Hannah Arendt’s intellectual diary, her Denktagebuch, is a unique record of an intellectual life and one of the most fascinating and compelling archives of twentieth-century literature, political thought, and philosophy. Comprising twenty-eight handwritten notebooks—primarily in German but partly in English and Greek—the Denktagebuch begins in 1950 and trails into sporadic notes in the early 1970s. By far the majority of entries, ranging from personal reflections to dense, argumentative engagements with other thinkers, are from the 1950s and 1960s. In these two decades, during which Arendt published The Human Condition, Between Past and Future, Men in Dark Times, On Revolution, and Eichmann in Jerusalem, as well as a number of essays, the Denktagebuch makes evident how closely Arendt read the works of her interlocutors, records previously hidden sources, and displays the dynamic, evolving nature of Arendt’s thinking.

Neither an Augustinian confessional nor an autobiography like those of Virginia Wolff, still less a narrative journal like the diaries of Samuel Pepys or Andy Warhol, the Denktagebuch is an uneasy fit in familiar literary categories. It is far more structured than the collection of musings and quotations that comprise Thomas Jefferson’s commonplace book, but less formal
than a collection of drafts and unfinished essays. The majority of entries are thematic, and some of the most common themes (often announced in Arendt’s own subheadings) include “Thinking and Acting,” “Plato,” Plurality,” “Means—Ends Categories in Politics,” “Metaphor and Truth,” “The Path of Wrong,” “Love,” “Marx,” “Hegel,” “On Labor,” “On Loneliness,” “On Heidegger,” and “On Philosophy and Politics.” Arendt’s utterly unconstrained intellectual range, combined with the unusual form of the record, makes it nearly impossible to align the Denktagebuch with any familiar genre or subject heading, as the humorously strained classification of the work by the Library of Congress under “Political Theory. Theories of the State: The Modern State” attests.

Even the usual English translation of the title, Thought Diary, can be misleading, insofar as Arendt herself as a figure appears only rarely in her Denktagebuch and the first-person voice is almost never used. There are pieces of poetry and aphorisms by herself and others, as well as favored quotations and musings that stretch for pages. Some entries are polished short essays. Many are intense textual readings with etymological and philosophical commentary. Others are the rough working out of new ideas, which will later appear in her published writing. The notebooks manifest Arendt’s thinking and writing process and betray the intensity of her reading and thinking in a community of thinkers, but Arendt herself as a thinking subject occupying the privileged seat of I, remains elusive.

The absence of the authorial voice adds to the peculiar intimacy of reading the Denktagebuch, precisely because the text bears none of the signs and disturbances of having any potential audience other than herself in mind. The first notebook, written on Arendt’s return from a still war-shattered Europe and her first postwar encounter with Martin Heidegger, opens with a long, troubled reflection on responsibility for the past and reconciliation among its survivors. Belying the clearly personal nature of her reflections, Arendt’s tone is often a conceptually rigorous distillation of thoughts. She may be responding to conversations with Heidegger, as detailed in her letters, and readings of Nietzsche, but neither thinker is mentioned in entries. The opening metaphor of the weight of the past that is born on one’s shoulders is taken from Friedrich Hölderlin, who again is not named and disappears behind Arendt’s analytical accounts of forgiveness, revenge, and reconciliation. The first reconciliation narrative is a personal working out of her thoughts, a seemingly finished product that Arendt nevertheless returns to in the Denktagebuch and amends many times over the next twenty years. Never do Arendt’s conceptually detailed and seemingly considered reflections on reconciliation appear in her published writings.
Introduction

There is another voice in the notebooks, one evident in the opening entry of the last notebook, dated 1971. Arendt begins poetically as she struggles to come to terms with a life without her longtime partner and husband, Heinrich Blücher. The one-sentence entry bears the title “Ohne Heinrich” (Without Heinrich) and reads: “Frei—wie ein Blatt im Wind.” Blücher’s death, Arendt’s entry suggests, leaves her “free, like a leaf in the wind,” a suggestive line that Arendt then includes in a letter to her friend Mary McCarthy. In that letter, Arendt goes on to cite explicitly from “Reif Sind,” the same poetic fragment of Hölderlin about the burden of the past that she takes as her inspiration for the inaugural entry of the Denktagebuch in 1950. Not only does this opening of the final notebook hearken to the book’s origin, but it also sets a once playful expression of freedom into a context of both grief and respect for the past. Arendt is profoundly aware of the mixed blessings of unconstrained freedom; the unbounded freedom of a leaf in the wind is without the tether to a past that gives life meaning.

