Artifacts of Thinking
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“The question is: Is there a way of thinking which is not tyrannical?” (Die Frage ist: Gibt es ein Denken, das nicht tyrannisch ist?), wrote Hannah Arendt in December 1950, a few months after she began writing the *Denktagebuch* (D II. 20.45). It is a thought in the form of a question, which begins and forms the center of Arendt’s work of the next several years as she rethinks the political, rereads dominant and hidden traditions of philosophy, and develops unprecedented modes of writing in the face of an unprecedented break in history and tradition (dealing with the legacy of totalitarianism, the Nazi past, and the Shoah). At the time of this entry, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* was already in manuscript form. In the winter of 1949–50, Arendt had returned to Germany for the first time since her flight in 1933. In her “Report from Germany,” published in October 1950 in *Commentary*, she formulated the challenge of the present era: “to face and to come to terms with what really happened.” It is a challenge of understanding, of judgment, and not least of writing itself regarding the literal process of “coming to terms with.”

What is the context of Arendt’s question about the possibility of non-tyrannical thought in the *Denktagebuch*? What do the surroundings of this
passage look like? The entry itself deals with “the affinity of the philosopher and the tyrant since Plato” (D II. 20.45). The tradition of Western thought that identifies thinking and reason with logic begins with Plato. The irrevocable laws of logic, according to Arendt, are “by definition” connected not to freedom, but rather to tyranny. If one understands this tradition where the political is the concern of man and of a rational constitution, then only tyranny can produce good politics. The political, however, is not intrinsic to humans, it is not part of the human essence: The human being is apolitical, Arendt states in a neighboring entry. As Arendt conceptualizes it and explains in The Human Condition, the birthplace of freedom and the political lies “between people” (Zwischen-den-Menschen): “Politics arises in the space between people and establishes itself as the relationship” (Politik entsteht im Zwischen und etabliert sich als der Bezug; 17, my emphasis).

The question of the relationship between tyranny and thought is a political and theoretical one. How can the connection between the occurrences of the world and the capacity of humans to understand and think through them be effectively conceived? In an immediately preceding entry from December 1950, Arendt recalls a powerful guiding principle of the philosophical tradition: adaequatio rei et intellectus, the correspondence theory of truth which claims the adequacy of knowledge, or intellect and subject. According to Hegel, Arendt notes, the movements of the mind and the movements of events match insofar as the intellectual “swimming” (Schwimmbewegungen) of man continues to match the “tide” (Strombewegungen) of world events. Marx, according to Arendt, concludes from this that the swimmer is in fact stronger than the tide, and even able to channel the river of world events into specific channels. “Naturally, this is possible only within the laws of the tide” (innerhalb der Stromgesetze), since the laws of the tide “are also the laws of swimming” (zugleich auch die Schwimmgesetze sind), she comments. In anaphoric unison with her question about nontyrrannical thought, Arendt responds: “The question is how one can avoid swimming in the tide at all” (Die Frage ist gerade, wie man das Schwimmen im Strom überhaupt vermeiden kann; D II.19.45).

Arendt calls into question the et/and between rei and intellectus in a twofold manner, as well as the conjunction in “the conception of truth and world security” (Wahrheitsbegriff und Weltaufbruch), as the entry is titled in the Denktagebuch. In questioning the binding power of these conjunctions, she breaks up the assumptions of traditional connectors.

The cited notes, including Arendt’s emphatic questions, precede an entry that is literally broken up. “The path of life” (Der Lebensweg), as it is titled, runs metaphorically on land, instead of swimming in the tide of history. The
“deserts and wildnesses of life” (Wüsten und Wildnisse des Lebens), with which the entry begins, however, lay no solid ground for the paths of thought to follow. As protection from the worst perils of the “human jungles” (Menschenjungfern), society has built “a few tracks” (ein paar Wege), which provide orientation, at least in “bright times” (in ruhigen Zeiten). And what happens to men in dark times? After a dash she begins the contrary argument: “Whoever does not these tracks . . .” (Wer diese Wege nicht . . .) and the note breaks off. But just two entries later (D II.21.45), a voice seems to continue this reflection on the “path of life”:

Up life's hill with my little bundle,
If I prove it steep,
If a discouragement withhold me,
If my newest step
Older feel than the hope that prompted,
Spotless be from blame
Heart that proposed as heart that accepted,
Homelessness for home.

The voice that speaks here in Arendt’s Denktagebuch belongs to Emily Dickinson. Like Arendt, she vexed her contemporaries and left no one untouched but many uncomprehending. The theorist answers her own question about the unsettled relationship between reality and the contemplation of reality with a poem. Is there a conjunction that connects these disparate pieces that Arendt places next to one another in her Thinking Notebook?

To accept “homelessness for home” was a new kind of experience for Arendt upon her reencounter with Germany. Her “Report from Germany” uses the word twice in the first paragraph. The “peculiarly modern touches of physical homelessness,” Arendt says, had been added to the general picture of catastrophe in the devastated land of postwar Europe; she describes “homelessness on an unprecedented scale” in her preface to the Origins, written at the same time in summer 1950. “Heartlessness,” which rhymes with “homelessness” and echoes Dickinson’s poem, is the remarkable word with which Arendt brings the core observation of her report to light.²

