a way for her writing to keep in touch with the empirical world, maintain its relevance, precisely when writing, or more broadly, public deliberation, has become largely irrelevant to the reproduction of the social status quo. "[U]nder the circumstances of the twentieth century," Arendt claims, "the so-called intellectuals—writers, thinkers, artists, men of letters, and the like—could find access to the public realm only in time of revolution."<sup>23</sup> And her realism is a modernism insofar as it mimetically acknowledges and elaborates what cannot be directly thematized: Social reification is given expression as the nonalignment of author and narrator, author and reader, ultimately, mind and world. Arendt's writing *palpably suffers* from the destitution of desire for self-disclosive collective deliberation through which collectivities work out what matters to them collectively and so who they are. If, following Plato, philosophy begins with and is sustained by desire, then Arendt's writerly modernism is a testing of the possibilities of political expression when desire for it is wanting.

While what Arendt seeks to accomplish with her writings is, in a certain way, a direct, point-by-point reversal of the tendencies of totalitarianism, these writings show that the shadow cast by totalitarianism envelops us still: The elements of totalitarianism are also those of a society of laborers without labor. In all forms of totalitarianism, says Arendt, "the human masses sealed off in them are treated as if they no longer existed, as if what happened to them were no longer of any interest to anybody, as if they

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<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

were already dead.”<sup>24</sup> “Terror enforced oblivion.”<sup>25</sup> Or as she says elsewhere, “One could defend oneself as a Jew because one had been attacked as a Jew. National concepts and national membership still had a meaning; they were still elements of a reality within which one could live and move,”<sup>26</sup> yet Auschwitz opened “an empty space where there are no longer nations and peoples but only individuals for whom it is now not of much consequence what the majority of peoples, or even the majority of one’s own people, [who, let me add, because one is little concerned with them, and they with you, are not exactly a “people,” let alone “one’s own people”] happens to think at any given moment.”<sup>27</sup> “A life without speech and without action,” she claims in *The Human Condition*, “is literally dead to the world; it has ceased to be a human life because it is no longer lived among men.”<sup>28</sup> Arendt’s most sustained elaboration of this thought takes place in *Origins of Totalitarianism*, where she claims that:

The fundamental deprivation of human rights is manifested first and above all in the deprivation of a place in the world which makes opinions significant and actions effective. Something much more fundamental than freedom and justice, which are the rights of citizens, is at stake when belonging to a community into which one is born is no longer a matter of course and not belonging is no longer a matter of choice, or when one is placed in a situation where, unless he commits a crime, his treatment by others does not depend on what he does or does not do. This extremity, and nothing else, is the situation of people deprived of human rights. They are deprived, not of the right to freedom, but of the right to action; not of the right to think whatever they please, but of the right to opinion.<sup>29</sup>

*This is what Arendt suffers, what we suffer: what she calls in *Between Past and Future* “the weightless irrelevance of personal affairs ...” the “sad opaqueness of a private life centered around nothing but itself.”<sup>30</sup> While in many ways free, wanting for solidarity we cannot act, are but “carping,*

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<sup>24</sup> Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 455.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 443.

<sup>26</sup> Arendt, “Dedication to Karl Jaspers” in *Essays in Understanding*, 215.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998) 176.

<sup>29</sup> Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 296.

<sup>30</sup> Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 4.

suspicious actor[s] of life."<sup>31</sup> And however acute our judgments, wanting for fellow feeling, we cannot form opinions. Of stateless persons, Arendt writes, "their freedom of opinion is a fool's freedom, for nothing they think matters anyhow."<sup>32</sup> "[T]he right to have rights," Arendt continues, "means to live in a framework where one is judged by one's actions and opinions."<sup>33</sup> What Arendt texts thus demand, impossibly, is "what," she says, "we must call a 'human right' today," namely, mutual interest and institutions adequate to its mediation, for, she says, "[i]ts loss entails the loss of the relevance of speech."<sup>34</sup> This right cannot be directly demanded, for love cannot be the object of a command, but its claim on us can yet be conveyed. The right to have rights is the stuttering expression of a demand that cannot be fully voiced, but without which whatever we can directly demand becomes propaganda for nihilism.

If Arendt's writings are as complicated, self-contesting, and demanding as I have suggested, it is perhaps because, in Arendt's words, "only within the framework of a people can a man live as a man among men without exhausting himself."<sup>35</sup>

*Department of Philosophy, Rochester Institute of Technology, United States of America*

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<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 296.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 296-297.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 297.

<sup>35</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Jew as Pariah*, ed. by Ron H. Feldman (New York: Grove Press, 1978), 90.

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