

Sounding Through – Poetic Difference – Self-Translation: Hannah Arendt’s Thoughts and Writings Between Different Languages, Cultures, and Fields

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I. The Sound of Arendt’s Writing

Every time I read Hannah Arendt, I get the impression of hearing *her* voice speaking the words and phrases I read, like a performance. It is not that I want to get rid of this effect; I very much appreciate the mode of her speaking and presenting arguments. The only drawback of this presence of her soundless voice is the fact that it compels me to follow that mode of relatively slow reading which in ancient Greek was introduced as ‘reading inwardly.’ This is regarded as a silent reading performed on an inner stage,¹ but – taking into account the metaphorical character of all sayings about the ‘inner’ or ‘inward’ – actually occurs as a soundless reading of any single word as if one was reading aloud. In order to find out the reason for this phenomenon I listened again to several of her recorded radio speeches and to the few interviews that Hannah Arendt, who hated to have her face represented and reproduced in the public sphere, consented to give.² After listening again to Arendt’s recorded voice, I have come to the conclusion that it is the rhythm of her thoughts that attracts my mind to such an extent that I can’t separate it from the lucidity and rhetoric of her analyses.

1 See Svenbro, Jesper, *Phrasikleia. Anthropologie des Lesens im Alten Griechenland*, Munich 2005.

2 Namely the famous interview by Günter Gaus in 1964 in German and the (originally English) interview by Roger Errera for French TV in 1973. Both published in German in: Arendt, Hannah, *Ich will verstehen. Selbstauskünfte zu Leben und Werk*, ed. Ursula Ludz, Munich, Zurich 1996.

As soon as one's attention is alerted to the voice, the rereading of Arendt's writings immediately yields new discoveries – this one, for example, in one of the centerpieces of her theory, namely in the chapter on *Acting (Handeln)* in her book *The Human Condition* (in German: *Vita activa oder Vom tätigen Leben*):

In acting and speaking, men show who they are, reveal actively their unique personal identities and thus make their appearance in the human world, while their physical identities appear without any activity of their own in the unique shape of the body and sound of the voice.³

Arendt thus considers the voice as belonging among the phenomena of that involuntarily revealing and personal “Who-somebody-actually-is,” which remains to a great extent veiled to oneself while appearing “so clearly and unmistakably” to others. The fact that any person only makes an appearance as “someone” or “somebody” in the realm of togetherness forms the centre of Arendt's theory: it is the *inter-est* of inbetweenness, or the interspace between humans from which her concept of the political emerges.

In what follows I will discuss this persistent reverberation of the author's voice as a symptom of the very characteristic *sound* of Arendt's political theory in order to examine the specific historical and epistemological conditions from which her unique thinking emerged. The sound underlines not only the eminent role language plays in her thoughts – as confirmed by her repeatedly expressed confession that even in exile she remained close to her German mother tongue – I also refer to a particular scenario from which her reflections emerge. This can be called tragic in that it might be compared to the counter rhythmic structure of the ancient theatre, based on a constellation of irreconcilable parts. In his *Essay on the Tragic* (1978),⁴ Peter Szondi argued that the enlightened subject/person may be described as the heir of the antithetic character of ancient tragedy in as much as the *agon* of ancient drama has turned into an irresolvable tragic constellation to which the modern subject is bound. Thus, it is this Szondian sense of the tragic to which I refer when describing the tragic scenario of Arendt's work, rather than to the sentimental meaning it has acquired in ordinary language. It forced

³ Arendt, Hannah, *The Human Condition* (1958), Chicago 1998, 179.

⁴ Szondi, Peter, *Versuch über das Tragische*, Frankfurt/M. 1978. Engl. transl. Paul Fleming, *An Essay on the Tragic*, Stanford 2002.

her to develop her unique reflections on the concept of the political and the human condition. She translated the latter herself as “menschliche Beingheit” when arguing: “Men are conditioned beings because everything they come in contact with turns immediately into a condition of their existence.”⁵

The main challenge her work presents is the incommensurateness between philosophy and politics. It not only forms a leitmotif in her writings, but has also been elaborated theoretically by her reflections on acting and thinking. Arendt regarded *acting* (*Handeln*) as the realm of “human affairs,” based on the plurality of human being, their *Miteinander* that is to say their being, speaking and acting together forming an inbetweenness and space for the political. *Thinking*, as an activity (*Tätigkeit*) which takes place in a distance from acting (*Handeln*), is described as a dialogue of “two-in-one” or of a “Self” with the “Other of the Self.”⁶ Instead of merely contemplating and developing theoretically sophisticated examinations of the limits of philosophy and politics – and of other realms, systems, concepts and institutions, such as the legal system with respect to the Nazi crimes – Arendt’s work took place *in* the very tension between them, taking philosophy as resistance against existing politics and vice versa. In other words she was working above the abyss, thus turning the existing contradictory constellation into a life *with* and a work *on* them. The traces of such work, which does not leave the person uninjured, are audible in the voice and discernable in the face of Hannah Arendt, especially in the last decade of her life.

In one of her last addresses, the Sonning Price Speech of 1975, Arendt reflects on the discontent of being a public figure and explains the etymology of *persona* – a word deriving from the mask in antique theatre:

But in this mask, which was designed and determined by the play, there existed a broad opening at the place of the mouth through which the individual, undisguised voice of the actor could sound. It is from this sounding through that the word *persona* derived: per-sonare, “to sound through.”⁷

5 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 9.

6 See Arendt, Hannah, *Denktagebuch 1950–1973*, ed. Ursula Ludz/Ingeborg Nordmann, Munich, Zurich 2002, 246, 725 et al.

7 The speech is published as “Prologue” in: Arendt, Hannah, *Responsibility and Judgment*, ed. Jerome Kohn, New York 2003. German transl. Ursula Ludz in: *Hannah Arendt. Text und Kritik* 166/167.9 (2005): 3–11.