If the Denktagebuch has a consistent voice, it is Arendt’s unique and unceasing interrogation of her world, a world that, as she once wrote to Gershom Scholem, is the world of German philosophy—“If I ‘come out of’ anywhere,” Arendt writes in denying Scholem’s claim that she is part of the “German left” or the “German intellectuals,” “it is out of German philosophy.” But even as Arendt engages in the tradition of German philosophy—with numerous entries on Kant, Nietzsche, Hegel, Marx, and Heidegger—the notebooks widen our sense of the scope of her intellectual homeland. In the Denktagebuch, we see her in close and careful conversation with her spiritual family: Plato, Aristotle, Montesquieu, Alfred Portmann, William Faulkner, Wallace Stevens, and Friedrich Hölderlin. We might think of the Denktagebuch as a kind of antithesis to Rousseau’s Confessions: if, as Cicero said, “the face is a picture of the mind as the eyes are its interpreter,” then Rousseau has put on his best (and worst) face for us, but in her twenty-eight fragmentary and eloquent notebooks, we have something as close to Arendt’s literary eyes as we could ever hope to see.

The singular nature of the Denktagebuch as a glimpse through Arendt’s own way of reading and thinking raises important questions for how to think about its contribution to our understanding of Arendt’s monumental life spent in thought, and how it can be used for scholarship when it is read other than for sheer pleasure. There will be a temptation to read the Denktagebuch as any other of Arendt’s books, but this is a seduction that must be resisted: The Denktagebuch is not a finished product, and its conceptual categories are rarely finalized. We may never know why Arendt chose not
to publish certain of her insights recorded in the *Denktagebuch*, but that choice cannot be ignored.

Early forays such as those of David Marshall and Sigrid Weigel have shown the considerable promise of looking to the *Denktagebuch* to help illuminate Arendt’s published writings, and in the process they have shed light on an equal danger: that, presented with a treasure trove of hints and gestures, one might treat the *Denktagebuch* as a kind of definitive guide, a historical trump card when confronted with difficult, unavoidable trials of hermeneutics that come with interpreting a writer as dense and original as Arendt. An honest perusal of the *Denktagebuch* itself—an unsteady terrain of shifting arguments, investments, architectures, and conjectures—should trouble this impulse. For those of us without the mental grammar of the sole mind by and for whom it was written, the *Denktagebuch* can constitute neither more nor less than Whitman’s “backward glance o’er travel’d roads”: entrancing, instructive, illuminative, but no more final than the thoughts each entry brings us.

Finally, there will be a competing tendency by skeptics to diminish the importance of the *Denktagebuch*, arguing that its motley collection of notes, aphorisms, and tentative formulations may have been useful to Arendt herself but is unreliable as a window into her thought. Just as we must resist the temptations to rely too fully on the *Denktagebuch*, we must also resist the urge to write it off as a private fancy. The *Denktagebuch* offers insights into both formative and advanced stages of Arendt’s thinking, a halting and often incomplete yet ultimately invaluable guide through her intellectual and philosophical development.

This question of how to read, interpret, and employ the immense wealth of the *Denktagebuch* guides all of the essays in this volume, and each author has tried to approach these questions explicitly and to do so in a way that uses a substantive concern or theme in the book to model their approach. Taken together, the essays, most of which began their life during a week-long workshop in the summer of 2012 sponsored by the Hannah Arendt Center for Politics and Humanities at Bard College, attempt to present a conversation on how to begin what will be a long, slow, but infinitely fruitful process of integrating the *Denktagebuch* into our understanding of Hannah Arendt and her world.

