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Thinking, Totalitarianism, and Tribunals: The Notion of Responsibility in Repressive Regimes

Abstract:

Hannah Arendt is one of the twentieth century's foremost thinkers on totalitarian regimes. For her, such a political development becomes possible particularly because people abrogate their faculty of thinking. Totalitarianism, in turn, breeds conformity, engenders an ethics of alienation. Moreover, language, too, loses its hermeneutical ability to conjure up other possible, alternative, imaginative scenarios, as the regime clamps down on the use of words and phrases, creating a rhetorically univocal echo chamber from which it becomes increasingly more difficult to escape. The observations of Stanislav Aseyev, a Ukrainian journalist, corroborates Arendt's reflections, underscoring her perennial relevance on this matter.

Keywords:

Hannah Arendt, Stanislav Aseyev, totalitarianism, thinking, autocracy, hermeneutics

In “Autocracy and War,” penned six years before the publication of his political novel *Under Western Eyes*, Joseph Conrad portrays Russia as an entity without a past or a clearly-defined future, an “ill-omened creation,” “a fantasy of a madman’s brain,” and a “figure out of a nightmare seated upon a monument of fear and oppression.”¹ Russian autocracy has “something inhuman” in it, which from the country’s very beginning has shown itself in its “atmosphere of despotism,” a curse that has “moulded its institutions, and ... drugged the national temperament into the apathy of a hopeless fatalism.”² Autocracy, moreover, contaminates ordinary Russians with its “half-mystical, insensate, fascinating assertion of purity and holiness.”³ Russia, therefore, is “and has been simply the negation of everything worth living ... a bottomless abyss that has swallowed up every hope of mercy, every aspiration towards personal dignity, towards freedom, towards knowledge; every ennobling desire of the heart, every redeeming whisper of conscience.”⁴ In his essay, Conrad tries to capture, for an early-twentieth century Western audience smitten with what it perceived as Russian mysticism, the alarming nature of its political character, disclosing its totalizing and paralyzing embrace of its citizens. In short, he reveals the indifference that autocracy spreads among human beings, rendering them nearly automatons, subhuman in their inability to engage in thoughtful dialogue with each other and the world. In this way, autocracy gives birth to a stillborn culture, a hermeneutic field of quantum immobility, which transmogrifies its citizens’ souls into mere specters that haunt its icy tundra.

Conrad’s *Under Western Eyes* bodies forth some of the insights he expresses in his essay, particularly autocracy’s effects on the inner life of ordinary (and perhaps not-so-ordinary) citizens. Such a political system creates an atmosphere of suspicion and paranoia, cutting off the bonds that unite humans *qua* humans. Karl Jaspers defines such bonds as metaphysical, as the “absolute solidarity with the human being as such – an indelible claim beyond morally meaningful duty.”⁵ Jaspers’s notion – that the claim of the other on me surpasses even the moral law – Emanuel Levinas defines as

1) Conrad, “Autocracy and War,” 39.

2) Ibid., 44.

3) Ibid.

4) Ibid., 45–46.

5) Jaspers, *The Question of German Guilt*, 65.

the other's face. As he puts it, "The way in which the other presents himself, exceeding *the idea of the other in me*, we here name face."⁶ I can never contain the entirety of the other; the other always has the capacity to surprise me, to transcend my expectations of his or her behavior. The opposite of this, an ethics of alienation – from others and even from oneself, dominates the autocratic climate.

Hannah Arendt explores similar themes in her writings, and she, too, is preoccupied by modern authoritarian regimes as she sees them embodied in the twin phenomena of Nazism and Stalinism. As it relates to Arendt, perhaps the most stunning claim Conrad makes comes in his "Author's Note," published several years after *Under Western Eyes* was first printed: "As to Nikita [one of the characters] ... What troubled me most in dealing with him was not his monstrosity but his banality... The most terrifying reflection ... is that all these people are not products of the exceptional but of the general – of the normality of their place, and time, and race."⁷ To my knowledge, there is no direct link between Conrad's use of the word in describing Nikita's immoral actions and Hannah Arendt's use of the "banality of evil" to describe what she witnessed in the Israeli courtroom standing in judgment over Adolf Eichmann. Nevertheless, the fact that two of the greatest thinkers of the twentieth century reached similar conclusions regarding heinous deeds only reinforce their reflections: totalitarian regimes do not rise to power through the imposition of a godlike will. On the contrary, citizens acquiesce, no matter in how small a way, to the tyrant's ascension as the head of state. As Margaret Canovan comments, "Totalitarianism as portrayed by Arendt was not a plague that had descended on humanity from some external source. It was self-inflicted, the outcome of human actions and the processes they set off, and part of the story she tells is a classical tale of ... the quest for total power [that] leads to destruction."⁸ For Arendt, then, such a political development becomes possible particularly because people abrogate their faculty of thinking. Totalitarianism, in turn, breeds conformity, bringing about the ethics of alienation Conrad explores in his novel. Moreover, language, too, loses its hermeneutical ability to conjure up other possible, alternative, imaginative scenarios, as the regime clamps down on the use

6) Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 50.

7) Conrad, *Under Western Eyes*, 316–17.

8) Canovan, "Arendt's theory of totalitarianism," 35.

of words and phrases, creating a rhetorically univocal echo chamber from which it becomes increasingly more difficult to escape.

Despite totalitarianism's being a new political phenomenon on the world stage, Arendt sees its seeds in historical factors. In her first comprehensive treatment on this matter, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, published in 1951, she sees the Declaration of the Rights of Man as an important stage in the rise of totalitarianism. The loss of religious and spiritual forces that link humans to God led to a re-grounding of human rights in a different authority, namely, Man, in order to guarantee individual freedoms. As she writes, "the consensus of opinion [in the nineteenth century] was that human rights had to be invoked whenever individuals needed protection against the new sovereignty of the state and the new arbitrariness of society."⁹ Confronted by a secular government that no longer appeared committed to protecting individuals from the abuse of power, a different entity needed to be found to guarantee that everyone's safety will be preserved. The paradox of looking to Man in general for this, though, is that "it reckoned with an 'abstract' human being who seemed to exist nowhere, for even savages lived in some kind of a social order."¹⁰ In this way, the Rights of Man became unenforceable "whenever people appeared who were no longer citizens of any sovereign state,"¹¹ the Jews being a prime example. Of course, as Nazism proved, any minority could be stripped of citizenship, which in the end renders people more vulnerable than ever. The world continues witnessing this kind of phenomenon, one contemporary example coming from the "independent states" in the Donbas region of Ukraine. Stanislav Aseyev, a journalist who continued living in what the separatists claim is now the Donetsk People's Republic (DPR), reflects in one of his dispatches entitled "Citizens Without Citizenship" on the issue of passports, of what it means to live in a so-called republic that can issue documents "no one [state] would recognize."¹² He continues, "With every passing day, the idea of a 'republic' becomes more and more ephemeral. And with every passing day, the impression grows that this is all a nihilistic banquet of the damned for the 'republican' elite, who control the lives

9) Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 369.

10) Ibid., 370.

11) Ibid., 371.

12) Aseyev, *In Isolation*, 139.

of all those who still live in this benighted land.”¹³ In other words, those living in the DPR are not citizens of any internationally-recognized government, which effectively renders them stateless. Such a hellscape deprives citizens of what Arendt calls action and opinion. Ultimately, humans in this situation have nowhere to go but back into nature,¹⁴ a *de facto* rights-less state.

Ironically, Arendt is confronted by the issue of statelessness in Eichmann’s case when she reports on his trial in 1962. She observes that Eichmann’s apprehension was problematic since the evidence strongly suggested that it was the state of Israel who commissioned his arrest. This was tantamount to a breach of jurisdiction, as it was a sovereign state acting against another sovereign state. The court argued, however, that any breach that occurred was “‘cured’ through the joint declaration of the two governments ... that they ‘resolved to view as settled the incident which was caused in the wake of the action of citizens of Israel which violated the basic rights of the State of Argentina.’”¹⁵ Argentina, however, Arendt is quick to point out, would not have been this obliging had Eichmann been an actual citizen and not one who had been living under an assumed identity on its territory. In other words, he was politically homeless, even though no one actively deprived him of his German citizenship; however, West Germany refused to extend protections that it normally would to its citizens living outside of its territory. As such, it was Eichmann’s “de facto statelessness ... that enabled the Jerusalem court to sit in judgment on him.”¹⁶ The irony of this did not escape Arendt, who comments that Eichmann “should have appreciated [this irony], for he knew from his own career that one could do as one pleased only with stateless people; the Jews had had to lose their nationality before they could be exterminated.”¹⁷ By depriving Jews of their citizenship, the German Reich consigned them to the periphery of humanity, humans in the same sense that a Beagle is a dog

13) Ibid., 139.