First appearing in a public speech, these reflections on the *persona* have had a 25-year-long latency, during which they slumbered in her notebook (*Denktagebuch*). Reflections on the relationship between “Person – Ich – Charakter”⁸ can be found in the second entry of her notebook and consist of reflections, written mostly in German, which she started in June 1950 after having finished the manuscript for her first English book, i.e. the book on totalitarianism partly written and originally published in English. The *Denktagebuch* thus forms a German *Parerga* to the work of a German-speaking English-writing author. Referring to the theatrical primal scene of *per-sonare* one could describe the unique tone of Arendt’s political theory as a sort of sounding through, namely a sounding of German through English, a sounding of poetic language through theory, and a sounding of experiences through political concepts. And these experiences were first and foremost those of immigrants, Jewish refugees and stateless human being.

II. The Metamorphosis of an Author – From Philosophy to Politics

In May 1968, while simultaneously supporting the students’ movement with her conceptual critique of their slogans, regularly participating in the heated discussions organized at the *Theatre for Ideas* in Manhattan,⁹ and expanding on the plan for her book *On Violence* (in German *Macht und Gewalt*, both 1970), she wrote a remarkable entry in her *Denktagebuch*, reflecting the crucial challenge of her whole commitment: “Any ‘political philosophy’ must be preceded by a comprehension of the relationship between philosophy and politics. It might be that ‘political philosophy’ is a *Contradictio in adjecto*.”¹⁰ Arendt’s work is stamped by the insight and acknowledgment of this *contradictio* at the same time as it is by the conviction of the necessity to act and think in spite of it, and in full awareness of it. This, I want to argue, was forced upon her and made possible first and foremost by her emigration and the experience of entering into a totally foreign political and intellectual culture. This both forced and enabled her to turn the polar opposition of philosophy and politics

8 Arendt, *Denktagebuch*, 8.

9 “The discussion took place in the 21st Street loft where the Theatre for Ideas, a gathering place for New York intellectuals since 1961, had its house.” Young-Bruhl, Elizabeth, *Hannah Arendt. For Love of the World*, New Haven, London 1982, 413.

10 Arendt, *Denktagebuch*, 683.

into a counter-striving productivity, akin to those two arrows pointing in different directions and, though opposed to one another, nevertheless propelling each other forward which Walter Benjamin depicted in his so-called *Theological-Political Fragment*.

Arendt shared the overall experience of exile with many other refugees and Jewish-German intellectuals in New York – many of whom were struck by depression and standstill, falling into silence and an inability to act at all, some of them busy with their mutation into the ‘perfect American,’ others stuck in their home customs and language and in their enclosed circles of German-speaking émigré friends, and yet others struggling to develop a bilingual and bicultural life as was customary in the United States with its long history of immigration. In the case of Hannah Arendt, however, the escape from Nazi Germany took the shape of a genuine *metamorphosis*. Leaving Germany in 1933 as a gifted, promising young philosopher she was unprepared and abruptly dropped into practical political work during her eight years in France, when working for the Youth-*Alijah*. After arriving in New York in 1941 she immediately turned herself into a writer of political analyses, starting with committed commentaries on the Palestinian situation and the question of a Jewish army, commentaries which may be interpreted as a sort of compromise between the two preceding periods of her life. During the subsequent years her commentaries proceeded step by step toward analyses of politics and political concepts. Although arising from the current political situation, they surpassed the actual problems in formulating fundamental reflections on the conditions of human acting as such.

The way in which Arendt was politically educated by historic events may be studied in her article, “We Refugees,” published in January 1943 in *The Menorah Journal*. There she not only reflects on the experience of the refugees alienated from their “language, which means the naturalness of reactions, the simplicity of gestures, the unaffected expression of feelings” and the experience of being the “first non-religious Jews persecuted.”¹¹ Confronted with the historically new situation of the refugees and the stateless in WWII who, “unprotected by any specific law or political convention, are nothing but human beings,”¹² she also reflects on the collapse of both the existing historical and political concepts and the “kind of human beings.” The need for a fundamental reconsideration

11 Arendt, Hannah, “We Refugees,” in: *The Jew as Pariah. Jewish Identity and Politics in the Modern Age*, ed. Ron H. Feldman, New York 1978, 55–66, 59.

12 Arendt, “We Refugees,” 65.

of political thought deriving from this breach finds its point of departure in the insight that “for the first time Jewish history is not separate but tied up with that of all other nations”¹³ – that is to say that Jewish history has turned into an epistemological viewpoint for developing general, universal political concepts.

In short: In the case of Hannah Arendt the *escape to life* turned out to take the form of an *entrance into the language of politics*, the latter occurring in the form of the American idiom of English. However, this did not happen without letting the German *backstage* of her mind play an active role. It functioned as a resistance against getting assimilated to the order of the real existing American policy and its conventional codes. I use the word “backstage” here quite literally as a site of speech for the performance of words and thoughts. This constellation forms one of the facets of *per-sonare*, namely a sounding through of her awareness of language and concepts through the voice of the author of political theory into whom Arendt turned herself in the United States.

This metamorphosis took exactly one decade – from her arrival in New York until 1951 when her first book was published in the U.S., namely *The Origins of Totalitarianism*¹⁴ – four years before the German version. This she translated herself, although it might not be called a true translation, as the author herself remarks in the foreword to the first edition in 1955:

It is not a literal translation of the English text. Some of the chapters I had originally written in German and later translated them into English. I am now giving the original version where this was the case. However, there were more instances here and there where in the process of re-working the text into German changes, cuts and additions occurred, which, however, are not worth pointing out.¹⁵

While single chapters were translated from original German texts, the main part was written in English as the formation of this book reaches

13 Ibid., 66.

14 Arendt, Hannah, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, New York 1951.

15 Arendt, Hannah, *Elemente und Ursprünge totaler Herrschaft* (1955), Munich 1986, 13 (Arendt’s own transl.). As regards the complex genesis of the book see Ludz, Ursula, “Hannah Arendt und ihr Totalitarismusbuch. Ein kurzer Bericht über die schwierige Autor-Werk-Geschichte,” in: Antonia Grunenberg (ed.), *Totalitäre Herrschaft und republikanische Demokratie. Fünfzig Jahre The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Frankfurt/M. 2003, 81–92.

back to her very first articles in the U.S. in 1942 from which her analysis of anti-Semitism in “From the Dreyfus Affair to France today”¹⁶ turned out to become the seed for the first part of the book.

