

DOI:10.14394/eidos.jpc.2024.0018

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When “Things Fall Apart”: Thinking Through Absurdity with Arendt and Aseyev

Abstract:

Hannah Arendt notably remarked that thinking, understood as the non-conclusive inner dialogue of “me” with “myself,” is most indispensable in those historical moments when “things fall apart.” War often occasions such moments, not just because of the moral and political turmoil that accompanies it or the physical damage it inflicts upon people and their environments, but also because of its absurdity; this latter feature, the absurdity of war, is captured by Stanislav Aseyev, a Donetsk-born Ukrainian writer, in his books *In Isolation: Dispatches from Occupied Donbas* and *The Torture Camp on Paradise Street*. In this essay, I argue that Aseyev’s reflections on Russian occupation, imprisonment, and torture demonstrate both the special value of Arendt’s “thinking” for those enduring war and violence and reveal a pre-moral-political capacity of “thinking” latent but never explicit in Arendt’s work: the power to cope with the absurd qua absurd.

Keywords:

thinking, Arendt, absurdity, Aseyev, Ukraine, war

Simplicity ends where the checkpoint begins.

—Stanislav Aseyev

The ongoing Russo-Ukrainian War began not with Putin's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February of 2022 but eight years prior, in the early months of 2014. That time marks not just Russia's annexation of Crimea, but the start of a Russian-backed separatist movement in the Donbas region of Ukraine which proclaimed the so-called new and independent Donetsk People's Republic (DPR) and Luhansk People's Republic (LPR). War, with all its chaos and conflict, ensued in the Donbas between Ukraine and these Russian-backed separatists. Let this suffice as the backdrop to my subject matter. This is not the proper place for, nor am I able to trace in so short a space, the history and significance of this conflict as it expanded beyond the Donbas; my focus here is not on the war as such, but on one man's experience of it.

Hannah Arendt remarks, in the conclusion of her 1971 lecture "Thinking and Moral Considerations," that the political and moral value of the act of thinking (qua thinking) "comes out only in those rare moments in history when 'things fall apart; the centre cannot hold'," that "at these moments ... when everybody is swept away unthinkingly by what everybody else does and believes in, those who think are drawn out of hiding because their refusal to join ... becomes a kind of action."¹ The war, which began in the Donbas in 2014, is certainly such a moment; and it is my assertion that Stanislav Aseyev, a Donetsk-native writer and journalist, is precisely one "who think[s]." Aseyev was a resident of Donetsk when the war broke out and continued to live there until being arrested by Russian forces in 2017, following which he was imprisoned and tortured for over two years; up until his arrest, he maintained a written collection of reflections on his home surroundings, later published as *In Isolation: Dispatches from Occupied Donbas*. I argue that these reflections both demonstrate the special value of Arendt's "thinking" for those enduring war and violence and reveal a pre-moral-political capacity of "thinking" latent but never explicit in Arendt's work.

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1) Arendt, "Thinking and Moral Considerations," 445–46. Arendt is quoting here from William Butler Yeats' "The Second Coming."

“Thinking and Moral Considerations” intimates another, “relentlessly abstract” work of hers: *The Life of the Mind*² – the first volume of which is devoted to thinking.³ The two works are consistent with one another, though in *The Life of the Mind* Arendt provides greater context and detail for notions about thinking. In both, Arendt characterizes thinking as a private activity of the individual person withdrawn from the world of senses, which never reaches static nor satisfactory conclusions and must thereby be ever renewed. Formally, thinking is “the soundless dialogue between me and myself.” Thinking, in this sense, is the actualization of the dual identity (the “I am I”) of consciousness (LM, vol. 1, 179–93).⁴ Arendt maintains the Kantian distinction between reason [*Vernunft*] and intellect [*Verstand*], wherein thinking is a faculty of reason and knowing (for example) is a faculty of the intellect; she draws the distinction further, however, in her delineation of the respective objects of thinking and knowing. Whereas the intellect seeks truth (chiefly, to know what is given to the senses), reason seeks meaning. “[To] put it in a nutshell: *The need of reason is not inspired by the quest for truth but by the quest for meaning. And truth and meaning are not the same*” (LM, vol. 1, 15; see also, 57–65). Neither does thinking seek any kind of practical end, though the act may prove beneficial to practical endeavors; thinking cannot directly seek what to do, since Arendt holds that “in our world there is no clearer or more radical opposition than that between thinking and doing” (Ibid., 71).⁵ Thinking, then, is not bounded by what is knowable or practicable; rather, we “can think, that is, speculate meaningfully, about the unknown and the unknowable” (LM, vol. 1, 71) and in the act of thinking can “ask unanswerable questions” (Ibid., 62). From these formal facets of thinking follow what is perhaps its most recognizable characteristic.