14) Arendt does not define, in this context, what she means by nature. However, seeing how she relies on the Aristotelian distinction between nature and *polis* and on his assertion that only beasts and gods live outside the *polis*, she presumably means that which stands in contrast to the *polis*. To be relegated to nature effectively consigns one to the private sphere only, to the violence of biological laws.

15) Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 239.

16) Ibid., 240.

17) Ibid., 240.

– part of some universal “human species” but who can nonetheless be treated as apart from it because no governmental body will step in to defend their particular rights. In other words, the Jews were pushed back into “nature,” according to Arendt, in much the same way that slaves in the pre-Civil War U.S. were “born” slaves: it is nature’s fault that they are the way they are.¹⁸ It is, to use Aristotle’s distinction, to make of them beasts (since one does not ordinarily go about wishing to eradicate deities).¹⁹

Relegating humans to nature all but ensures their political erasure, a natural consequence, as it were, of totalitarian regimes. As Arendt writes, “The paradox involved in the loss of human rights is that such loss coincides with the instant when a person becomes a human being in general – without a profession, without citizenship, without an opinion, without a deed by which to identify and specify himself.”²⁰ Action, for Arendt, is only possible in the public sphere; there, true freedom is achieved because human beings interact with one another as equals. To belong merely to nature is to fall back on one’s biological givenness, on one’s inequality. Such a “natural” status confers on the totalitarian state the ability to kill with impunity, to annihilate nature and those belonging to it altogether – especially nowadays, when technological advances have allowed us to subdue nature to the point of destroying it completely. Put differently, we will do to those whom we see as merely natural what we have already done to nature itself.

Totalitarian regimes do the opposite of what Arendt claims happens in civilized society, namely, eradicating any distinction between the public and the private. As she writes, the “whole sphere of the merely given [is] relegated to privative life in civilized society [because it] is a permanent threat to the public sphere.”²¹ Such regimes as the Nazi one promote the public sphere’s total control of the private sphere, overshadowing everything and paralyzing the normal processes of the biological life that are the essence of the private. Nature cannot and should not be overcome, though, but humans forget that “man is only the master, not the creator of the world.”²² It is

18) Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 383.

19) By beasts, Aristotle simply means non-human animals. Today, many would take issue with eradicating non-human animals.

20) Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 383.

21) *Ibid.*, 382.

22) *Ibid.*, 383.

no accident, then, that Eichmann directed that “births be banned and pregnancies interrupted among Jewish women.”²³ In the same vein, it should come as no surprise that, as CNBC reports, “According to a decree signed ... by President Vladimir Putin, the [Soviet-era] title [Mother Heroine] will be awarded to those who ‘birth and raise’ 10 Russian citizens, with a lump sum of 1 million Russian rubles (\$16,645) received when the 10th child turns one.”²⁴ Totalitarian governments attempt to take control of the life process itself, something that by its nature cannot and should not be subsumed under its sphere of influence.

Physical survival becomes the *modus operandi* in totalitarianism, with fear blanketing everything. As Aseyev writes, “Nor am I the only one who has become a virtual shadow in his own hometown, forced to hide my thoughts about the war: those who were once close to me have melted away with no less force and speed, disappearing with every day that this war continues.”²⁵ People choose to isolate themselves from others for fear of betrayal. Friendships, one of the most (if not the most) fundamental human connections, and freedom vanish alongside each other since people no longer feel able to express themselves or think for themselves. Once thought becomes policed, though, so does language, and human flourishing becomes impossible. As Arendt notes in “Personal Responsibility Under Dictatorship,” “Totalitarian society ... is indeed monolithic; all public manifestations, cultural, artistic, or learned, and all organizations, welfare and social services, even sports and entertaining, are ‘coordinated.’”²⁶ Art can no longer effect an encounter with a subject-matter that can address us as humans and demand that we change our lives, as the poet Rainer Maria Rilke writes in “Archaic Torso of Apollo.” Rather, as Aseyev observes of the cultural milieu in the DPR, “Any cultural events of the Soviet past are to be cultivated. Any cultural events in Donetsk that are funded by the local budget – say, an art or photography exhibit – must reflect the ‘heroism’ of Soviet soldiers and workers, and the ‘greatness’

23) Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 244.