In the course of the decade during which the author’s metamorphosis took place, a German-American tension was superimposed upon the underlying contradiction between philosophy and politics, a framework within which Arendt ascribed a philosophical attitude to German culture and a political one to American. The crucial *contradictio* of her thought and writing thus appeared to the emigrant in the guise of cultural differences. Arendt, far from thinking in *pros* and *cons*, reflected upon this constellation as an epistemological *chiasmus* concerning the intellectual habitus. In January 1949, after almost eight years of residency in the U.S., she wrote to Karl Jaspers in Basel: “Sometimes I wonder which is more difficult: to instill an awareness of politics in the Germans or to convey to Americans even the slightest inkling of what philosophy is all about.”¹⁷

This statement has to be evaluated as more than just the impression of an immigrant using the common rhetoric of a cultural comparison which opposes the old homeland to the new; rather, it is based on widespread and intense experiences in writing, teaching, and political activities during her first years in the U.S.¹⁸

III. The Sounding Through of Poetry

The sentence in the letter to Jaspers is an emblematic statement for Arendt’s thought. It indicates her *doubly-focused gaze* that makes use of the intellectual and political possibilities and disadvantages of both cultures and both languages without resulting in a binary scenario. This

16 Arendt, Hannah: “From the Dreyfus Affair to France today,” in: *Jewish Social Studies* 4.3 (1942): 195–240.

17 Arendt, Hannah/Jaspers, Karl, *Correspondence 1926–1969*, ed. Lotte Köhler/Hans Saner, transl. Robert Kimber/Rita Kimber, New York 1992, 129.

18 Immediately after her arrival in New York Arendt was intensely engaged in writing and in politics: After only a six months stay she started being busy with different activities: working for the monthly German-Jewish journal *Aufbau*, teaching at Brooklyn College, delivering lectures, working as an executive director of the *Jewish Cultural Reconstruction Corporation* (JCR) and, since 1946, as the editor of the Schocken publishing house – all this besides writing countless articles for various journals, like *Jewish Social Studies*, *Contemporary Jewish Record*, *Menorah Journal*, *Partisan Review*, *Commentary*, *Nation* and *Aufbau*.

was guaranteed by the voices from the backstage of her mind (she talked of her “Hinterkopf” and the “back of my mind” in the famous Gaus-interview)¹⁹ which consisted mainly of poetry, and, for a long period, exclusively of words and phrases from German poems with Goethe, Heine and Rilke playing the leading parts. But later on, after long years of living in the U.S. and maintaining close friendships and exchanges with several writers and poets (W.H. Auden, T.S. Eliot, Mary McCarthy, for example) there are also words and phrases of poems by American or English poets appearing from the backstage of her mind to act out and sound through in Arendt’s speeches and articles.²⁰

One of the earliest of these friendships grew from an encounter with Randell Jarell, the poet, literary critic, novelist, and translator of German literature.²¹ This was in 1946 when Jarell was in charge of the book reviews of the journal *Nation*, for which she wrote some reviews. Their friendship started with an exchange of language or even just words. He grew accustomed to translating or “polishing” her articles – what she called “verenglischen” or “Englishing” – and she helped him with his translations of German poetry, though apparently he knew less German than she did English. Her collection of portraits, *Men in Dark Times* (1968),²² includes a memory image written after his death in 1965. It is a description of him introducing her to English/American poetry during his regular visits at her home, which they called “American Poetry Weekend”:

He opened up for me a whole new world of sound and meter, and he taught me the specific gravity of English words, whose specific relative weight, as in all languages, is ultimately determined by poetic usage and standards. Whatever I know of English poetry, and perhaps of the genius of the language, I owe to him.²³

19 See Arendt, Hannah, “Fernsehgespräch mit Günter Gaus” (1964), in: id., *Ich will verstehen. Selbstausskünfte zu Leben und Werk*, ed. Ursula Ludz, Munich, Zurich 1996, 58.

20 See for example the lines of W.H. Auden in the Sonning Price Speech which Arendt delivered in the last year of her life in April 1975 (cf. footnote 7).

21 Jarell was the author of the early campus novel *Picture of an Institution* (1954), a novel which includes figures modelled on Arendt and her husband Heinrich Blücher.

22 A collection of profiles intended to illuminate the darkest times by means of the “uncertain, flickering, and often weak light that some men and women, in their lives and their works, will kindle under almost all circumstances and shed over the time span that was given them on earth,” as Arendt puts it in her preface to Arendt, Hannah, *Men in Dark Times*, San Diego, New York, London 1983, IX.

23 Arendt, *Men in Dark Times*, 264.

Although in one of his letters Jarell says that nobody has ever said such things about his poems as Hannah Arendt had,²⁴ she, with her typical modesty, explains that he was attracted to her house not just because of her but due to “the simple fact that this was a place where German was spoken.” To confirm this she cites a line of one of his poems: “The country I like best of all is German,” a citation immediately to be followed by Arendt’s commentary: “The ‘country,’ obviously, was not Germany but German.”

This episode illustrates that her friendships to poets were based on a kind of elective affinity. Long before living in exile and before writing in a second language, Arendt considered the language to be her actual country. Belonging to the first generation of women and Jews in Germany with general access to universities, she was already forced to constantly explain and consider her intellectual position before her exile. Her teacher in Heidelberg, Karl Jaspers, with whom she finished her dissertation on the concept of love in Augustine²⁵ in 1928, permanently addressed her German Jewish position and its impact on philosophy. In January 1933, five years after her Ph.D. and in the context of her critical remarks to his reference to the dubious category of “deutsches Wesen” in his book on Max Weber (1932), Arendt spends more effort than before on explaining her viewpoint and position from which she speaks. Here, on the one hand, she enunciates a clear distance to a German identity in which he, Jaspers, saw her self-evidently involved. On the other hand, she highlights the role of the German language for her as a Jew grown up in German culture:

For me, Germany means my mother tongue, philosophy, and literature. I can and must stand by all that. But I am obliged to keep my distance, I can neither be for nor against when I read Max Weber’s wonderful sentence where he says that to put Germany back on her feet he would form an alliance with the devil himself. And it is this sentence, which seems to me to reveal the critical point here.²⁶

This letter, by a twenty-seven year old Jewish intellectual expressing her distance to any German issue if it appears in a nationalist mode, shows that

24 Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt*, 191.