Because thinking consists in a meaning-seeking inner dialogue between me and myself, encompassing even the most unknowable matters and unanswerable questions, it never rests satisfied with one or another conclusion. Thinking “subjects everything it gets hold of to doubt”; as such, even if it does arrive at a conclusion,

2) Cited parenthetically as LM.

3) Young-Bruehl, “Reflections on *Life of the Mind*,” 360.

4) What Arendt calls consciousness here is called self-consciousness by others (e.g., Hegel). See also, Arendt, “Thinking and Moral Considerations,” 441–42.

5) This sharp division has drawn much attention from Arendt’s critics and defenders alike: cf. Villa, *Politics, Philosophy, Terror*.

it will soon turn its questioning upon that conclusion, dismantling it in its process (LM, vol. 1, 53). As Arendt points out, “it was thought – Descartes’ reflection on the *meaning* of certain scientific discoveries – that destroyed his common-sense trust in reality, and his error was to hope he could overcome his doubt by ... concentrating only on the thinking activity itself” (ibid.). Thinking cannot even be contented by the insights of philosophers; it is only satisfied through the act itself, and only through a present renewal of the act as “the thoughts I had yesterday will satisfy this need today only to the extent that I want and am able to think them anew” (ibid., 88). Thinking is thereby “self-destructive” in the sense that “like Penelope’s web ... it undoes every morning what it had finished the night before” (ibid.).⁶ In keeping with this aspect of her account, I will distinguish Arendt’s “thinking” from other philosophical and colloquial accounts of thinking by calling it “intransitive thinking.” Like “intransitive writing” (e.g., diary accounts, certain poetry, etc.), intransitive thinking finds its purpose not in transmitting some information or causing some effect upon an external party but rather in the very act itself. That is not to say that intransitive thinking does not have consequences beyond the time and place of its performance – these consequences, however, are secondary to the action, as a byproduct of sorts. I have here compiled but a scaffolding account of intransitive thinking; it will suffice, however, as a foundation upon which to consider thinking through Aseyev’s eyes.



In February of 2015, at a time when so many Ukrainians were emigrating from Donetsk for their safety, Aseyev explained his decision to stay as a step toward “a real civic movement of people with local roots, represented by thousands of those who do not accept the ‘land of the DPR,’ and who are prepared to gather on the central square of Donetsk” (IS, 38).⁷ The movement was the only thing, he said, which could radically change the situation at hand. This attention to the need for action and insight into its potential efficacy is a common thread throughout Aseyev’s writings in *In Isolation*. The entire collection of reflections, spanning from January 2015 to May 2017, might

6) See also, Arendt, “Thinking and Moral Considerations,” 425.

7) Aseyev, *In Isolation* hereafter cited parenthetically as IS.

be seen as an attempt to render answers to the question: What is stopping such a “civic movement?” What keeps so many from resisting the separatist movement with all they have got? Aseyev identifies various obstacles, both internal and external to the citizens of the Donetsk region – which guide us back to Arendt and thinking.

Aseyev often seems to identify the root problem in his fellow citizens’ response to the uprising as a mental one, caused and exacerbated by both internal (i.e., mental, spiritual, etc.) and external (i.e., sensual) aspects of their current circumstances. “First and foremost, we lost the battle in our minds, when we followed a tactic of silence at one point or chose not to attend a rally at another point ... only a few people here can honestly say, ‘I did everything I could back then’” (Ibid., 180). Of course, just because this battle is a mental one does not necessarily mean it is one to be won or lost by intransitive thinking. Other of Aseyev’s reflections, however, do suggest that Arendtian, intransitive thinking is at least part of the battle. This becomes especially clear when he remarks that “it is ... obvious that there are not enough people here like me, people who feel the secret urge either to act to free Ukraine or who blame themselves for whatever happens” (Ibid., 127). The link between these observations and thinking lies in the connection between intransitive thinking, personal responsibility, and action.