The heartless and stubborn refusal of many Germans to accept the blatant and shocking realities revealed a difficult legacy of the Nazi regime. Arendt saw the inability of many of those she spoke with to distinguish facts from opinions as a variation on this problem. “The reality of the death factories” had often been “transformed into a mere potentiality,” Arendt
reports from numerous conversations.\textsuperscript{3} This was the burdensome inheritance of totalitarian rule, which fostered an understanding of reality in which “what is true today may already be false tomorrow.”\textsuperscript{4} The refusal of countless Germans to confront and understand what actually happened comes to Arendt as an image: “Amid the ruins, Germans mail each other picture postcards still showing the cathedrals and marketplaces, the public buildings and bridges that no longer exist.”\textsuperscript{5} Arendt does not look “behind the facades,” but rather describes what she perceives in front of her eyes. She does not refer to a preexisting system of conception, nor does she deduce a theory to present her thoughtful observations. Her way of writing describes a process: “to face and to come to terms with what really happened.”\textsuperscript{6}

Arendt does not arrange the two activities “to face” and “to come to terms with” in a chronological, intentional, or causal order. Instead, the sentence expresses a mode: to look reality in the face, to confront what happened and to find words for what one thus discovers, to bring it into language. An oscillating “and” that joins, and creates distance. A break and a space between. “Stop and think.” “Between” is a political word for Arendt: It is a place for interactions that are unpredictable and not fully controllable; it is a birthplace for freedom. Totalitarianism tried to radically destroy this space of freedom with an “iron band” of ideology and terror, Arendt writes in \textit{The Origins of Totalitarianism}. In the \textit{Denktagebuch} she takes up the word “band” and links it in a new and different way. It is not the coercive logic of reason but rather the imagination that forms a “band between people” (\textit{Nicht die Vernunft, sondern die Einbildungskraft bildet das Band zwischen den Menschen}), she says, in regard to the political aptitude of different intellectual capacities: “Against the self-sense, reason, which grows from the thought of the “I”/ego, stand the world-sense, public spirit (passive) and imagination (active) which grow from others” (\textit{Gegen den Selbst-Sinn, die Vernunft, die aus dem Ich-denke lebt, steht der Welt-Sinn, der als Gemeinsinn (passiv) und als Einbildungskraft (aktiv) von den Anderen lebt}; D XXII.19.570).

In the immediately following paragraph of the same entry (from August 1957), Arendt considers the relationship between art and politics and comes to the conclusion that “both have to do with the world” (\textit{beide haben es mit der Welt zu tun}). A year later, the thought resurfaces in \textit{The Human Condition} (as well as in the German version \textit{Vita activa} of 1960). In the section on “The Permanence of the World and the Work of Art” (\textit{Die Beständigkeit der Welt und das Kunstwerk}) Arendt speaks of the human faculty to be “open and re-
lated to the world” (weltoffene und weltbezogene Fähigkeit) from which art is produced. This is the human capacity “to think and to sense” (zu denken und zu sinnen) as she refers to it later in the same paragraph. It is a surprising “and”-connection of two traditionally separate capacities again reminiscent of the mode “to face and to come to terms with.”

This wording exists only in the German edition of Vita Activa, while in the American Human Condition merely “the human capacity for thought” is discussed. Whereas the connection “to face and to come to terms with” is only in Arendt’s publications in English (see “Report from Germany” and Origins), compared with simply “verstehen” (understand) or “begreifen” (grasp, conceive) in the German (Elemente und Ursprünge totaler Herrschaft). In one of two entries in the Denktagebuch on “Metaphor(s) and Truth” that directly follow the Dickinson poem “Up life’s hill with my little bundle,” Arendt creates another counterpart for “come to terms” which carries significant and remarkable echoes of the English, down to the very syllable: First the “coming- to- words” (Zum- Wort- Werden) makes the “shock of reality” (Schock der Wirklichkeit) bearable; “this may indeed underlie the ‘adaequatio rei et intellectus’” (dies liege vielleicht doch der ‘adaequatio rei et intellectus’ zugrunde; D II.25.48). As fragile as the already difficult relationship between reality and the reflection on reality becomes in the face of the modern breaks in tradition, Arendt persistently considers the particles of that divide, while “shock of reality” and “coming to words” act as if they were transcriptions of rei and intellectus, the focus remains on et/and. The question then becomes how these conjunctions can be conceived and presented today.

In Arendt’s writing, the word “and” continually appears not as a simple connector to be taken for granted, but rather as a word for making distinctions and as a particle noting engagement (Verbindlichkeit). “And” can make seemingly incompatible concepts confront each other. Such arrangements can be surprising and confusing. “And” can hold abutting concepts in limbo and leaves space for further thought, regroupings, and new beginnings. “And” cannot be resolved into one concept; it needs two to come to life. “And” brooks no negation. Metaphorically, “and” is a word of poetry—and of poetic thinking.

In her speech accepting the Lessing Prize, “On Humanity in Dark Times,” Arendt pursues the question of “how much reality must be retained even in a world become inhuman if humanity is not to be reduced to an empty phrase or phantom” (wieviel Wirklichkeit auch in einer unmenschlich gewordenen Welt festgehalten werden muss, um Menschlichkeit nicht zu einer Phrase oder einem Phantom werden zu lassen). Arendt imagines a friendship between a German and a Jew under the conditions of the Third Reich.
Under such circumstances, would it not have been a sign of humanness, if these friends had said, “Are we not both human beings” (Sind wir nicht beide Menschen)? No, according to Arendt: “in keeping with a humanness that had not lost the solid ground of reality, a humanness in the midst of the reality of persecution, they would have had to say to each other: ‘A German and a Jew, and friends’ (‘Ein Deutscher und ein Jude, und Freunde’).” It is a double “and” that enables an “unpremeditated facing up to, and resisting of, reality” in thought and writing, a doubled “and” whose two sides cannot be united, but that rather live from and in the distinction.