25 Arendt, Hannah, *Der Liebesbegriff bei Augustin: Versuch einer philosophischen Interpretation*, Berlin 1929, engl. transl. *Love and Saint Augustine*, Chicago 1996.

26 Arendt/Jaspers, *Correspondence*, 16.

due to her awareness of her Jewish position Arendt resisted the demand of assimilation already before the experience of Nazi-Germany and exile. Instead she substituted a country of words for the nation – similarly to many other German speaking Jews in modern Europe.²⁷ More than three decades later she makes a similar statement, though under totally different conditions. And here I refer to her famous answer she gave in the interview with Günter Gaus:

I write in English, though I have never lost the distance. There is an enormous difference between mother tongue and all other languages. In my case I can explain this very clearly: In German I know quite a great deal of German poems by heart. They are constantly there – *in the back of my mind** – the same can never be achieved for another language. Thus I take liberties in German that I would never possibly take in English.²⁸

What separates both statements is the specific attitude of distance: In 1933 she claims that “I am obliged to keep my distance,” and then in 1964 that “I have never lost the distance.” Whereas in 1933, the attitude of distance was addressed to the country as a nation, later, in 1964, it is addressed to a total assimilation into the second language. In both situations it is the language of poetry that forms the counterpart, thus providing her with the ability to remain at a distance – at a distance from the nation state and from conformism. Writing under bilingual conditions, the words of poetry are there to *per-sonare*, to sound through the text of the refugee who has become a leading as well as a controversial figure of political theory.

The two statements are separated not only by three decades but by a breach of civilization and a new epoch in the life of refugees like Arendt. A striking feature of recognizing the correspondences between the two citations is the fact that the danger of assimilation has apparently switched levels in that the necessity of distance has shifted from a national issue to that of language. In her further answers to Gaus, Arendt mentions people who have managed to forget their mother tongue and to learn the mimicry²⁹ of American English:

27 Cf. Braese, Stefan, *Eine europäische Sprache. Deutsche Sprachkultur von Juden 1760–1930*, Göttingen 2010.

28 Arendt, “Fernsehgespräch mit Günter Gaus,” 58. * in English in the original German interview.

29 Already her 1943 article “We Refugees” includes a sarcastic critique on such mimicry: “After a single year optimists are convinced they speak English as

I am still speaking with a heavy accent, and often I don't speak idiomatically. They all are used to that. But it becomes a language riddled with clichés because that kind of productivity that one has in one's own language is cut off when one forgot that language.³⁰

This statement is reflective of the experience that when speaking a second language one tends to use a less complex and more conventional idiom. What she does not explain in the interview, and instead keeps to herself, is that it is not just to a second language, but specifically to English she needs to maintain a distance. She entrusted such critical comments solely to her *Denktagebuch*, where, in April 1970, an entry can be found: "On the difficulties I have with my English readers." A main reason for her distance emerges in what she calls a "thesaurus-philosophy," that is that "the notion that words 'express' ideas which I supposedly have prior to having the words." Arendt, in contrast, doubts "that we would have any 'ideas' without language."³¹ Here again, it is the echo of language from the backstage of her mind that rescues her thinking from sheer assimilation – this time from being assimilated into an existing conventional terminology.

To summarize up to this point: The scenario of Arendt's work, which was shaped by the counterparts of philosophy and politics, was superimposed twice: first by the tension between German and American intellectual culture, and second by the antagonism between poetry and conventional language full of idioms.

IV. Politics Controverting Philosophy

At this point I need to shift the perspective within her doubly-focused gaze in order to recognize the other side of the difficulties connected to the American language/culture. There we will encounter the role of the political history of the United States as the embodiment of a concept of politics Arendt considers to be a proper concept neither occupied by nor mixed up with non-political concepts. The demarcation of the

well as their mother tongue; and after two years they swear solemnly that they speak English better than any other language – their German is a language they hardly remember." And lost language means the loss of the "naturalness of reactions, the simplicity of gestures, the unaffected expression of feelings." Arendt, "We Refugees," 56.

30 Arendt, "Fernsehgespräch mit Günter Gaus," 59.

31 Arendt, *Denktagebuch*, 770f.

political in her theory is built upon its distinction from both the realm of *Arbeit* (labor/reproduction of life) and the sphere of *Herstellen* (work/making, where humans struggle with nature, a sphere dominated by tools and techniques), the two realms which in *The Human Condition* she distinguishes from *Handeln* (acting). The fact that she developed her political theory in close relation to the constitution and the founding model of the United States is accompanied by her appraisal of America as being a republic, a “government of law and not men,” and as a country which does not call for the immigrants’ assimilation because in a country populated solely by immigrants there is nothing into which to be assimilated. Her statements, articles, and books written after her arrival to New York are marked by the leitmotifs of the U.S. as being a country that is explicitly not a nation state. She dismisses precisely that catalogue of criteria that Ernest Renan critically discusses in his 1882 speech, “*Qu’est-ce qu’une nation?*” when she explains:

This country is united neither by heritage nor by memory, nor [by language], nor by origin from the same [soil]. There are no natives here. [The Indians were the natives, the others] are citizens [and these citizens are united only by one thing – however, this thing is very much: it is the fact you can become a citizen of the United States] by simple consent to the Constitution.³²

Also her emphasis on the sheer consent to the constitution which characterizes a citizen of the United States recalls Renan’s reference to a voluntary moment of the unity and his metaphor of the state being the result of a daily plebiscite.³³ This concerns the differences between the various forms and concepts of nation states acuminating in the opposition between the European model of a homogenous nation state based on an origin, and the nation state formed by a constitution and considered to be a voluntary unity, which mainly exists in immigration countries.

In this respect Arendt’s book *On Revolution* (1963)³⁴ is her most American book. Here she interprets the American revolution in the

32 TV-Interview with Roger Errera. Ursula Ludz transcribed the English interview from the French broadcast and translated it into German; see Arendt, *Ich will verstehen*, 115, here quoted after Ludz’ original manuscript transcript.