The opening essay, Roger Berkowitz’s “Reconciling Oneself to the Impossibility of Reconciliation,” explores themes of responsibility and reconciliation in the long first entry and beyond of the *Denktagebuch*, and how those themes are repeatedly reflected (and altered) in Arendt’s later works. Looking solely at Arendt’s published writings, Berkowitz argues, one could
be forgiven for seeing reconciliation as “meaningful, but not central to her larger effort to rethink the practice of politics in the modern age.” “All this changes” though, “when one opens Arendt’s Denktagebuch,” within which reconciliation is a constant, fluid trope to which she returns often in the face of an enormous variety of intellectual problems. In order to emphasize the extraordinary flexibility and incisive influence of the idea of reconciliation for Arendt’s thought, Berkowitz eschews putting forward a unitary account of Arendt’s theory of reconciliation in favor of nine interrelated but distinct (and sometimes in tension) understandings of reconciliation to be found in the Denktagebuch. The formal architecture of Berkowitz’s essay presents a way of thinking about the content of the Denktagebuch that emphasizes Arendt’s own resistance to systematicity in favor of conceptual flexibility and responsiveness to the world around her.

Ursula Ludz, one of the two editors who took on the monumental task of compiling and annotating it, explores the unique perspective the Denktagebuch provides into perhaps the most publically tumultuous period of Arendt’s life and work: her report on the trial of Adolf Eichmann and the ensuing furor. In “On the Truth-and-Politics Section in the Denktagebuch,” Ludz uses a detailed account of three entries as a platform to contemplate not only the background and motivations of Arendt’s singular decision only to respond to her critics collectively and at arms length, but also what the Denktagebuch reveals philosophically about the claim, sometimes made, that she understood Eichmann’s banality to be a simple factual truth. The question of what is a factual truth becomes central Ludz’s reading of Arendt’s own thinking about the Eichmann controversy.

Picking up from Berkowitz the strands in the opening notebook that would become Arendt’s central political concerns of the 1950s, Thomas Wild provides a meditation on what he views as Arendt’s extraordinary translation of her specific political diagnosis of an “unprecedented break in history and tradition” into new modes of writing and expression that confront the political structure of thinking itself. Entwining Arendt’s frequent meditations in this period on poetics with the signs the notebook provides of her developing account of totalitarianism and judgment, “‘By Relating It’: On Modes of Writing and Judgment in the Denktagebuch” suggests that we can read the Denktagebuch as an alternative practice of writing and judgment, one that re crafts historical understanding as a response to her early question, “Is there a way of thinking which is not tyrannical?”

Like Wild, Wout Cornelissen focuses his “Thinking in Metaphors” on the particular, deliberate practices of thinking recorded in Denktagebuch. Cornelissen constructs a dialogue between the Denktagebuch and The Human
Condition on thinking and the dangers of *herstellen* (making) as a mode of approaching the world. In a striking series of interconnections between Arendt’s texts, Cornelissen provides a reading of three different metaphors or literary motifs that he suggests all point to modes of thought Arendt embraces to resist the anticommunicative (and ultimately antipolitical) nature of a *herstellen* and its tendency to “mute violence.” Rather than read *Denktagebuch* through Arendt’s more canonical texts, the essay suggests that we need to learn to read those published texts more in the mode of the *Denktagebuch* and take more seriously Arendt’s commitment not just to perspectival plurality but also to its implications for the very thinking of theory itself.

In “The Task of Knowledgeable Love: Arendt and Portmann in Search of Meaning,” Anne O’Byrne explores Arendt’s long fascination and engagement with the natural scientist and thinker Adolf Portmann, who emerges as a central figure in Arendt’s discussion of appearance in *The Life of the Mind*. In dialogue with Portmann, O’Byrne writes, Arendt found an account of the natural world that resonated with her own approach to the political one, a “hermeneutic phenomenology, a way of looking at the world that engages and transforms the viewer.” Portmann’s antifunctionalism and focus on “intensified life” shared and fed Arendt’s anti-instrumental revaluation of appearance in which “appearances are sensed, and that sensing is the province of all sentient beings.” The unreliability of sensed appearance as well as its diversity supports Arendt’s turn from knowledge to meaning and from singularity to plurality. For both Arendt and Portmann, this attunement to meaning-making through knowledge was what made it possible to love the world as it is, thus leading Arendt to imagine education as the decision to “love the world enough to take responsibility for it.”