This thought of Hannah Arendt’s on distinctions that are binding without being tyrannical is related to her reflections on “plurality.” The beginnings of these thoughts are noted in her early entries in the Denktagebuch. We know from later writings, such as The Human Condition (1958) or On Violence (1968) that plurality—the existence of the many and the various—was a prerequisite for politics for Arendt. Politics, whose raison d’etre is freedom, arises from the spontaneous thinking and acting together of the many and the various. At the beginning of the Denktagebuch, she makes a connection between her reflection on plurality (as a political concept) and a “plurality of languages” (Pluralität der Sprachen), and in fact renews and contextualizes her original question of nontyrannical thought. “If there were only one language, perhaps we would be sure of the nature of things,” Arendt writes (Gäbe es nur eine Sprache, so wären wir vielleicht des Wesens der Dinge sicher; D II.15.42). “Gäbe,” “wäre,” “vielleicht”? “If,” “were,” “perhaps”—the distance between this uncertainty and the certainty of “one language” or “the nature of things” has the potential for humor, or at least polemical possibility. This is intentional, as Arendt sees concepts like one “world language” (Weltsprache) not only as “nonsense” (Unsinn) but also as “artificially enforced disambiguation of the ambiguous” (künstlich gewaltsame Vereindeutigung des Vieldeutigen), a totalizing abolition of plurality. The decisive case for a plurality of languages is made in her opinion by the fact that a multiplicity of languages exists. These languages differ in vocabulary and grammar, and therefore in their “mode of thinking” (Denkweise), and all are learnable. It is primarily the learnability of foreign languages, according to Arendt—who knew Greek, Latin, French, and English—which enables the discovery that there are other “‘counterparts’ to the physically identical world that we have in common” (dass es noch andere ‘Entsprechungen’ zur gemeinsam-identischen Welt gibt als die unsere). We, who are many and various, and more than simply descendants of one “animal rationale” or “zoon logikon,” we are beings gifted not with reason or language, but with languages and with the faculty of speaking to one another.
But why does Hannah Arendt put the “other ‘counterparts’ of our collectively shared world” in quotes? If one now reconsiders this entry on the “fluctuating ambiguity of the world and the insecurity of humans in it” (schwankenden Vieldeutigkeit der Welt und [der] Unsicherheit des Menschen darin) as a reflection of the fluctuating relationship of rei and intellectus, one notices that Arendt speaks of the adaequatio, with echoes of the original Latin (‘adäquierende’... adjustierende Erkenntnis), as “adjusting knowledge” (D II.15.43). So why “Entsprechungen/counterparts”? This German entry on the “plurality of languages” is bordered by a quote in French (Blaise Pascal), and an entry by Arendt in English. In this echo chamber, what would be the counterparts of the German Entsprechungen? Equivalences, analogies, counterparts—pendants, adéquations, équivalents? Or perhaps correspondents—correspondances?

“What fascinated him about the matter was that the spirit and its material manifestation were so intimately connected that it seemed permissible to discover everywhere Baudelaire’s correspondences, which clarified and illuminated one another if they were properly correlated, so that finally they would no longer require any interpretative or explanatory commentary.”10 “What fascinated him” refers to Walter Benjamin. In the original German version of her essay, Arendt characterizes Benjamin’s writing style through the plural words “Entsprechungen/correspondances.” She uses the word Entsprechungen once again in this essay when she sums up his unique way of thinking on “the intellectual and its material appearance” (das Geistige und seine materielle Erscheinung)—“intellectus et rei”—as follows: “What is so hard to understand about Benjamin,” Arendt writes, “is that without being a poet he thought poetically”11 (Was an Benjamin so schwer zu verstehen war ist, daß er, ohne ein Dichter zu sein, dichterisch dachte). To think poetically, to think philosophically, to think politically—what connections, conjunctions, relationships does Arendt open up here surrounding her question whether there is a kind of thought that is not tyrannical?

In the following entry, after she cites the poetic thought of “Entsprechungen/correspondances,” Arendt notes in English, “If Man is the topic of philosophy and Men the subject of politics, then totalitarianism signifies a victory of ‘philosophy’ over politics—and not the other way round.” And she continues: “It is as though the final victory of philosophy would mean the final extermination of philosophers. Perhaps they have become ‘superfluous’” (D II, 16:43). “Superfluous,” like “counterparts” in the preceding entry on the “plurality of languages,” is set in quotes. For what reason? No other English word is thus marked in the surrounding entries on the problem of totalitarian regimes—where “the omnipotence of Man corresponds
to the superfluousness of Men” (die Allmacht des Menschen der Überflüssigkeit der Menschen entspricht) (D II.21.53). Where does this quoted “superfluous” come from?

“Superfluous were the Sun/When Excellence be dead,” begins a poem by Emily Dickinson. It was written in the same year as “Up life’s hill with my little bundle.” In the Complete Poems, the two are neighbors (No. 999 and No. 1010). “Superfluous were the Sun” was published in a 1950 edition that Arendt owned. It is a poem that presents the absence, indeed the death of an all-seeing majesty, and also deals with one presumed dead: “dead/said” is the rhyme of the first strophe. Arendt juxtaposes the internally rhyming “final victory of philosophy” with the potential “final extermination of the philosophers.” Would it be the assassination of a tyrant or rather his suicide? Would this mark the end of the time of philosophical thought? How could one continue to write in such an era? The iambs of the last verses both narrow it down and open it up:

Upon His dateless Fame  
Our Periods may lie  
As Stars that drop anonymous  
From an abundant sky.\footnote{12}

Which “periods” are falling from the sky here? Eras, punctuation marks? Which conjunction(s) could stand between them? And they drop “as stars”—the time when the stars were brought to the earth was a time of Revolutions. Constellations of tides, times, terms—characters, signs?