33 Renan, Ernest, *Qu’est-ce qu’une nation? Conférence faite en Sorbonne, le 11 mars 1882*, Paris 1882, 35.

34 Arendt, Hannah, *On Revolution*, London 1963, German transl. *Über die Revolution*, Munich 1965.

18th century as a kind of model because it was dedicated exclusively to the struggle for a constitution whereas she analyzes the breaking-in of the social question, of pathos, and passions in the French revolution as the moment of distortion and decline, namely a fall of acting from political aims, that is to say as a sort of fall of man from politics. It seems as if it was necessary for Arendt to protect this role of the American constitution for her concept of the political. Elisabeth Young-Bruehl regarded Arendt's emphatic reference to the founding fathers to be a "political fable," and Bernard Crick explained it as the gratitude that German-Americans are wont to express.³⁵ It is obvious that such a discussion of the U.S. as a political model doesn't acknowledge many aspects of American reality – be it the heavy obstacles one has to overcome in order to earn the U.S. citizenship, or the enormous constraints for assimilation which Arendt herself mentioned in her critique of the social life in the U.S. However, what the American experience taught Arendt with respect to her political thinking was much more than a model of a state. This can be observed in her correspondence with Jaspers.

In 1960 Jaspers expressed a fundamental critique of the Eichmann trial scheduled to take place in Israel arguing that Eichmann's crime lies beyond what can adequately be reached by a legal procedure conducted by a single state.³⁶ And in an even more general argument concerning the incommensurability between law and politics, he stated that the political has a status that can't be captured by legal concepts: "Das Politische hat einen mit Rechtsbegriffen nicht einzufangenden Rang"³⁷ (The political has a dignity which cannot be caught by legal concepts).³⁸ The statement is accompanied by a remarkable comment in brackets: "(the attempt to do so is Anglo-Saxon and a self-deception that masks a basic fact in the functionings of political existence)."³⁹ In her answer, Arendt confronts this general philosophical statement with the specific and unusual historical conditions. The Eichmann trial is confronted with crimes that lie beyond what has been thought yet, even beyond what is conceivable or can be thought, and is thus also beyond any political supposition that the state of Israel can act as a representative of the victims and

35 Sir Bernard Rowland Crick (1929–2008), famous British author of political theory, as quoted in Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt*, 403.

36 Arendt/Jaspers, *Briefwechsel*, 449.

37 Arendt/Jaspers, *Briefwechsel*, 450.

38 Arendt/Jaspers; *Correspondence*, 413.

39 *Ibid.*

survivors of Nazi crimes, which cannot be left without being litigated, the murders left without penalty. Additionally, in admitting that, in respect of the law, she might be “angelsächsisch angesteckt” (which means ‘infected,’ but can also mean ‘to be driven by passion’), she argues that nothing but the law is available in order to judge and condemn that which can not even be described adequately, neither through legal concepts nor political categories. While arguing on the theoretical level that the controversy concerns crimes that surpass any existing concepts, both in politics and law, she simultaneously counters it on the level of concrete political acting. The only concrete possibility for responding to a crime that exists beyond any legal definition is a lawsuit under the heading of ‘crime against humanity,’ as she emphasizes: “nicht: Verbrechen gegen die Menschlichkeit, sondern die Menschheit.”⁴⁰ Her reflections on the concept of humanity and mankind go back to her article “We Refugees,” where she had already analyzed the crucial caesura experienced by the persecuted and Jews during the Second World War as an assault against the concept of man, against “the kind of human being.” In her letter to Jaspers she writes:

The concept of *hostis humani generis* – however one translates it, but not: crime against humanness; but, rather, against humanity – is more or less indispensable to the trial. The crucial point is that although the crime at issue was committed primarily against the Jews, it is in no way limited to the Jews or the Jewish question.⁴¹

This is just one example of the political lessons to be studied in her letters to Jaspers, in which philosophy is controverted. In this dialogue, Jaspers appears as a sort of embodiment of the voice of philosophy. When seeking a controversial dialogue with philosophy, Arendt found one in her former academic advisor. When they met again after the end of the war, he became a friend to her when his house in Basel became her European refuge, located, as it was, in a place outside the territory of her linguistic homeland. The rhetoric of her letters to Jaspers is quite remarkable, written with intimacy yet without hesitating to contradict and criticize she always remains within the limits of the concrete question at hand and never touches his way of thinking as such – although there were enough opportunities to do so. Thus, for example, she doesn’t comment on

40 Arendt/Jaspers, *Briefwechsel*, 459.

41 Arendt/Jaspers, *Correspondence*, 423.

his problematic expression, “politisches Dasein,” which he used in the above-mentioned controversy on the Eichmann trial. Instead she takes a debate over concepts that had become obsolete and abstract by historical experience as an opportunity to reflect on possibilities of politics after migrating through the lesson of philosophy.

The lesson she taught herself with this controversy sharpened her specific theoretical approach. Situated at various intersections of historical phenomena and central concepts of philosophy, policy, and anthropology, it gained its epistemological precision from the examination of the often hidden or forgotten origin and genesis of concepts. One of the primal scenes (in the Freudian sense) for this is the already-mentioned 1943 article, “We Refugees.” This article is remarkable not only in that one can already discern the tone of Arendt’s political thought (although it was written shortly after her arrival in New York and published in English), but also for the fact that it is characterized by a sarcastic “threat of conformism.”⁴² The article is an early example of the *per-sonare* of personal experience sounding through her lucid analysis and her conclusion about the Jewish history getting for the first time “tied up with that of all other nations.”⁴³

V. Writing, Self-Translation and Working-Through

The characterization of Arendt’s written English in scholarship alternates between two poles. While it is sometimes qualified as “awkward English,”⁴⁴ elsewhere it is appreciated precisely because of its idiosyncrasies, whether for her style or for her semantic and rhetorical peculiarities. Instead of going further with such a debate about qualifications (that is in any case seldom staged on a stable ground), in what follows I will develop a reading of Arendt’s bilingualism beyond criteria like style or alleged

42 “The Threat of Conformism” is the title of an article by Arendt published in *The Commonweal*, September 24, 1954, in: id., *Essays in Understanding 1930–1954. Formation, Exile, Totalitarianism*, ed. Jerome Kohn, New York 2005, 423–427.