This connection (or rather, disconnection) between thinking and doing has long been a point of frustration for many Arendt scholars. Arendt always insisted on a stark division between thought and action, which can cause difficulties in understanding her claims of thinking’s effect on action.⁸ The effect, always indirect, occurs by two main routes: 1) by creating the byproduct of conscience and 2) by clearing the space for judging. Thinking, as the actualization of the “I am I” of consciousness in the inner dialogue between me and myself, encourages (but does not necessarily cause) an active conscience. For, the scrutiny inflicted by the thinking dialogue is not limited to objects outside the dialogue partners; one must, therefore, take care that “the two [me and myself] who carry on the thinking dialogue be in good shape, that the partners be friends” lest the scrutiny turn “me” against “myself.” In effect, this means that those in the habit of thinking are more likely to “think twice,” as it were, before acting, and ask: can I live with myself if I do this? The problem with

8) Cf. Villa, *Politics, Philosophy, Terror*, 87–106.

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

this, of course, is that conscience does not guarantee moral action; a murderer might be perfectly content to live with a murderer, her “me” and “myself” no less friends because of her murderous actions.¹⁰ That said, Arendt’s point does stand that “he who does not know the intercourse between me and myself (in which we examine what we say and what we do) will not mind contradicting himself, and this means he will never be able to give account of what he says or does.”¹¹ Aseyev points to a deficiency of this sort, a deficiency in personal accountability – and identifying its cause in the mind. Too many people, in his eyes, either lack the acute sense of their roles in “whatever happens” which would be gained in the inner dialogue of thinking or fail to hold themselves to their own standards of doing “everything I could back then” (thereby contradicting themselves). This becomes perhaps most readily apparent in Aseyev’s recounting of his commonplace exchanges with one “fan of separatism” who he has known since birth: “every time I see him, this man tries to justify why he’s still on the other side – even as he drifts further and further away from the separatist narrative” (IS, 154). This man cannot give a sound account consistent with his actions, just as one who evades intransitive thinking could not. A deficiency in intransitive thinking may well be at the core of what Aseyev identifies as Donetsk’s problems; however, this deficiency may itself be caused by an inveterate obstacle.

For the Donbas, a region still haunted by its Soviet past, this obstacle rests deep in its cultural spirit. Aseyev hints at this in a chilling passage:

For as long as I can remember, I’ve always heard, “We don’t make the decisions.” All we could do was think about the price of butter or how expensive potatoes had become, while the powers-that-be had already decided everything for us. My friends, have you never stopped to think why this is so, why people whose strength of character and will enables them to descend half a mile below the surface of the earth while under artillery fire are so indifferent and apathetic to their own fate? Don’t rush to the answer. (Ibid., 46)

10) Though Arendt does not discuss this problem with relation to conscience, she does seem cognizant of the underlying issue. Compare Arendt, “Thinking and Moral Considerations,” 437–38.

11) Ibid., 444–45.