One could call Arendt’s system of writing in the Denktagebuch creating constellations: It is a collection and juxtaposition of notes, excerpts, reflections, fragments, quotes, poems; assemblages that establish connections and leave them open, because they are being questioned; or figurations, whose traces are reworked in Arendt’s texts, from The Origins of Totalitarianism (1951) to The Life of the Mind (1977). This characteristic of Arendt’s writing remains, up to today, largely without response. To accept “Homelessness for Home,” as Dickinson writes, can thus also be read in relation to Arendt’s barely answered way of writing.

It might not be a coincidence that it was a poet who responds to Arendt’s way of scrutinizing the questions “Is there a way of thinking which is not tyrannical” and “how one can avoid swimming in the tide” most precisely. In her novel Das zweite Paradies (Second Paradise), Hilde Domin gives the following line to an Arendt-voice: “‘Auf dem Atlantik,’ sagte eine, ‘bau ich mein Haus. Beide Kontinente sind unmöglich. Ich lebe zwischen Ihnen,’” (“I’ll build my house in the Atlantic,” she said. “Both continents are impossible.
I’ll live between them”). It is a moving and apt image for Hannah Arendt’s “place” between different languages, audiences, and traditions, and it is the emerging outline of a thinker of conjunctions and relations.

In the “Postscriptum” to Thinking, at the end of the first section of The Life of the Mind, the question of a way of thinking that is not tyrannical resurfaces. Here this “distinct capacity of our minds” is closely associated with another: the capacity of “judging.” In “contradistinction” to the intellectual activities of thinking and willing, “judgments are not arrived at by either deduction or induction,” Arendt says, “in short, they have nothing in common with logical operations.” While the sonorous voice of consciousness confers its commands to action on the basis of generalization, the quiet praxis of judgment is constantly concerned with uniquenesses. Arendt, in agreement with Kant, characterized judgment as “a peculiar talent which can be practiced only and cannot be taught.” Correspondingly, Aristotle recognized that scientific rules could not be applied to ethical matters; rather, moral actions are situationally determined, in individual cases and according to particularities. Any discussion of matters of ethics and action he adds, echoing ethics and aesthetics, “cannot be more than an outline and is bound to lack precision.”

In order to be able “to arrive at a halfway plausible theory of ethics,” according to Arendt, it is important to separate judgment from other intellectual capacities and to grant it its own modus operandi. For the question of whether a person is able to make this distinction, Arendt devises an interesting litmus test. How does one understand the relationship of judgment and history? Does one accept with Hegel and Marx that history is the tribunal of the world and that questions of ethics are essentially questions of development and progress? Or does one believe with Kant in human autonomy, in the ability to spontaneously start a series from the beginning?

Arendt has a characteristic way of dealing with such questions of the development of traditions and possibilities of thinking, in which she dives down to the moment in the past when a common word was transformed into a concept, when the crystallization of a concept happened. She thereby recreates a moment of undecidedness, and therefore the possibility of deciding. With the word “Geschichte/history,” she starts her reflections at its Greek stem historein. The word once had several meanings: to see, to know, to report, to investigate and question an eyewitness, to evaluate testimony like an impartial judge. While Arendt understands the will as a sense of the future, she understands judgment as a capacity for dealing with
the past. “If judgment is our faculty for dealing with the past, the historian is the inquiring man who by relating it sits in judgment over it.”

How should this emphatic “by relating it” be read? The decisive aspect, the place where the judgment becomes manifest, seems to be the (way of) presenting (the story/history). The English expression “by relating it” has a double meaning here: the process of telling, and a way of relating things, of putting them in relation to each other. Which relationships are created here? Which capacities are addressed? How is the relationship that Arendt invokes between Homer and Herodotus—authors that fall somewhere between writers of history and poets—to be understood? Why does Arendt focus on the relationship of judgment (to writing, and) to history? What door does the insertion of the phrase “by relating it” open in our understanding of judgment? What grammars (English, German, Greek) are folded into each other here, what plurality of ways of thinking are introduced to the reader?18

In the “Postscriptum” to the first volume of The Life of the Mind, Arendt had already decided and announced that her investigation of judgment would come at the end of the second volume, which is dedicated to willing. That Judging should become its own—however unwritten—book, was at that point unforeseeable. In the last section of Willing, we again encounter the constellation that is introduced in the “Postscriptum.” Here again she talks about the turning point in the traditional understanding of history: of the modern conception of historical progress, which is connected with Hegel and Marx, as well as its counterpart in Kant’s thinking on freedom.