43 Arendt, “We Refugees,” 66.

44 In his analysis of *The Human Condition*, Arendt’s second book written in English, the Canadian scholar Bauer has argued against the later evaluation in talking of a low readability, of many incoherences, and ill-conceived concepts. Bauer, Gerhard Walter, *Is There an Educational Problem With Reading Hannah Arendt’s ‘The Human Condition’ in English Only?*, The University of British Columbia 2007.

linguistic failures. In order to get rid of such value judgment it is worthwhile to study the discourse of *self-translation* used by authors in a bilingual and bicultural status, i.e. authors who are accustomed to translating their own texts originally written in a second language into their mother tongue.

This practice is often mistakenly considered a kind of ‘back-translation.’ In an analysis of self-translations (by Klaus Mann, Stefan Heym, Rudolf Arnheim and Hannah Arendt), Verena Jung, for example, has argued against the common interpretation of self-translations as being simply “freer, less literal translation[s],” which liberate creative potential. Instead she discusses two different tendencies. The first is a pragmatic, reader-oriented strategy wherein authors refer back to the different cultural contexts and the presupposed intertexts with which readers are familiar. Within this paradigm, she presents a comparison of the English version (5th edition 1972) and the German first edition (1955) of Arendt’s book on *Totalitarianism*, reading a passage from the 12th chapter on “Totalitarianism in Power” and showing how Arendt restructured her arguments in the German translation and put them in a different order.⁴⁵

Such observances of her different addressees are, in fact, to be found frequently in Arendt’s work, albeit in a much more subtle manner than a simple reordering of a paragraph. It is mainly to be found in places where she refers to historical phenomena from far enough back that she couldn’t expect her American audience to be familiar with them. For example, in her article, “Franz Kafka: A Reevaluation,” which appeared in 1944 “on the occasion of the twentieth anniversary of his death” in *Partisan Review*, Arendt reads *The Castle* as an interpretation of the situation of the Jews in modernity, whereas the German version refers to a specific historical constellation, namely to the simultaneous exclusion and privilege of Jews as embodied in the figure of ‘court Jews.’ Such a privilege is valued like the “Gnadengeschenk” (gift of mercy), which K. in Kafka’s novel considers the legal residence to be, and which he therefore refuses; he could solely accept it as his right, as Arendt’s reading of the novel puts it.⁴⁶

The second tendency of self-translation as mentioned by Jung is more relevant with respect to a theory of self-translation; however, it is also more problematic. Here she assumes an “inner language version of the

45 Jung, Verena, “Writing Germany in Exile – the Bilingual Author as Cultural Mediator: Klaus Mann, Stefan Heym, Rudolf Arnheim and Hannah Arendt,” in: *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development* 25.5/6 (2004): 529–546.

46 Arendt, Hannah, “Franz Kafka,” in: *Die verborgene Tradition*, Frankfurt/M. 1976, 88–107.

English original that preceded the writing process.”⁴⁷ This category of an ‘inner German’ or an ‘inner text’ functions as a sort of pre-text for a book written in the second language. Yet this assumption corresponds to the idea of a pre-written, already linguistically-constituted signified that Jung shares with a common linguistic approach to self-translation.⁴⁸ This idea is not only extremely problematic with regard to language theory, it will also provide another occasion for Arendt’s problem with her English-speaking readers reflected in her above cited notes from the *Denktagebuch*. If this idea presumes the existence of a meaning already completed in a pre-written state, it at the same time legitimizes the goal of reconstructing a so-called inner pre-text, in actuality intending to make an inner invisible text visible and readable:⁴⁹ Thus the so-called inner German text, identical neither with the written English text nor with the translated German version,⁵⁰ in this way assumes the position of the ‘true original’ through which the text originally written in English becomes displaced into a second state, a sort of secondary original. Based on the notion of a lasting and seemingly eternally fixed hierarchy of first and second language, any text written in the second language thus becomes a sort of distorted original. It may, as it were, be healed when – through the detour of a self-translation into the first language – it is brought back to the true original that always already existed in a dormant pre-verbal state, awakened through the analysis of the scholar.

In contrast to such a construction I would suggest to take the *belatedness* of the self-translation seriously and to use it as the point of departure for an alternative theory of self-translation. Referring to the dream as a “translation without an original” in psychoanalysis,⁵¹ one could consider

47 Jung, “Writing Germany,” 530.

48 See also Bauer’s (footnote 44) and Gössmann’s construction of an inner language: Gössmann, Wilhelm, “Das literarische Schreiben als Zentrum von Schreiberfahrungen,” in: Wilhelm Gössmann/Christoph Hollender (ed.), *Schreiben und Übersetzen*, Tübingen 1994, 11–29.

49 “An author who edits his own text during the translation process by using his pre-text as a basis allows the pretext to surface during the translation process.” Jung, “Writing Germany,” 532.

50 “Yet it is neither the English original nor the German translation in itself, but the differences between them that enable us to attempt a reconstruction of the possible pre-text.” Jung, “Writing Germany,” 530.

51 As Jacques Lacan does in his return to Freud. Cf. Weber, Samuel, *Return to Freud-Jacques Lacan’s Dislocation of Psychoanalysis*, transl. Michael Levine, Cambridge 1991, 2, 4.

writing in a second language as a translation without original – that is to say as writing literally in an *other* language. There, the author can never be completely sure of acting as the master in the house of meaning/language, where the author can never be sure of actually saying what he/she wishes to express. In contrast to the psychological insult to the self diagnosed by Sigmund Freud in 1917, that the “ego is not the master in its own house,”⁵² the uncertainty that comes with writing in a foreign language is not caused by one’s own unconscious. It instead comes from a linguistic unconscious, namely from a limited familiarity with the ambiguity, nuances, and the subtines and overtones of the foreign language. The self-translation into the first language can thus be interpreted as a process of working-through: working through the words, the concepts and metaphors, the arguments, examples and explanations.