24) See “Russia is offering a hero’s medal and \$16,000 to women who have 10 kids” for the full article. <https://www.cnbc.com/2022/08/18/russia-offers-mother-heroine-medal-and-16800-for-having-10-children.html>. Accessed December 2, 2023.

25) Aseyev, *In Isolation*, 12.

26) Arendt, “Personal Responsibility Under Dictatorship,” 33.

of Russian history.”²⁷ Totalitarianism cannot tolerate any message that it perceives to be against its ideology. Painters, sculptors, poets, and photographers, among others, cannot remain free to practice their artistic genius because such freedom can inspire the desire for freedom in others. More importantly, though, artists remind people that fear does not and should not have the ultimate word in human affairs, unmasking totalitarianism’s most potent weapon. This is why totalitarianism seeks to control this human impulse, since it cannot totally annihilate it.

Totalitarianism goes farther than any other tyrannical ancient regime in its doubling down on those it dubs as enemies – everyone becomes one, including regular citizens. As Richard J. Bernstein explains, “What troubled Arendt was the fact that totalitarianism went beyond [humanly understandable feelings]. Bestiality, *ressentiment*, sadism, humiliation have a long history – yet they are still distinctively *human* categories. But something new and different arose with totalitarianism, and was epitomized in the concentration and death camps.”²⁸ Totalitarianism defies simple categorization. We cannot assume that we fully understand its mechanisms. It is especially dangerous because it commits and legalizes mass murder not in the name of something, but because its essence is death, preying on and discriminating against the most vulnerable among the population. It exterminates people indiscriminately in a paroxysm of hate.

Despite what appears to be systematic destruction, totalitarian violence proceeds according to its own logic, which, for Arendt, amounts to saying it has no human logic at all. As Canovan notes, Arendt does not present totalitarianism as a rigid, frozen body of water, but as a “a shapeless, hectic maelstrom of permanent revolution and endless expansion, quite unaffected by utilitarian concerns. Its central institution is not the civil service or the army but the secret police, and even they have a function that defies comprehension in terms of ordinary common sense.”²⁹ To proceed in secret reveals the need to control through widespread fear and paranoia. Propaganda is indispensable in such an environment, and regular language loses its meaning. Aseyev bears witness to this: “From the very beginning, the notions of ‘friend’ and ‘foe’ in the Donbas has made

27) Aseyev, *In Isolation*, 133.

28) Bernstein, *Radical Evil*, 216.

29) Canovan, “Arendt’s theory of totalitarianism,” 29.

it impossible to follow the first principle of war: to distinguish who is ‘us’ and who is ‘them.’”³⁰ Inability to find *some* semblance of a correspondence between language and events, some definition upon which all can agree, sows mass confusion among people. Totalitarianism manipulates language and hence reality, making it ever more difficult to disentangle oneself from the web of corruption, to breathe again something other than the putrid air of fear and decay. The distortion of reality that totalitarianism brings about is in tune with Conrad’s remarks, quoted earlier, about Russian autocracy, which kills every noble desire of the heart, mind, and soul of the human being. Nothing good can survive for long in such a suffocating landscape.

Totalitarianism ultimately immobilizes the faculty of thinking, which, for Arendt, is one of the distinguishing features of human beings. For her, thinking never ends in ideology of any kind or in historically-transcendent repeatable utterances applicable to all times and all places. Such moral (or otherwise) maxims only devolve into clichés. As Bernstein writes in “Arendt on thinking,” Arendt shows “one of the most bitter lessons of totalitarianism – the ease with which habits, customs, and mores could be transformed.”³¹ Totalitarianism easily replaces our moral slogans with others, cutting off the supply of oxygen to our brain. It is no accident that Eichmann himself insisted that he was guilty only of “aiding and abetting,” that his “guilt came from his obedience, and obedience is praised as a virtue.”³² Obedience for obedience’s sake, however, is a mark of a tyranny. Thoughtlessness, to put it differently, is the feature *par excellence* of such regimes. In a similar vein, Aseyev observes of the people of Donetsk, “The yearning for a ‘strong hand,’ the rejection of basic democratic rules and norms, unmitigated xenophobia, both in politics and in the community, a general poisoning of minds with the idea and fear of ‘fascism’ – this is what makes it possible for coal miners to keep going down into the ground.”³³ Regular people – “coal miners” – in this way, become deformed, capable of tolerating and eventually even participating in monstrous evil deeds. It is not just “coal miners,” though, who become sucked into the vortex of totalitarianism. Canovan argues that the “paradox

30) Aseyev, *In Isolation*, 22.