But here Arendt tells the story a bit differently, and with a surprise: with John Donne. In the seventeenth century, as a new scientific understanding of history was already emerging, John Donne, who was not a scientist, but a poet, wrote an astounding observation “in immediate reaction to what he knew was going on in the sciences” in 1611. Without a colon, which would demote what follows to the status of an illustration, but rather with a new, indented paragraph that interrupts and resets the discursive text, Arendt says what she has to say at this moment in her train of thought with another voice, namely the voice of John Donne’s poetry:

[Donne] did not have to wait for Descartes, or Pascal, to draw all the conclusions from what he perceived.
And new Philosophy calls all in doubt,

’Tis all in pieces, all cohaerence gone;
All just supply, and all Relation:
Prince, Subject, Father, Sonne, are things forgot. . . .
And he ends with lamentations that needed roughly three hundred years to be heard again. . . .\textsuperscript{19}

Arendt sets in motion all John Donne’s conclusions, reached independently of Descartes and Pascal, whose ideas are still formative today, by picking up on precisely this word—“all.” In this way a plurality of sentences emerges from all-embracing completeness. Arendt’s and Donne’s observations do not seem complete, but instead offer possible combinations. Arendt’s “all the conclusions” is posed as an echo of Donne’s “all in doubt” and “all in pieces.” The verses diagnose a state of affairs: “all cohaerence gone . . . and all Relation.” What follows is a string of powerful entities—ruler, subject, father, son—that have been forgotten: That is to say, their relationships to each other must be reconsidered. The only conjunction in this poem is “and”: conclusive connecting particles like “because” or “thus” are absent. The verses she cites begin with “and,” and it is with “and” that Arendt continues her text. Arendt’s passage deals with history, with the oscillation between “all” and “and,” and seeks “to draw all conclusions” from history “by relating it.”

In this mode of “relating,” philosophy, poetry, history, and politics come into relation with each other. In Notebook XX of Arendt’s Denktagebuch there is a passage of about twenty pages (477–496) notable because of the density with which poetry, philosophy, history, and politics are brought into relation, and because of the density or urgency with which at the same time she questions their relationship to judgment.\textsuperscript{20}

Those who know Arendt’s later writings will hear hints of judging already at the beginning of Notebook XX: one with “common sense ‘argues,’” because otherwise he would have no way of ordering particular sense-data in the common world. This ‘common sense’ always works with \textit{working hypotheses} that serve to control the particular in reference to its ‘general validity’ (\textit{D X X I . 4 7 7}). Although “judging” is not specifically mentioned, the use of expressions like “common sense” (as “\textit{gesunder Menschenverstand}” and as “\textit{Gemeinsinn}”), with which Arendt was to develop her reflections on judging over the next two decades, shows that it is already clearly under consideration here. This early passage from the \textit{Denktagebuch}, in which the “particular” is twice mentioned, and its relationship to “general validity” emphasized seems directly echoed by the end of Arendt’s \textit{Kant Lectures}. “In conclusion,” she writes there, “The chief difficulty in judgment is that it is ‘the faculty of thinking the particular’ [Kant, Section IV of the Introduction to \textit{KdU}]; but to \textit{think} means to generalize, hence it is the faculty of mysteriously combining the particular and the general.”\textsuperscript{21}
The keyword of Notebook XX appears right at the beginning in entry 2: *athanasia*, the Greek word for immortality, for deathlessness, imperishability, which can also be understood as persisting or living on. In the polis, glorious deeds were helped toward immortality and their heroes made deathless by being told over and over again, so that they remained a vital element of life in the polis, the political sphere. Arendt confronts this ancient understanding of history, according to which “the polis was the site of ‘historicity’ and so politics was ‘the medium of history,’” with a modern way of thinking about history as a *Prozess*, as a process or trial, according to which history was seen as the medium of politics (*D* XX.6.480). If one accepts the modern conception of nature and history as a process of development and progress, history is in the position to be understood as “produced,” which results from a quasi-mechanical understanding of the making of history. For our traditional conception of *athanasia* / deathlessness, Christianity also plays an important role. “In antiquity, man is perishable, but the world is not,” according to Arendt’s aphoristic distinction, and “in Christianity the world is perishable but man is not” (*D* XX.7.482). In modernity meaning is won for individual deeds and lives from their arrangement in a universal design, while in antiquity the history of men and deeds was given meaning in relation to a specific, unique occurrence.

“What the concept of process implies is that the concrete and the general, the single thing or event and the universal meaning have parted company,” Arendt writes in her essay “The Concept of History” at the beginning of the section on “History and Earthly Immortality”: “The process, which alone makes meaningful whatever it happens to carry along, has thus acquired a monopoly of universality and significance.” While this understanding of history as a universal meaning-creating process has its representatives in Hegel and Marx, Arendt invokes the author of the *Histories* in her consideration of the other conception of history. Herodotus “never would have doubted that each thing that is or was carries its meaning within itself and needs only the word to make it manifest,” according to Arendt in the same passage: “Everything that was done or happened contained and disclosed its share of ‘general’ meaning within the confines of its individual shape and did not need a developing and engulfing process to become significant.”

It is astounding, this sentence in which Arendt concretizes Herodotus’s concept of history. “The flux of his narrative,” she writes, “is sufficiently loose to leave room for many stories, but there is nothing in this flux indicative that the general bestows meaning and significance on the particular.” Herodotus’s writing style, the *presentation* of his *Histories*, is what makes the difference. This way of writing makes distinctions that open possibilities; it
creates relationships without subordinating. It is able to think the particular by relating it, which characterizes the capacity of judging, according to Arendt and Kant. Is it a sufficiently loose flow of presentation to deal with the question of “how one can avoid swimming in the tide at all”?

How does Arendt deal with the relationship between history, politics, presentation, and judging in the German version of her essay? In the closing of Geschichte und Politik in der Neuzeit, she turns her criticism of history-making decisively on the present; in the English version this is presented in an epilogue. The monstrous destruction that characterizes the “political experiences and catastrophes of the 20th century,” according to Arendt in a 1957 text, “arose from the disposition” to see politics as a process of production. Understanding politics as the consequent product of a given aim ultimately took away the meaning of politics as an action of freedom that includes incalculabilities. The “totalitarian regimes, the tyrannies and dictatorships of our century” would in fact “ultimately aim to achieve this.” When people are forced into an inescapable, inevitable course, there is no room to jump out of this line and begin a new sequence. According to Arendt what is set in motion through action cannot be controlled, since its interaction with the actions of others is unforeseeable. Not only are the outcomes of acting (together) unpredictable, but even their general tendencies cannot be clearly determined. The vectors of political action, which consolidate into history, do not have a definable direction; rather, they move in a space of time, which points into “an endless future and an endless past.” Herein lies the foundation of an experience of history as related moments, which is strictly distinct from history as development. This former experience rather questions the way relationships are formed, it asks about the mode of “relating.” How can the experiences of such a “potential earthly immortality” be written?

