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Formation, Exile, and Totalitarianism

HANNAH ARENDT



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Formation, Exile, and Totalitarianism

Hannah Arendt

Edited and with an introduction by
Jerome Kohn



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Introduction

What is important for me is to understand.
For me, writing is a matter of seeking this
understanding, part of the process of understanding.
— “ ‘What Remains? The Language Remains’ ”

“IT IS A curse to live in interesting times.” So runs an ancient Chinese saying that Hannah Arendt, during the last eight years of her too short life, would cite as an aside in the middle of discussing the latest domestic disaster or international crisis. She did so wryly and pensively, as if its ironic meaning were transparently clear, neither requiring nor receiving any explanation. Nevertheless, it was difficult not to be struck by something paradoxical, not only in the saying itself but in hearing it from her, for her commitment to human affairs was uncompromisingly serious. She sought to understand the events of “this terrible century” with a passion that for many years has inspired scholars, artists, writers, intellectuals, public figures, and many others who read her work to confront unsentimentally, and without equivocation, the sufferings of “this none too beautiful world,” even in “the darkest of times.” The quoted words are hers, and it is on account of them that today, in retrospect, the Chinese proverb appears strangely evocative and even emblematic of this intense and thoughtful and private woman.

Hannah Arendt (1906–1975) is known throughout much of the world as a political philosopher, in spite of the fact that, for the most part, she repudiated that title, along with the claims and foundations of political philosophy. It is difficult to say *what* she was. Where some commentators have emphasized the sociological and historical aspects of her work, and others its literary and indeed poetic quality, still more have written of her as a political scientist (a label she applied to herself for many years). Later, when fame had come to her and she was asked to describe what she did, she reluctantly, but commodiously referred to it as political “theory” or “thought.” She has been hailed, justifiably, as both a liberal wanting change and a conservative desiring stability, and been criticized for harboring an unrealistic yearning for the past or for being a utopian revolutionary. These various characterizations (and far more subtle ones might be adduced) reflect the diverse interests of those who make them, yet they also indicate the genuine perplexity encountered by any impartial reader who attempts to form a judgment of Arendt in terms of traditional academic disciplines or traditional political categories. It may be disconcerting to realize that by nature Arendt was not personally attracted to the political realm, not initially and perhaps not ever: even her striking and mature understanding of political action was due, she said, to the fact that she “looked at it from the outside.”

What is beyond doubt, however, is that from first to last she was irresistibly drawn to the activity of understanding, an endless and circular mental activity whose principal significance for her lay in itself rather than in its results. She had plenty of ideas and opinions, to be sure; she made new distinctions, contributed new concepts, and altered old categories of traditional political thought. Those are results, and they have proved to be useful ones. But, although it is unexpected to find a political thinker who is not primarily concerned with solving problems, Arendt’s ceaseless ventures in understanding were for her no more “instrumental

than life itself. What is more difficult to grasp is that the activity of understanding afforded her a measure of reconciliation to the world in which she lived. If others came to understand in her sense of understanding, then she was gratified and made to feel "at home." This does not mean she wanted or thought it possible to hand over her own understanding to anyone else. That would have been sheer nonsense to Arendt, for whom thinking—understanding—endowing an event with meaning—was an engagement with oneself, solitary and private. She led an exemplary life, a life that has been told and will be retold, but ultimately the light shed on the world by her understanding of it is the only way to catch a glimpse of what Hannah Arendt was.

Born into a well-established nonreligious German Jewish family near the beginning of the century, she was prodigiously intelligent, bountifully educated, and heir to an old and rich culture which in many ways she embodied. In the 1920s two events, of fundamentally opposed nature, played a crucial role in the development of her thought and character. The first was her initial contact as a student, which was to develop into lifelong attachment, with two great thinkers in the vanguard of existential philosophy: Martin Heidegger and Karl Jaspers. The second event was the consolidation of the National Socialist movement in Germany.