He gives his own answer a few pages later: “The thing is that we were taught to look at the world with a calculator... . This is how it used to be, and this is how things still are now; it’s not worth thinking about having anything more, or thinking about the future. ‘The Donbas is at work’ is the phrase that will answer any question” (Ibid., 48–49). This problem – narratives passed down from a totalitarian past – is unique in that intransitive thinking is both what could eliminate it and what it seeks to suppress; these narratives are the enemy of, not just an impediment to, thinking. These narratives are the kind of thing that can be overthrown by intransitive thinking on account of its second indirect connection to acting. By this other route to action, the “liberating effect” of thinking gives rise to judging, which in turn actualizes thinking in the world of appearances as “the ability to tell right from wrong, beautiful from ugly.”¹² Thinking functions here in a “largely negative fashion,” ridding us of the prejudices (e.g., fixed habits of thought, ossified norms, etc.) that prevent authentic knowing, judging, and acting.¹³ In this way, “it is good for guidance – not legislation, but guidance ... [without it,] other forms of guidance or legislation *can* take over: truth, necessity, the law, or even the Führer’s will.”¹⁴ Thinking does not, directly or indirectly, prescribe action – it but indirectly prevents what others may prescribe. As Villa puts it, thinking and judging taken together (that is, speculating on the meanings of things and arriving at actionable conclusions that this or that thing is good or bad, beautiful, or ugly), “prepare us, as individuals and citizens, to say no to policies or narratives which present themselves as necessary, unquestionable, irresistible.”¹⁵ Intransitive thinking, leading the way to judging, enables people to say no to the unquestioned Soviet narratives encapsulated in the maxims “We don’t make the decisions” and “The Donbas is at work.” However, these narratives themselves present a defense against intransitive thinking, as they create – indeed, are often designed to create – mental habits deleterious to intransitive thinking.

In her own work, Arendt recognizes this aspect as a special characteristic of these kinds of narratives. Villa sums up Arendt’s stance quite well: “This strict deduc-

12) Arendt, “Thinking and Moral Considerations,” 446.

13) Villa, *Politics, Philosophy, Terror*, 89.

14) Young-Bruehl, “Reflections on *Life of the Mind*,” 361.

15) Villa, *Politics, Philosophy, Terror*, 90.

tion of action from ideologically given premises [as found in totalitarian regimes] eliminates the need for judgment, and, as a habit of the mind, shuts down the space for thinking.”¹⁶ This insight accords with Aseyev’s remarks on Donetsk’s mental habits. As Aseyev observes, “this way of thinking [of those in the Donbas] has always coincided with their way of life and with a lingering Soviet mentality that is nothing more than a very longstanding tradition of giving responsibility for everything to a single individual, instead of deciding things for oneself” (IS, 54). It is incredibly difficult to break out of this mindset once it has set in, as the norms which result from it become foundational to one’s everyday life; to question and dismantle these norms which guide your everyday action, as would occur in intransitive thinking, would be to dismantle your own identity. Loss of identity is not the only obstacle to intransitive thinking in a context such as Donetsk; there are others, which become especially intensified amidst conflict and war.¹⁷ Nevertheless, such a feat is possible – Aseyev and the many others who have resisted this “Soviet mentality” are proof of that. Aseyev is only able to make these observations and write these reflections because he has done the pre-work of thinking, has torn down the “ideologically given premises” in the relentless meaning-seeking process of intransitive thinking. The ability to act in good conscience and resist the power of totalitarian dogmatism are not the only fruits of intransitive thinking, however. I would like to consider another, which Arendt herself never remarked on but which may be most apposite for those enduring first-hand the distinctive hardships of war: the ability to cope with absurdity.

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The absurdity of what he has experienced is another common thread in Aseyev’s work, both in *In Isolation* and in his later book recounting his time in a Russian torture camp, *The Torture Camp on Paradise Street*. He describes two kinds of absurdity, as I see it, interrelated but distinct from one another. The first operates on a more rudi-

16) Ibid., 92.

17) For example, obstacles to withdrawing (temporarily) from the sensible world and company of others, urgent practical concerns which occlude the space for intransitive thinking, and so forth. Compare Arendt, “Thinking and Moral Considerations,” 423; LM, vol. 1, 69–98; Arendt, “Organized Guilt and Universal Responsibility;” Aseyev and Tsurkan, “Violence and Hope in Ukraine,” 9.

mentary level, as the condition felt in “this theater of the absurd” (IS, 122), on account of the Donetskites’ inability to get “answers to the most elementary questions about the most important event in the recent history of our country,” (Ibid., 241) not even “to distinguish who is ‘us’ and who is ‘them’” (Ibid., 22). Beneath this absurdity, the absurdity of extreme disorientation, lies the absurdity which issues from irreconcilable contradictions. This kind of absurdity arises from the many instances of split reality, as it were, which underlie a war like this one. This is the absurdity Aseyev describes when he remarks,