Arendt addresses this question with four lines of a poem by Rainer Maria Rilke from the tenth poem in his cycle “From the Remains of Count C.W.” In Arendt’s copy of the published edition of this “poem cycle,” which is preserved in her library at Bard College, the afterword notes that Rilke said precisely these four lines aloud to himself as if in passing one evening, and subsequently remarked “in astonishment” that these verses “are not written by you.” With a mixture of strangeness and familiarity, Arendt puts these verses in both the German and English versions of her essays on “The Concept of History.” There—as later John Donne’s words would in The Life of the Mind—they continue the thought process of the essay without a colon, transitioning to the German original also in the English version of her essay, simply beginning a new paragraph:
Berge ruhn, von Sternen überprächtigt; 
aber auch in ihnen flimmert Zeit.
Ach in meinem wilden Herzen nächtigt 
obdachlos die Unvergänglichkeit.26

Here the Greek athanasia has disappeared from the world; it no longer lives in the public retellings of men, presented in the bright light of the polis. The “immortality” is relocated to the darkness of the human heart. It is a process of internalization through which “earthly immortality” loses its shelter and becomes homeless in the world. Rilke’s verses are not the inspiration for Arendt’s criticism of a now-dominant understanding of history as the result of a process of development, in which context this inward retreat occurred. The lines’ purpose is not exhausted in serving as a quotation. They host something independent. They stand for themselves—as verses.

Rilke’s verses describe a phenomenon that Arendt called the reversal of the Greek relationships between man and the world. Whereas in antiquity man was the only perishable entity in the boundless immortality of the world, in modern times he has become the last refuge of immortality. Arendt’s text presents the reversal of this relationship in verse. The poetry here does not propose an eternal truth. Rather, it invokes that endangered immortality (athanasia) that accompanies the experience of a political action, pointing “into an endless future and an endless past.” It is for this purpose that Arendt interrupts the linear development of her essay and opens it to the turns, the phrasings of this poem. The presentation of this reversal of discourse (the reversal of the relationships between man and world) and this performative reversal (the interruption of the progression of the text and insertion of verse) is resolved neither into discourse nor into rhetoric. Arendt puts these particularities in relation to each other without predetermining their relationship (without grammatical subordination, for example, and without proposing a resolution).

Even in the English version, Arendt quotes the verses in the original German, since “their perfection seems to defy translation.”27 Rilke’s lines do not fundamentally resist translation, for Arendt provides the reader with a prose version in the notes to her essay.28 Nonetheless, the gesture of interrupting the discursive text is made particularly explicit here, as the change of mode of writing is accompanied by a leap into another language. It is a gesture that acknowledges the singularity of the fact that only in German can “flimmernde Zeit” be rhymed with “obdachlose Unvergänglichkeit,” and that “Nacht” can neither be made into a verb (“nächtigt”) in English nor echoed with a confusingly clear neologism like “überprächtigt.” In
other words, Arendt’s writing offers an experience of how the particular is not replaceable and cannot be rendered into a general meaning. In this way Arendt extends her observation of the capacity of judging in Herodotus’s *Histories*, “that the general [does not] bestow meaning and significance on the particular,” and that instead the author sits in judgment of history “by relating it.”

Judging describes a mode of “mysteriously combining the particular and the general,” Arendt writes. Her method of combining, her constellating mode of writing has a somewhat less mysterious effect in the *Denktagebuch*, since one can ascribe this structure of the writing to the genre of the notebook. How does the particular character of the *Denktagebuch* comment on the capacity of judging in Arendt’s writing in general? How do the different spaces of writing relate to each other?

“Arendt writes in the XX Notebook in April 1953: “Possibly three essays: Forms of government—Vita Activa—Philosophy and Politics” (D XX.9.482). Such entries are rare. Arendt seldom reaches beyond the concrete moment of thought or reading notes and plans future publications in the *Denktagebuch*. Nonetheless, she remained faithful to the plan sketched here, and it previews her writings of the next twenty years. Arendt began writing “Forms of Government” a bit later as “Introduction to Politics,” an unchanged project that became the nucleus of her attempts at and variations on rethinking the political. “Vita Activa” was the title she originally considered for her 1958 book *The Human Condition* in English and the one she actually chose for the 1960 German edition, which revolves around the human activities of labor, work, and action in modern times. Many consider it her “most philosophical” book. In the United States it is as good as canonized as such. But what would it mean to read *Vita Activa*, in contrast to its canonization as a philosophical monograph, as an “essay,” in agreement with her earlier note from the *Denktagebuch*?