31) Bernstein, “Arendt on thinking,” 383.

32) Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 247.

33) Aseyev, *In Isolation*, 58.

of totalitarian novelty was that it represented an assault on that very ability to act and think as a unique individual... . Ideology complements terror by eliminating the capacity for individual thought and experience *among the executioners themselves*, binding them into the unified movement of destruction.”³⁴ Totalitarianism incapacitates even those in the higher echelons of the administration. Eventually, these learn to rationalize their behavior, forgetting that no Führer is God and that no human being is owed unconditional obedience.

At this juncture, it is important to emphasize how much Arendt departs from the tradition of discourse surrounding the nature of evil. Arendt concludes her book on Eichmann’s trial by stating, “It was as though in those last minutes he was summing up the lesson that this long course in human wickedness had taught us – the lesson of the fearsome, word-and-thought-defying *banality of evil*.”³⁵ As Seyla Benhabib comments, “In using the phrase the ‘banality of evil’ and in explaining the moral quality of Eichmann’s deeds not in terms of the monstrous or demonic nature of the doer, Arendt became aware of going counter to the tradition, which saw evil in metaphysical terms as ultimate depravity, corruption, or sinfulness.”³⁶ Arendt contends we should no longer appeal to a deity to make sense of the human mess in which we find ourselves. Rather, it is up to us to attempt to grapple with the new political situations that confront us without recourse to a god. To put it differently, by denying metaphysics a direct role in human affairs, Arendt places an immense burden on us: we can never take a break, as it were, from thinking.

Arendt finds it difficult to come up with a positive, once-and-for-all definition for thinking. Reflecting on her use of her famous phrase in a lecture she gave in 1971, “Thinking and Moral Considerations,” Arendt contends that “the only specific characteristic one could detect [in Eichmann] ... was something entirely negative: it was not stupidity but a curious, quite authentic inability to think.”³⁷ Eichmann’s use of platitudes – moral or otherwise – to exculpate himself reveals, in essence, precisely what Arendt does *not* have in mind when she speaks of thinking: it is not a faculty that

34) Canovan, “Arendt’s theory of totalitarianism,” 27, emphasis added.

35) Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 252.

36) Benhabib, “Arendt’s *Eichmann in Jerusalem*,” 75.

37) Arendt, “Thinking and Moral Considerations,” 417.

creates a morally, politically, or metaphysically unassailable edifice. As a matter of fact, it does not construct anything. The most powerful aspect about thinking, then, lies in its deconstructive abilities. In her words, “[T]hinking’s chief characteristic is that it disrupts all doing, all ordinary activities, no matter what they happen to be.”³⁸ In this way, “thinking is resultless by nature.”³⁹ We can only approach thinking apophatically, then, speaking of what it is not, not of what it is. A positive definition, it seems, can lead down the path to ideology, to facile answers to difficult problems.

Thinking, as Arendt presents it, becomes one of our best defenses against totalitarianism. As Bernstein comments, “Like Socrates’ daimon, thinking may not tell us what we ought to do, but it may prevent us from tolerating or becoming indifferent to evil deeds.”⁴⁰ Understood in this way, thinking becomes an inner dialogue, a “two-in-one.”⁴¹ As David R. Villa adds, “It is this dialogue that Socrates tried to incite, and that Arendt traces back to the internal plurality of consciousness itself. Only those who have cultivated their inner plurality through the activity of thinking can be said to have truly awakened the voice of conscience.”⁴² Arendt uses Socrates as an example of someone who is in constant dialogue with himself, but perhaps Socrates learned it from Odysseus, whom Homer portrays time and again as a man who debates within himself as to the correct course of action. Crucially, Odysseus always thinks of two possible paths he could take when faced with a situation, and each time it is not possible to predict which he will take. Odysseus, in other words, embodies Arendt’s portrait of the thinking person. Furthermore, it is this dialogue one has with oneself that arouses conscience, revealing it not as an *a priori* faculty implanted by God, but one that is in a person’s power to activate. Conscience, therefore, is the opposite of the automatism that totalitarianism promulgates.