When you walk down a warm, sunny street and suddenly hear a mine explode and see dozens of people dead, after which quiet descends once more and the trams continue to run as before, it’s impossible not to see the absurdity of this war – a war in which bloodshed is sanctified by ideas that never went further than the gates of a university. (Ibid., 83)

These “sanctifying” ideas of the intelligentsia are so dissonant with the facticity of the situation – yet they coexist in this same corner of reality, both claiming to account for it. Aseyev recounts many similar instances of this split reality and its resultant absurdity: in the contradiction of the Donbas’ belief “in the now” which trumps “the logic of the coming days” (Ibid., 59); in the strife between the devotion those emigrating from Donetsk have for “this riverfront” alongside apathy for Ukraine itself, even as they flee “to ‘that’ place where the Ukrainian flag still flies” (Ibid., 147); in the utter disjunction between the life of those in the occupied territory and the life of those just miles beyond it, for whom the war hardly seems to exist (Cf., *ibid.*, 166, 195); and more. This absurdity extends to Aseyev’s experience in a Russian torture camp from 2017–2019 as well.

The camp, dubbed *Izoliatsiia*, is a place of such undeniable suffering that Aseyev has stated, in purely pragmatic fashion, that it would be better to die than be recaptured; absurdity resides there right alongside, perhaps even as part of, this suffering.¹⁸ The monster of dissonance rears its head almost immediately, as evinced by Aseyev’s description of his first “interrogation”:

18) Aseyev and Kozlovsky, “Our War Is a People’s War.”

If I hesitated for even an instant or tried to say that I couldn't focus because of the pain, they beat me harder and with greater frequency, so I began to get my taste of the absurd. I had to keep up my end of the conversation while pretending that I wasn't being worked over with the baton ... the first electrical shock followed an apparently innocent question about a specific number stored in my cell phone ... Any negative answer would produce another jolt: I deduced this from the next set of the apparently absurd questions I was asked. For example, they next asked me how often I masturbated. Their trick is to begin with questions that are uncomfortable for you but have answers that are obvious to the interrogator ... On top of this, they try to disorient you by intermixing questions about, in my case, the espionage with which I had been charged, and whether I believed in God or had ever jumped with a parachute. This evident chaos has one specific goal: to make you lie.¹⁹

Here we see absurdity of all kinds intermingle: the disorienting absurdity of being unable to make sense of a given situation, as well as the absurdity consisting in conflicting realities which makes one unable to make sense of the situation. This attention to the absurdity felt in war is not unique to Aseyev, however; other witnesses to it have expounded on it, too.

To take another recent example, in some of her poems, Ukrainian writer Halyna Kruk exposes the futility of attempts to make rational sense of this war. In 2017, Kruk appealed to the heart as the only space of the human person capable of "grasping" all that is at hand Russia's aggressive actions: "but for now, hold on for dear life / to the hawthorn roots (hawthorne cures the heart), / because only the heart holds all of this, / and the mind refuses to grasp."²⁰ A few years later, in 2020, she wrote a poem which suggests that the mind cannot be content to cede to the heart. In an impersonal voice and potentially tongue-in-cheek tone, she gestures to a "sequence of [mathematical] functions" which might be united under the ratio of reducing complexity: "there's a plane where the square root of evil / grows as if to differentiate the whole curve. /

19) Aseyev, *The Torture Camp on Paradise Street*, 102–4.

20) Kruk, *A Crash Course in Molotov Cocktails*, 161, "resin," lines 10–13.

There’s an equality whereby life / brings two opposites to zero at best / there’s a point at zero, where rain falls, like a god, / on parched lips.”²¹ All this before she delivers her ominous final line, “there’s a bullet flying eternally toward you,”²² as if to remind her reader that in the end that is the only pressing matter.²³ Like Aseyev, she is attuned to the senselessness of the conflict being carried out against them; attempts of the mind to simplify it, to understand it, prove either impossible or, at the least, hampered.