Arendt elaborated on the third project of her plan: “Philosophy and Politics. Including ‘common sense’ (Hobbes) and history as ‘Ersatz’ for the polis” (D XX.9.483). If one adds to this an entry written shortly before, it becomes clear that these few lines essentially outline Arendt’s entire project. Hobbes transformed common sense into its logical conclusion—“reckoning with consequences” (D XIX.44.473). Arendt challenges this tradition with her question of the possibility of nontyrannical thought. Her question likewise challenges Hegel, whose speculative reason was inspired by Hobbes through a dialectical-conclusive process-thinking. According to Arendt, Hegel’s universal theory of history had dismissed the praxis of the Greek polis, which understood history as the remembrance of continually retold
 deeds of great heroes. This is the context, Arendt writes in parentheses, of “Hegel’s contempt for Kant’s power of judgment.” In this way the early entries, which opened up a line of thought that associates history and judging, once again establishes a relationship to Arendt’s late writings.

The side question about the temporality of thought raised by the relationship of thoughts in Arendt’s early and late writings stretches out another “rainbow of concepts” than the one Arendt mentions near the end of the second volume of *The Life of the Mind*. With one of Nietzsche’s words, she speaks of the “rainbow bridge of concepts” by which so many modern thinkers attempted directly to reach the ancient world. It is a harmonization that glosses over ruptures. Arendt was not able to cross this bridge, saying that she was “not homesick enough.” Here in the *Denktagebuch* the rainbow bridge of concepts, which helps to think about and address the ruptures of the twentieth century, seems to lead not only to Herodotus but also to thinkers like Kant and Goethe.

In the same passage of the *Life of the Mind* where the “rainbow bridge of concepts” appears, Kant and Goethe are referred to as thinkers who resist a totalizing tendency toward idealism. This tendency attempts to harmonize the diversity and contradictions of history, whether in the form of personifications like Adam Smith’s “invisible hand” or in metaphors of humankind’s collectively fostered design like Hegel’s “Cunning of Reason.” Arendt opposes this with the “dismal reign of chance” with which Kant described the turmoil of history in his *Idea for a Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Point of View* (1784) or Goethe’s remark on history as “mishmash of error and violence” (*D* XX.21.488). “Do not think that I ramble, that I versify, / Look and find me in a different form!” Goethe writes in a rare poetological quatrain of his late collection of aphorisms *Zahme Xenien/Tame Xenia* (1820–24): “Church history / is a mishmash of error, outrage, and force.” Arendt takes the liberty of extracting and varying the fragment that she finds useful. These verses allow this room for play. They share a core quality with other fragment collections by authors Arendt quotes in the same section of her *Denktagebuch*—Pascal’s *Pensées*, Nietzsche’s *Will to Power*, and not the least the epitome of the genre, Novalis’s collection of fragments *Blossom-dust* (*Blütenstaubfragmente*) from 1800: These fragments stand only for themselves; they do not lead to an all-encompassing framework of meaning. To encounter them in any way other than to recognize their particularity is pointless; it is from this very pointlessness that they derive their power. In the same year *Zahme Xenien/Tame Xenia* was published (1827), Goethe wrote: “The view that every creature exists for its own sake and that, for example, the cork tree does not grow so that we may stop our bottles, is something Kant and I have in common.”
Arendt cites Goethe yet again in the context of these passages in Notebook XX of her Denktagebuch, in fact this time she cites from a work that the poet of the era himself declared to be fragmentary: Goethe’s *Farbenlehre / Theory of Colors* (1810). This book is also a thinking notebook, if you will, it was written over decades, a collection of experiments, attempts, observations and reflections, accompanied by a scattering of poems from across the four decades of its creation. “Goethe’s Theory of Colors” (*Goethes Farbenlehre*) is the title of a poem noted by Arendt in the Denktagebuch (496):

Gelb ist der Tag.
Blau ist die Nacht.
Grün liegt die Welt.
Licht und Finsternis vermählen
sich im Dunkeln wie im Hellen.
Farbe lässt das All erscheinen,
Farben scheiden Ding von Ding.

Wenn der Regen und die Sonne
ihrer Wolkenzwiste müde
noch das Trockene und das Nasse
in die Farbenhochzeit einen,
kläzet Dunkles so wie Helles—
Bogenförmig strahlt vom Himmel
Unser Auge, unsere Welt.

The day is yellow.
The night is blue.
The world lies green.
Light and darkness marry
in shadow as in daylight.
Color allows all cosmos to appear,
Colors separate thing from thing.

When rain and sun,
tired of their cloud-strife
unite the dry and the wet
in a wedding of the colors,
dark will shine like brightness—
beaming in a bow from heaven
our eye, our world.

Right from the beginning, there is a plurality of colors. The world lies in the mixture of day and night, light and darkness. When the singular
“color” appears in the poem, it is quickly followed by “all,” the same universal from which John Donne drew his conclusions: the all-encompassing coherence is past, dissolved in a multiplicity of relationships. According to Goethe in his *Theory of Colors*, colors never exist in the world as absolutes, but rather always in relation to the other colors that exist with and around them, surrounding and bordering them. “Colors,” now plural again, “separate thing from thing” according to the poem, they correspond to judgment. In other words, they are capable of separating out particularities and setting them in relation to each other. It is a capacity of judgment that “our eye, our world” comprehends both actively and passively when it beams from heaven in the form of a bow. When it is able to separate “thing from thing,” like the power of colors, like another rainbow of concepts. Which rainbow “Goethe’s Theory of Colors” crossed over to arrive as a poem in Arendt’s *Denktagebuch* remains an open question. A reference in Goethe cannot be proven, and it does not fit into the archipelago of poems by Arendt in her notebooks. A gem, a fragment of thought, a curiosity, a phenomenon of uncertain origin?