In the Arendtian cosmos, thinking is also closely connected to the faculty of judgment. As Douglas Klusmeyer states, “[T]he activity of thinking and the promptings of conscience ... could play an important role in enabling individuals to abstain

38) Ibid., 423.

39) Ibid., 426.

40) Bernstein, “Arendt on thinking,” 285.

41) Arendt, “Thinking and Moral Considerations,” 442.

42) Villa, “The Banality of Philosophy,” 180.

from doing evil by enhancing their capacity for judgment.”⁴³ Once again, because thinking does not deal in absolutes, Klusmeyer is correct in using the subjunctive mood. This grammatical mood arguably best reveals the essence of thinking: if done correctly, it could help us in identifying a totalitarian regime, should we find ourselves in such a milieu. Maurizio Passerin d’Entrèves expands on what is at stake in Arendt’s view of judgment. In “Arendt’s theory of judgment,” he writes,

For Arendt ... the enormity and unprecedentedness of totalitarianism [has] not destroyed, strictly speaking, our ability to judge; rather, [it has] destroyed our accepted standards of judgment and our conventional categories of interpretation and assessment, be they moral or political. And in this situation the only recourse is to appeal to the imagination, which allows us to view things in their proper perspective and to judge them without the benefit of a pre-given rule or universal.⁴⁴

Totalitarianism’s newness on the political world stage requires that we reevaluate the standards by which we judge, as Arendt finds them wanting in correctly assessing it. Interestingly, d’Entrèves points out the vital role the imagination plays in such an endeavor, as it is able to escape the ossified confines of the inherited tradition. Aseyev corroborates this conclusion: “In the end, the fact is that the majority of those Donbas residents who don’t agree with the DPR and ‘Novorossia’ are the students, the teaching staff at post-secondary institutions, and artists: in short, the intelligentsia, which was not crushed by heavy manual labor and which has managed to preserve its capacity for independent thinking.”⁴⁵ Ultimately, thinking works hand-in-hand with art, language, and hermeneutics – these are the tools that oppressive governments, no matter how hard they try, can never fully eradicate. A fully-formed, holistic, and wholesome imagination informs thinking about how to reinterpret creatively the tradition and push beyond its borders, so to speak. Like the ever-expanding universe, it creates space as it stretches onward and outward.

43) Klusmeyer, “Beyond Tragedy,” 345.

44) d’Entrèves, “Arendt’s theory of judgment,” 247.

45) Aseyev, *In Isolation*, 54.

In this light, thinking protects humans from the dangers of the abstraction – of easily categorizing people and forgetting to treat them as individuals – that totalitarianism encourages. The Nazis, for instance, fashioned an abstractness in their propaganda – the Jews – othering an entire people and forgetting that the Jews are also individuals. This type of indoctrination is hard to break: unsurprisingly, Eichmann, on hearing the court's verdict, expressed his disappointment that "the court had not believed him, though he had always done his best to tell the truth. The court did not understand him: he had never been a Jew-hater, and he had never willed the murder of human beings."⁴⁶ In his own words, "I am not the monster I am made out to be... I am the victim of a fallacy."⁴⁷ To Eichmann, Jews were not human beings, so in his mind he never assisted the regime in killing humans. Arguably, then, one of the most dangerous powers that human beings have is the power of abstraction. As with anything great, it can indeed yield many beautiful findings, such as mathematics or black holes. In the realm of human affairs, however, abstraction can be – quite literally – deadly, the opposite of the Levinasian ethical encounter with another's face. The field of hermeneutics, moreover, constantly makes us aware that interpretation is more of an art than a science in the strict sense. It is perhaps why Hans-Georg Gadamer insists that the most experienced man is the least ideological man because he always approaches the subject-matter as if for the first time. Such a humble posture ensures that, while we can make some statements about populations as a whole, at the level of the individual, there is a lot of room for variation. Similarly, Aseyev, too, advises against fatuous classifications, linking them "with a lingering Soviet mentality that is nothing more than a very longstanding tradition of giving up responsibility for everything to a single individual, instead of deciding things for oneself."⁴⁸ Simply put, thinking can safeguard humans from their worst proclivities. Despite the grim image she paints, then, Arendt offers some glimmer of hope that humans are not necessarily doomed to total destruction. The task is arduous – more so than Dante's is as he goes up Mount Purgatory – but, just as he does, we may find, in the end, that it leads to self-rule.

46) Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 247.

47) *Ibid.*, 248.

48) Aseyev, *In Isolation*, 54.

Arendt essentially portrays totalitarianism as what Louise Cowan terms infernal comedy. In her introduction to *The Terrain of Comedy*, Cowan describes infernal comedy as “a state in which grace is utterly absent ... The community has accepted its fallen condition and cynically attributes its corruption to ‘the way of the world.’ Love cannot dwell in such society; everyone is fundamentally alone ... None of the virtues is present: only a sinister ‘double’ of each prevails.”⁴⁹ With love absent, cynicism and irony prevail over all sorts of other discourse in this kind of terrain. Truth can find no grounding here, for petrified hearts and minds dominate. If we can accept, though, that the hellish landscape of totalitarianism is not otherworldly in a religious sense, that the enemy is not the devil or some other imaginary being out of Dante’s *Inferno*, but an image of the worst destruction humanity is capable of, then there is hope for human institutions. Bringing such criminals as Adolf Eichmann to justice is not a wasted effort. As Arendt puts it, “[I]n a courtroom there is no system on trial, no History or historical trend, no ism, anti-Semitism for instance, but a person, and if the defendant happens to be a functionary, he stands accused precisely because even a functionary is still a human being, and it is in this capacity that he stands trial.”⁵⁰ If human hands perpetrate evil, then human hands must be held accountable. Refusing to judge wrongdoers because their deeds seem demonic in their scope is yet another abstraction, yet another form of evading thinking.

Our personal responsibility, in this scenario, becomes clearer. As Iris Marion Young suggests in *Responsibility for Justice*,

The imperative of political responsibility consists in watching these [human] institutions, monitoring their effects to make sure that they are not grossly harmful, and maintaining organized public spaces where such watching and monitoring can occur and citizens can speak publicly and support one another in their efforts to prevent suffering. To the extent that we fail in this, we fail in our responsibility, even though we have committed no crime and should not be blamed.⁵¹

49) Cowan, “Introduction,” 11.

50) Arendt, “Personal Responsibility Under Dictatorship,” 30.

51) Young, *Responsibility for Justice*, 88.

Responsible citizenship requires constant vigilance – over ourselves and over the human institutions we set up or inherited. We can never abdicate the role we play in politics. As Arendt reminds us, “[A] totalitarian system can be overthrown only from within ... unless, of course, it is defeated in war.”⁵² We can never divorce Arendt’s political thought, however, from her literary sensibility. As J. Peter Euben observes, her “discussions of politics and action are suffused by the language and imagery of theater. She talks of performance and audiences, of those who play a part and those spectators who see the entire play, and of spaces of appearance as stages upon which virtuosi speak and act in compelling and revealing ways.”⁵³ In other words, imagination, despite Arendt’s lack of sustained consideration of literature, is never far from her meaning. It is art – whether literature, poetry, music, sculpture, paintings, or something else – that moves our inner selves and that loosens totalitarianism’s hermeneutical chokehold.

Imagination is intimately connected to language and its ability both to reveal and to hide. In turn, by making us aware of hidden meanings, poetic language in particular can play a significant role in bringing about the demise of totalitarianism from “within.” As Hans-Georg Gadamer argues in “Boundaries of Language,” “The poets, especially, are the ones who make use of the flexibility of the linguistic gamut beyond rules, beyond conventions, and who yet know how to bring the unsaid to speak within the possibilities that language itself offers.”⁵⁴ The poet pushes “beyond rules” and “beyond conventions” for the sake of “the unsaid,” which is part and parcel of language as a medium: it conceals and reveals, it says and unsays because the subject-matter with which it deals, if it is truly a hermeneutical event, is greater than any human being in its depth and breadth. Put differently, one can never assume one understands everything after one reading of William Faulkner’s *Light in August*, for instance. There is always an excess that language can only approach indirectly, via metaphor or synecdoche. The English Romantic poet John Keats captures the meaning of this indirect route. In a letter to his brothers, George and Tom Keats, dated December 1817, he writes, “[A]t once it struck me, what quality went to form

52) Arendt, “Personal Responsibility Under Dictatorship,” 34.