Aseyev does carry this senselessness further, perhaps, than Kruk would; especially in the *Torture Camp on Paradise Street*, he carries absurdity to its extreme. He has described this work as “a polemic with Viktor Frankl’s *Man’s Search for Meaning*... Frankl created a therapy of sense ... but when I was released, I understood that there is no rational explanation for the ‘Izolyatsia.’ This understanding helped me to convert my suffering into an experience.”²⁴ Viktor Frankl, an Austrian psychiatrist who was a prisoner in Nazi concentration camps from 1942–45, founded a branch of psychotherapy called logotherapy based on the conviction he gained from his experience, that “everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms – to choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one’s own way... . It is this spiritual freedom – which cannot be taken away – that makes life meaningful and purposeful.”²⁵ For Aseyev, there is no such thing; there is no “metaphysical” meaning in these sufferings.²⁶ There is no meaning in the sense that there is no purpose, no reasonable explanation, nor life-affirming significance to be found in the suffering he has endured – but that is not to say it has no meaning whatsoever. If it had no meaning whatsoever, it would be impossible to say anything about it (and Aseyev certainly does say things about it). There must be meaning in the suffering and the absurdity in the sense that Arendt speaks of meaning: in the sense that these experiences have a sense that can be grasped in thought, that they convey something (i.e., anything). In other words, my claim is that Aseyev is able to speak to the meaning of

21) Ibid., 139, “moment of truth,” lines 3–8.

22) The poem concludes with a conspicuous lack of end-punctuation.

23) Ibid., “moment of truth,” line 12.

24) Stasiuk, “Aseyev Recalls Russian Camp.” This is a direct quote from Aseyev, translated from Ukrainian (translator unknown).

25) Frankl, *Man’s Search for Meaning*, 67.

26) Aseyev and Kozlovsky, “Our War Is a People’s War.”

the meaninglessness in his experiences precisely because he has grasped that meaning through the Arendtian meaning-seeking practice of intransitive thinking.

Arendt holds, and rightly so, that “all thought arises out of experience, but no experience yields any meaning or even coherence without undergoing the operations of imagining and thinking” (LM, vol. 1, 87). According to this premise, Aseyev’s experience could only yield meaning or coherence – even as absurd, as meaningless, as irrational – if he had undertaken the thinking process as Arendt describes it. Yet, this is true of every person, in every experience – so what makes intransitive thinking so characteristically central in this case? Simply put, because in this case, there is nothing else – there is nothing else to turn to, and nothing else more important. In normal, everyday encounters we do not have to withdraw and take time to reflect on (i.e., think through) the meaning of things to go perform our business as usual. But when the “normal” falls apart and one’s world splits into fragmentary realities, as it does in the absurdity of war and suffering (à la Pablo Picasso’s *Guernica*), intransitive thinking becomes necessary for coming to terms with reality. As Julia Sushytska puts it, in an essay addressing both Aseyev and Arendt (among others), absurdity – but specifically the absurdity of suffering – “destroys human beings by preventing them from making sense of what is happening to them.”²⁷ In this circumstance, one needs to devote oneself to thought to even ascertain the absurd in its absurdity. And in this circumstance, the transient results of thinking are the best one can hope for; to arrive at true and sense-derived knowledge (the object of the intellect, not reason) of what the absurd is or whether it exists at all is too much to ask – imagine asking yourself, in the face of something truly absurd: But how do I know this is absurd? This is not to say that the intellect plays no role in ascertaining the absurd; but such a role is peripheral to reason’s in this case.²⁸ Thinking, the act of unbounded reason, takes the existence of the thing for granted and asks what it means for it to be, what it means for the given to be absurd (Cf., LM, vol. 1, 57). Furthermore, intransitive thinking does not ask that its results satisfy, nor that they remain stagnant; the inconclusive and self-destructive nature of thinking suits the ever-changing and ever-elusive nature of the absurd.

27) Sushytska, “The Illusion of a Crossroads,” 27.

28) For more on the connection between knowing and thinking, see LM, vol. 1, 61–64.