According to Arendt, Goethe’s *Urphänomen* (essential phenomenon) was central to Benjamin’s way of thinking—a thinking that she connected with the gift of thinking poetically. Understood in this way, Goethe’s essential phenomenon is not an idea and cannot be deduced from any philosophical or theological theory, but rather material and concretely traceable, in that “word and thing, idea and experience collapse” (*Wort und Ding, Idee und Erfahrung zusammenfallen*). The word “zusammenfallen/collapse” is a remarkable choice, since it can be read in the sense of “coincide” as well as in the sense of “break down.” It formulates an echo of the opposition and relation of destruction and crystallization with which Arendt outlined Benjamin’s gift of thinking poetically. In his fragments for the *Arcades Project*, he sought to trace the essential phenomena of history, which were comprehensible to him only because the “breakdown of tradition had exposed the ‘prehistoric moments’ of all history.” Quotation and thought-fragment are key phenomena that are exposed here. Poetic thinking, as it exists in Benjamin, has a “strange power to settle down, piecemeal, in the present,” and to deprive “the mindless peace of complacency” from transmitted authority. Quotation and/as thought-fragment describes two capacities: both to “interrupt . . . the flow of presentation” and “to assemble together what is presented.” Is it a mode of presentation and of thinking that could deal with avoiding “swimming in the stream at all”? Ways of reading that could be associated with Herodotus’s “flux of narrative,” in
order to investigate the possibility of a way of thinking that is not tyrannical? Attempts to think our ability “of mysteriously combining the particular and the general” to judge, for example, or to present “by relating it”?

Translated by Anne Posten

NOTES

2. Ibid., 248ff.
3. Ibid., 250.
4. Ibid., 251.
5. Ibid., 249.
6. Ibid.
11. Arendt, “Walter Benjamin” (English), 166; (German), 204.

Superfluous were the Sun
When Excellence be dead
He were superfluous every Day
For every Day be said

That syllable whose Faith
Just saves it from Despair
And whose “I’ll meet You” hesitates
If Love inquire “Where”?

Upon His dateless Fame
Our Periods may lie
As Stars that drop anonymous
From an abundant sky.


15. Ibid., 213, 215.


18. See Arendt on the plurality of languages, ways of thinking, and truths in *Denktagebuch*, 42.


20. At the same time, passages 1–34 in volume XX are notable for their multiplicity of literary references: Chekov (17), Tolstoy (18), Goethe (21), Hölderlin (28), Brecht (29), Novalis (31), and Goethe (33); in addition, there are poems by Arendt herself (3, 30). Other thinkers we read about here include Pascal (14), Nietzsche (17), Kant (21), and, in contrast, Descartes, Hegel, and Marx.

21. Hannah Arendt, *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy*, ed. Ronald Beiner (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 76. The traces of many entries in the XX notebook of the *Denktagebuch*, however, also lead to writings by Arendt from around the same time. A large portion of the entries are related to the essays “Natur und Geschichte” and “Geschichte und Politik in der Neuzeit,” which Arendt published in the volume *Fragwürdige Traditionsbestände im politischen Denken der Gegenwart* (Frankfurt: Europäische Verlagsanstalt, 1957) as well as to the essays “History and Immortality” (*Partisan Review*, 1957) and “The Modern Concept of History (*Review of Politics*, 1958) which were originally written in English and published together under the
title “The Concept of History: Ancient and Modern” in Arendt’s essay collection *Between Past and Future* (1961). The versions differ from each other significantly in many places, as Ursula Ludz pointed out in her edition of the German version in *Zwischen Vergangenheit und Zukunft*; the English differs between the versions published in magazines and the book version, significant differences are in addition to be found between the English and German versions (the latter translated by Charlotte Beradt and reworked and largely rewritten by Arendt). A comparative reading of the German and English version merits a separate inquiry.


23. Ibid. Aristotle characterized Herodotus’s writing style of placing things next to each other (léxin eiroménen) as the mode of presenting his *Histories*; Wolfgang Schadewaldt remarked that in Herodotus’s prose the most heterogeneous becomes associable; and Henry Immerwahr formulated elements of syntactical coordination for each action (and/but/as well as), whose relationship in Herodotus was organized more by fractures than by connection; their primary function was “to build a large unified work out of a mosaic of small elements.” Florian Klinger picks up on this reading in his recent book *Urteilen* and emphasizes that in Herodotus *historía* is “articulated through tensions, even on the smallest level, as essentially no distinction, no matter how slight, was to be implied by or assimilated into another distinction.” Klinger continues: “The grainy/rough contrasting of elements whose independence is as broadly protected as possible gives the text an inner resistance which keeps it from collapsing into subordinating relationships, in which individualities run the risk of being structurally assimilated by their respective unities.” Florian Klinger, *Urteilen* (Berlin: Diaphanes, 2011), 94 and 97ff.


25. Rainer Maria Rilke, *Aus dem Nachlass des Grafen C.W. Ein Gedichtkreis* (Wiesbaden: Insel Verlag, 1950), 38. See also Wout Cornelissen’s considerations about the “singing poet” in his essay in this volume.

26. Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 44; *Zwischen Vergangenheit und Zukunft*, 76. Arendt quotes the following prose translation granted to her by Denver Lindley: “Mountains rest beneath a splendor of stars, but even in them time flickers. Ah, unsheltered in my wild, darkling heart lies immortality” See Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 285.

27. Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 44.

28. Ibid.

29. Ibid., 64.
30. Arendt, *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy*, 76.
33. Ibid., 1:645. Cf. corresponding citations from Arendt in the *Denktagebuch*, but also in her essay “The Concept of History” as well as in *Willing*.
34. See this and the following quote in Arendt, *Menschen in finsteren Zeiten*, 199ff.
35. Ibid., 229ff.