53) Euben, “Arendt’s Hellenism,” 152.

54) Gadamer, “Boundaries of Language,” 12–13.

a Man of Achievement especially in Literature & which Shakespeare possessed so enormously—I mean *Negative Capability*, that is when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason.”⁵⁵ Logic and science alone are poor guides in the quest for truth in poetry. Dissecting reality to the smallest particle, seeking for experimental repeatability – this is akin to reducing poetic knowledge to a corpse, on which a medical examiner can then perform his postmortem autopsy. To avoid this, the poet – and by extension all of us, if we wish to escape the facile thinking of totalitarian propaganda – must learn to dwell with the questions, to let the objects he encounters question him, to remain attuned to a different substratum of reality. He must do the opposite of William Wordsworth’s indictment in “The Tables Turned”: “We murder to dissect.”⁵⁶ It is not that logic and science do not have a place in human knowledge – they do – but they are not the primary tools, so to speak, of the poet. On the contrary, the poet proceeds via indirection, revealing that a subject-matter never fully discloses itself to the scrutinizing gaze that seeks only to dissect and refuses to be transformed. Metaphor, on the other hand, respects the complex integrity of the object. Working through metaphor and analogy, then, the poetic imagination re-presents the object in language in a way that does not lead to our thinking that we have conquered it or fully mapped out its reality. In other words, we deal with a live body, as it were, when we engage with a poem – and by extension any artwork.

Metaphoric language ultimately discloses that reality is dialogical. Only when we are open to the other’s presence is dialogue possible, which leads to our recognizing that an artwork ultimately questions us – not the other way around. As Helen Vendler puts it in her reflections on John Keats’s odes, “The self-complete world of the work of art exerts a force drawing us to a pathos not our own, not visibly reflecting our own immediate experience.”⁵⁷ Only when not reduced to our own personal experience can the subject-matter interrogate us. Furthermore, because language both hides and discloses, each retelling of a story, each new engagement with a poem, each viewing of an artwork, will yield new and oftentimes surprising

55) Keats, *The Complete Poems and Selected Works*, 492.

56) Wordsworth, *The Major Works*, 131.

57) Vendler, *The Odes of John Keats*, 122.

insights. If one assumes, for instance, that one has already read a poem and therefore “knows” it in some meaningful, absolute, once-and-for-all way, it is usually a sign that rigidity has set it, that one has closed off the imaginative avenues to wisdom. It is a sign that Keats’s negative capability, that Arendt’s thinking has been replaced by a Hegelian master-slave dialectic that seeks to dominate reality and give rise to a monological story – arguably the feature *par excellence* of totalitarian propaganda. In other words, the polyphonic register of human existence would be lost. Art, poetry, metaphor, the imagination: these may be the only antidote to totalitarianism and the propaganda on which it relies and which it uses to clamp down on the process of meaning-making itself: they offer the possibility – not certainty – of finding and reassembling the shards of truth lying on the ground of propagandistic destruction into a mirror capable of reflecting love.

Arendt’s considerations of some of the hardest political problems that faced the twentieth century remain as pertinent today as they were when she first wrote them. Arguably, though, her best legacy is the personal example she set for posterity of how one ought to engage creatively with tradition in a way that responds to new phenomena – political or otherwise. In no way did she set out to lay down an ideology. Rather, for her, the characteristic *par excellence* of human communities is novelty: one must never assume that human beings cannot surprise. On the contrary, a close study of human affairs teaches us that this is precisely what they do. Hope, in this way, becomes possible – not inevitable, but possible – because other marvels, such as forgiveness, are also possible. As Aseyev records in one of his dispatches written as a letter to the Russians, “[F]orgiveness is no less radical than war itself. If we manage to stop the war today, it is likely that we will find those who are able to forgive tomorrow. Therein lies my extremism, and I am calling on the Russians to make the same kind of radical choice.”⁵⁸ Aseyev expresses a sentiment that Arendt herself reckoned with in her writings. It is because of the human capacity to do good – despite all the suffering and misery endured, and despite the horrendous evil we can put into motion – that we have cause for hope. And while our portion in this world is charity, theologically speaking, it is thinking, politically speaking.

58) Aseyev, *In Isolation*, 86.

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