This process might well be described by analogy with the Freudian procedure of “Remembering, Repeating and Working-Through.”⁵³ When remembrance in this case concerns the question of “what was it what I wanted to express,” it receives its color from the current desire of expression, as in the practice of psychoanalyses. The aim, however, is not to reconstruct a previous text (or experience or affect) but to overwrite a text written in a foreign language with a text worked-through in the first language. The result of this repeated working through that always accompanies self-translation should by no means be confused with a supposed pre-existing original – rather, it is a belated text that repeats, reworks, *and* comments on the meaning of the original written in English. Authors who, like Arendt, are accustomed to practicing self-translation as a working-through after the first publication of a book written in the second language, are able to profit from a kind of ongoing rewriting in order to differentiate, explain and specify certain aspects and meanings. The differences between the English original and the German self-translation can thus be understood as symptoms of partially unclear and unsolved questions within the first edition.

52 Cf. Freud, Sigmund, “A Difficulty in the Path of Psycho-Analysis,” in: id., *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* 17, ed. James Strachey, London 1953–74, 135–144, 143.

53 Freud, Sigmund, “Remembering, Repeating and Working-Through,” in: id., *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* 12, ed. James Strachey, London 1953–74, 147–156.

VI. Arendt's Bilingual Writings

In Ursula Ludz' bibliography of all of Arendt's publications in both German and English, one repeatedly comes across the note stating that both versions differ considerably: "Deutsche und englische Fassung weichen erheblich voneinander ab."⁵⁴ This actually is the case in many texts which appeared during Arendt's lifetime – whether she translated them herself from German into English (as during the first years of her arrival in New York) or from English into German (as is the case for the main part of the book on totalitarianism (1950/1955), the *Human Condition/Vita Activa* (1958/1960), *On Revolution* (1963/1965) and for many articles). It is also the case for the many texts that were translated by others (often Charlotte Beradt⁵⁵) and later revised by Arendt, as for example the book *On Violence (Macht und Gewalt)*, (1970) and many articles. The specific bilingual character of Arendt's work is still a largely obscure phenomenon that has not yet attracted adequate attention.⁵⁶ It means that any dialogue or symposium on Arendt in which German and English readers and scholars participate refer to two quite different works by the same author – mostly without the participants being aware of it. In general the 'German Arendt' is regarded as an intellectual whose philosophical thoughts are shapped through metaphors and a poetic language whereas the 'American Arendt' is a more political thinker. Since both images are due to two different but equally limited readings of her work it is only through an analysis of her bilingual writings that one can perceive the 'full Arendt.' And this is much more than just an addition of both her German and her English work; it rather results from a constant exchange

54 "Bibliographic survey of all German and English publications," in: Arendt, *Ich will verstehen*, 255–332.

55 Charlotte Beradt is the author of *Das dritte Reich des Traums*, Frankfurt/M. 1981.

56 See my article "Dichtung als Voraussetzung der Philosophie. Hannah Arendts Denktagebuch," in: *Text und Kritik* 166/167 ("Hannah Arendt") (2005): 125–137. (English translation: "Poetics as a Presupposition of Philosophy: Hannah Arendt's Denktagebuch," in: *Telos* 146 (Spring 2009): 97–110.) In the same volume of *Text und Kritik*, B. Hahn discusses Arendt's bilingual work, see Hahn, Barbara, "Wie aber schreibt Hannah Arendt?" in: *Text und Kritik* 166/167.9 (2005): 102–113. And after the completion of this article appeared a small book by M. L. Knott including a comparison of some passages of *The Human Condition* and *Vita activa*: Knott, Marie Luise, *Verlernen. Denkwege bei Hannah Arendt*, Berlin 2011, 116–130. However, an intense and systematic analysis of Arendt's bilingualism is still lacking.

between different languages: between Greek, German and English, between poetic language, philosophical reflections and the idiom of political theory, between antique concepts, metaphors and modern ideas. The most productive site for this work was her writing and thinking in transition initiated by her arrival in New York.

During the first period of her stay in America it is obvious that Arendt's English publications (which were either written in English or translated by her and always polished by others) don't reach the linguistic complexity of her German writings. For example, *Die verborgene Tradition*, although written in German, appeared first in an English translation in *Jewish Social Studies* 6 (1944) as "The Jew as Pariah: A Hidden Tradition" because Arendt hesitated to publish it in German. In the preface to the German version published four years later, the reasons for the delay are expressed in the guise of a "Dedication to Karl Jaspers:" "In the face of what has happened, the appealing opportunity to write in one's own language again counts for very little, although this is the only return to home from exile that one can never entirely ban from one's dream."⁵⁷ In the body of Arendt's writings, the text *Die verborgene Tradition* probably shows the clearest traces of what I call the poetical difference distinguishing her German works from the American. Whereas the English translation reads like an historical narrative recounting something which took place in the past, the German text succeeds in setting the stage for the appearance of those historical figures whom she considers to be "Konzeptionen des Paria"⁵⁸ – not "types" or "forms," as the English text says. The German original is full of historical irony and images which is lacking in the English version. When she describes, for example, the attempt of some Jews, "die frohe Botschaft der Emanzipation so ernst zu nehmen, wie sie nie gemeint war, und als Juden Menschen zu sein,"⁵⁹ in English she writes: "to make the emancipation of the Jews that which it really should have been," and complements this obviously insufficient translation later with the comment that this conception of emancipation was a misconstruction and also a vision.⁶⁰ Where the translation is stamped by a tone of ideological critique, the German text presents a productive

57 Arendt, Hannah, "Dedication to Karl Jaspers," in: id., *Essays in Understanding*, 212.

58 Arendt, *Die verborgene Tradition*, 48.

59 Ibid., 46ff.

60 Arendt, Hannah, "The Jew as Pariah: A Hidden Tradition," in: *The Jew as Pariah*, 67–90, 69.

misunderstanding from which a magnificent process emerged, namely a history in which single Jews “in der Einbildungskraft von Kopf und Herz, gleichsam auf eigene Faust, Volksnähe realisierten”⁶¹ – which in the translation reads: “as individuals they started an emancipation of their own, of their own hearts and brains.”⁶²