Decades prior to her works on thinking, Arendt wrote an essay on the difficulties of understanding; here her notion of understanding seems, in many ways, to be the seed from which her notion of thinking grew. Her remarks might be taken as applicable to thinking, too, and speak to the characteristic strength of thinking in response to the reality-rendering quality of absurdity:

Understanding, as distinguished from having correct information and scientific knowledge, is a complicated process which never produces unequivocal results. It is an unending activity by which, in constant change and variation, we come to terms with and reconcile ourselves to reality, that is, try to be at home in the world.²⁹

Without the meaning-seeking, unending, reality-oriented process of thinking, those confronted with the absurd are thrust in two directions: they can either go numb to meaning and give up on engaging with the absurdity of their surroundings, or they can outsource the meaning enterprise to the narratives of others, which are all too often designed to manipulate and unlikely to acknowledge to the absurdity of reality at all since it does not fit prettily into a one-dimensional, dogmatic schema. Intransitive thinking stands peerless as that by which we ascertain the meaning of the absurd in its absurdity, meaninglessness in its meaninglessness; it is that by which “Aseyev’s story makes meaningful the absurd and senseless suffering, ... makes this suffering meaningful by revealing its meaninglessness.”³⁰ It is true that intransitive thinking can help condition people for authentic, conscientious acting, and this is indeed a pressing need in today’s political climates – but when the reality in which acting must occur is an absurd one, as it is for many today, thinking is needed first and foremost for its ability to reconcile us to the world. For this reason, we might do well to reflect on Arendt’s words: while thinking “can never directly inspire the fight or provide otherwise missing objectives, it alone can make it meaningful and prepare a new resourcefulness of the human mind and heart which perhaps will come into free play only after the battle is won.”³¹

29) Arendt, *Essays in Understanding*, 307–308.

30) Sushytska, “The Illusion of a Crossroads,” 30.

31) Arendt, *Essays in Understanding*, 310.



Though intransitive thinking captures the absurd in its absurdity, meaninglessness in its meaninglessness, we still run up against the difficulty of finding something which captures thinking in its full thinkingness – in its full invisibility, self-destructiveness, unendingness. Arendt turned to Socrates as the model of thinking qua thinking, and to great effect; but even he, as a singular exemplar, falls short of exhaustively representing the thinking activity.³² I have turned to Aseyev as someone who has clearly engaged in thinking and to his writings as the result of that process; and indeed, his work carries the imprint of intransitive thinking but is not one and the same with thinking itself. To capture thinking, of the sort we have been discussing, “is like trying to paint an elf wearing the magic cap that makes him invisible.”³³ Thinking cannot be captured like the image in a photograph if it can be captured at all, it requires much subtler instruments. For this reason, Elisabeth Young-Bruehl is right when she suggests that representing such a thing as thinking “is a special talent of poets and storytellers, the conveyers of Meaning, not Truth.”³⁴ Intransitive thinking corresponds with the kind of writing that is undertaken for its own sake, with no promise of being understood, but which nevertheless has a mentally liberating effect upon its enactor.³⁵ It is for this reason that, if we wish to witness thinking in its nakedness, we may do best to turn to works of poetry and storytelling such as those of Halyna Kruk, Paul Celan, Elie Wiesel, and the like. If we wish to be moved to thinking ourselves, we may do best to turn to art, which has the special ability to “seduce me into the process of thinking because it does not insist that it is giving me access to truth, ... it does the exact opposite – it flaunts its fictitious nature.”³⁶ Aseyev’s work is not poetry, nor (fictional) storytelling, nor art. It neither presents the thinking process for our witness, nor pulls us

32) Cf. Arendt, “Thinking and Moral Considerations,” 427–28; LM, vol. 1, 167–69; Beatty, “Thinking and Moral Considerations,” 57–74.

33) Young-Bruehl, “Reflections on *Life of the Mind*,” 343. Young-Bruehl identifies this metaphor of Kierkegaard’s as applicable to Arendt’s difficulty in presenting the Mind.

34) Ibid.

35) For more on these qualities of intransitive writing, see Culbertson, *Words Underway*, 45–61.

36) Sushytska, “The Illusion of a Crossroads,” 28.

Cana Beverage , When “Things Fall Apart”

into the thinking process with him; what it does do, however, is bring our attention to the fruits of intransitive thinking in a way that Socrates could not. From Aseyev, we can see that thinking is not only good for conditioning against inauthentic narratives and actions but also for coming to terms with the absurdity that arises in times like these when “things fall apart.”

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