Expanding beyond the particular form of love of the world, Tatjana Noemi Tömmel argues that the *Denktagebuch* is a source for understanding love as the deepest and most systematic of Arendt’s investments which never the less rarely entered her published work. In “*Vita Passiva*: Love in Arendt’s *Denktagebuch*,” Tömmel observes that we might “distinguish three or even four different concepts of love in the *Denktagebuch*” that allow for “a systematic reconstruction of her . . . ambivalent, partly paradoxical theories of love.” The key, according to the Tömmel, is to accept provisionally Arendt’s impulse to conceptual formalism and explore the ways in which she both deliberately contrasts passion, recognition, and *amor mundi*, while also cultivating their intersections. The result is a way of understanding the enormously important role of love in Arendt’s thinking that both and allows us to pick up and interweave “loose ends . . . waiting
to be tied up” while still keeping “the diversity of her concepts and the liveliness of her thinking.” Tömmel’s essay provides an elegant defense and demonstration that resisting the impulse to logical systematicity in interpreting Arendt need not entail abandoning systematic interrelation altogether.

Tracy Strong’s “America as Exemplar: The *Denktagebuch* of 1951” takes as its departure a starting point of Arendt’s own, her turn after the publication of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* toward “making sense” of her new adoptive country and searching in the “American revolutionary experience” for “what a human society would be that was truly political.” Tracing the genealogy of European thinkers to whom Arendt turns to begin to make sense of what might be distinctive about the American experiment as “an example of what an understanding of politics that did not rest upon any kind of absolute would look like,” Strong builds a conversation between Nietzsche and Arendt on contracting and promising, and the specifically political relation entailed in Arendt’s admonishment to Nietzsche that when we promise, we can only ever promise “to each other.” This concept of the political space founded in the creation of the revolutionary contract, for Strong, allowed Arendt to begin to explore what models of judgment were still open to the world after totalitarianism had left the thinking world with an inescapable and “legitimate distrust of all moralizing.” In this early section of the *Denktagebuch*, we discover just how important “America was, in Arendt’s reading” as “an exemplar of what the political could be.”

Although the concept of “natality” has become one of the central concerns of recent Arendt scholarship, she used the term itself only quite rarely in her published corpus, and as Jeff Champlin points out in his “‘Poetry or Body Politic’: Natality and the Space of Birth in Hannah Arendt’s *Thought Diary*,” still less in the *Denktagebuch*, where the word appears only once. Nevertheless, Champlin argues, it comes at a crucial moment, and examining the section in which natality appears not only helps us understand the specific, novel alteration she is trying to introduce to the concept of politics but also highlights the ways in which “Arendt uses the narrative and poetic dimensions of the idea to expand the philosophical concepts of novelty and change.” For Champlin, the way in which the *Denktagebuch* interweaves traditionally “poetic” and “philosophical” voices is a technique that puts into literary practice the conceptual demand of her new vision for a “poetry of the body politic,” a way of understanding the necessarily embodied character of all political beginnings for Arendt, which belies Habermas’s reduction of her thoughts on revolution to just another “contract theory of natural law.”
Finally, Ian Storey’s “Facing the End: The Work of Thinking in the Late Denktagebuch” inverts the traditional gaze of reading archival material forward into the work that resulted from it. It asks what can be learned by looking on the Denktagebuch as a rearview mirror on Arendt’s thought as well. Arendt’s intertwined late meditations on the nature of “thinking, death, and purpose” can be read, Storey suggests, as the preparatory notes for Thinking that they are, but they should also trouble our established sense of Arendt’s concerns in her early works as well, particularly her consistent concern with what she saw as the increasing instrumentalization of the shared human world. The twenty-seventh notebook of the Denktagebuch, the last substantive Heft, provides a language for teasing apart the multiple senses in which ends and end-orientation are an integral piece of Arendt’s view of the human condition, and for resuscitating some of the essential ambiguity in Arendt’s relationship to instrumentality. It also provides, in the end, some important gestures toward a way of thinking about political ethics that Arendt never finished exploring, some fascinating glimpses at what might have been and, in the afterlife of the Denktagebuch, what might yet be.

NOTES