Things changed during the following period as Arendt got used to writing her articles, lectures, speeches, and books in English and started to translate her own texts into German. When trying to find an overall characterization of her bilingual writings, one could summarize that Arendt’s English written texts practice a more conceptual mode of writing, while her German texts make more use of the metaphorical ground of thinking. But this cannot be explained solely by an insufficient linguistic capability as colorful as in German. Several of her texts written in English disprove such a simple explanation and are thereby reminiscent of the vivid portrayal of Randell Jarell. More significant is the fact that the more conceptual mode of her writing in English coincides with the language of political theory, whereas the more metaphorical one, practiced in German, refers to the important epistemological role of language, etymology, and the history of concepts in her thought. The metaphor also plays a central role in Arendt’s understanding of language, as one may see in her *Denktagebuch*: “Thinking and writing poetry are linked by the metaphor. What is called a term in philosophy, is called a metaphor in poetry. Thinking creates its ‘terms’ from the visible in order to name the invisible.” She writes further: “The role of the metaphor: to link the visible with the invisible, the known with the unknowable etc.”⁶³ Following another note – “Die Metapher spricht das Selbe im Nicht-Gleichen aus”⁶⁴ (“The metaphor says the same by the non-equal”) – Arendt’s self-translation may be characterized as a transferal of the *same* into the *non-equal* in the course of which the metaphorical character of the text is augmented. In any case, her German self-translations tend toward a more metaphorical, polyphonic, and at the same time more philosophical language.

What makes her work so fascinating is not just the difference between her writing and thinking in English and German as such, but rather the fact that through its bilingual character her writing turned into an ongoing process of *rewriting* and *working-through*. By comparing

61 Arendt, *Die verborgene Tradition*, 47.

62 Arendt, *The Jew as Pariah*, 68.

63 Arendt, *Denktagebuch*, 728f.

64 *Ibid.*, 744.

both works one gets the opportunity to follow the traces of a practice of writing being pressed and encouraged to permanently reflect the implications of language for thoughts and comprehension. The process of self-translation seemed to provide Arendt with a possibility to permanently differentiate, clarify, and find more precise descriptions as well as to comment and complement and, not seldom, invent new and unique meanings by referring to *the literalness* of words instead of using conventional terms or concepts.

Thus we come across condensed phrases that supplement the original text and function like monads within the whole of the argument. In her book on totalitarianism, for example, in the second paragraph of the chapter on “The Perplexities of the Right of Man” (often translated as “Die Aporien der Menschenrechte”), Arendt inserted the sentence: “Die Rolle der Menschenrechte in diesem Prozeß war, das zu garantieren, was politisch nicht garantierbar oder doch noch nie politisch garantiert worden war.”⁶⁵ (The role of the right of man was to guarantee that which politically could not be guaranteed or yet never had been guaranteed.) She thus adds a sentence that puts the aporetic structure of the rights of man in a nutshell. One also comes across tiny but meaningful insertions that amplify the whole context – for example, when in the chapter on “Unpredictability and the Power of Promise” of *The Human Condition* the discussion of “the inviolability of agreements and treaties”⁶⁶ is expanded in the German translation, *Vita Activa oder Vom tätigen Leben*, into a “*heilige Unverletzlichkeit von Verträgen und Abkommen*.”⁶⁷ Attributing unpredictability as holy or sacred also condenses a central argument of Arendt’s theory of contracts, namely the Biblical origin of the covenant as the historical predecessor of contract.

In other places one may find longer supplements, such as for example in her book *On Revolution*, where Arendt develops her critique of pity – or, more precisely, of the perversion of true compassion into ordinary pity, that is to say to an attitude of “being sorry without being touched in the flesh.”⁶⁸ The difference is easier to distinguish in English by use of the word compassion rather than pity than it is in the single German word *Mitleid*. To distinguish the two attitudes or affects linguistically,

65 Arendt, *Elemente und Ursprünge totalitärer Herrschaft*, 453.

66 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 243.

67 Arendt, Hannah, *Vita Activa oder Vom tätigen Leben*, Munich, Zurich 1981, 289. Emphasis mine, SW.

68 Arendt, *On Revolution*, 75.

Arendt writes in German of *Mit-Leiden*, whereas in English she goes back the Latin origin of compassion, using a literal translation and thus speaking of co-suffering. By rewriting and reworking the passage into German during the process of self-translation it has become twice as long as the original, thus enforcing the radical difference of a “bloß mitleidiges Bedauern [. . .] das wohl die Not der anderen sieht und sogar versteht, sie aber nicht eigentlich teilt, von ihr nicht ergriffen wird und die Distanz zu dem Objekt immer wahr,” in contrast to a “leidenschaftliche Betroffenheit von dem Leiden anderer” acuminating in the added statement that both attitudes should not even be considered as related phenomena.⁶⁹ And here I cite the whole passage both in the English original:

[. . .] “The Grand Inquisitor,” in which Dostoevski contrasts the mute compassion of Jesus with the eloquent pity of the Inquisitor. For compassion, to be stricken with the suffering of someone else as though it were contagious, and pity, to be sorry without being touched in the flesh, are not only not the same, they may not be related.⁷⁰

and the German self-translation:

[. . .] der “Großinquisitor” von Dostojewski, in dem das stumme wirkliche Mitleiden Jesu kontrastiert wird mit dem Schwall von Reden und Worten, in denen sich ein bloßes mitleidiges Bedauern kundtut, das wohl die Not der andern sieht und sogar versteht, sie aber nicht eigentliche teilt, von ihr nicht ergriffen wird und die Distanz zu dem Objekt immer wahr. Denn Mitleiden, die leidenschaftliche Betroffenheit von dem Leiden anderer, als sei es ansteckend, und mitleidiges Bedauern, also Mitleid in dem gewöhnlichen Wortsinn, das nicht eigentlich Leiden ist, sind nicht nur nicht dasselbe, sie dürfen nicht einmal verwandte Phänomene sein.⁷¹

These were just a few examples and varieties showing the creativity of the constant process of rewriting and working-through in Arendt’s practice of self-translation. As regards the role of language and the voices sounding through from the backstage of her mind, her bilingual writing can be described in terms of a metaphorical or poetic difference audible as an echo of literalness in theory – or as a condensation of the different facets of *personare* that are so significant for the genuine sound of Arendt’s writings.

69 Ibid.

70 Ibid.

71 Arendt, Hannah, *Über die Revolution*, 118.

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