For Arendt, the revolution in philosophy was a turning inward, not in the introspective psychological sense, but as if her faculty of thinking had been liberated from the systematic rationalizations of the natural and historical worlds inherited from the previous century. She experienced what she called a "philosophic shock": the sheer *wonder* at existence, which was sharply to be distinguished from mere curiosity. From that shock sprang intense self-reflection, or thinking with oneself, which for her would be the hallmark of all genuine philosophizing. Thus, in addition to the content of the thought of Heidegger and Jaspers, there was opened to the youthful Arendt an inner spiritual realm, invisible and immaterial, in which she could literally inhabit in solitude.

The opposed movement took place in the outward, apparent world, its radical intention being not to modify but to destroy the structures and institutions of civil association that had devolved through the centuries. She referred to the growth of this politically revolutionary movement as the "shock of reality."

It is not as if Arendt experienced separately the mind's withdrawal from the world in self-reflection and the approach of National Socialism. She was young and not one of the "professional" intellectuals who could leave Germany and in a freer country continue to work much as before in their fields of scholarship. Yet she was appalled by the ease with which some members of the intellectual community chose to swim with, and not against, the swelling tide of Nazism, or chose not to get out of that current altogether. A certain distrust of the tendency of intellectuals to let themselves be swept along by political currents whatever direction was to remain with her throughout her life.

Arendt once remarked that she was not a "born" writer, meaning that she was not one of "those who from the very beginning of their lives, from early youth, knew that this was what they wanted to do—to be a writer or to become an artist." She had become a writer, she said, by "accident," by the accident of the "extraordinary events of this century."* She meant that far from being a matter of choice, she could not help but attempt to understand and judge totalitarianism. In other words, it was upon her mind, the activity of which was conditioned

by withdrawal from the world, that, in the late 1920s and early 1930s, a world in upheaval ineluctably impinged.

It was a world in which, she later said, even before Hitler actually came to power she “had an awareness of the doom of German Judaism,” of the end of that “unique phenomenon,” the history and culture that were her own (cf. *Rahel Varnhagen*, xvii). She was thus made aware of something distinct from the forms of anti-Semitism which for centuries had afflicted the Jewish people and which they had somehow weathered and survived. (Later Arendt realized that it was not only the enormity of the destruction of European Jewry that distinguished Nazi totalitarianism from older forms of persecution, but also that anti-Semitism was but one aspect of an overall racist ideology.)

The originality of her political thought stems from the fact that what was phenomenal revealed to her as new, without precedent, and extraordinary was actually going on *now*, in that ordinary world which previously had been of such little significance in her reflective life. Thus the political became a reality for her, not only as the arena of “politics” in which politicians get on with the business of governing, harnessing power, determining goals, and formulating and implementing the means to achieve them, but also as the realm in which novelty, for better or worse, can arise, and the conditions of human freedom, including the freedom to think, and of human unfreedom are cast. In one way or another political reality would henceforth orient all her attempts at understanding—not least when, at the end of her life, her attention turned to reflective mental activities as the conditions of that understanding.

Arendt once wrote that “the essay as a literary form has a natural affinity to ... exercises in political thought as it arises out of the actuality of political incidents.” She went on to say, in the preface to *Between Past and Future*, that the unity of those essays “is not the unity of a whole but of a sequence of movements which, as in a musical suite, are written in the same or related keys.” Those words partially describe other books of Arendt’s as well; *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, *Men in Dark Times*, *Crises of the Republic*, and to a lesser extent *The Human Condition*, *On Revolution*, and *The Life of the Mind*, are works composed—woven and shaped—from essays and lectures that in earlier versions had been printed in journals or delivered to the public.

The contents of the present volume have been culled from the scores of her unpublished and uncollected essays and lectures. This is not a book that she ever expressed an interest in seeing published. Its words, but not its structure, are hers. Its organization is for the most part chronological, as will be that of projected volumes drawn from later writings and her writings on specifically Jewish themes.

Hannah Arendt left the bulk of her literary estate to the Library of Congress, where it occupies 33.6 linear feet of shelf space, fills more than 90 containers, and consists of approximately 28,000 items. These items include family papers and personal documents; extensive general correspondence with individuals, organizations, universities, publishers; notes, background information, transcripts, reports, and court rulings pertaining to the Eichmann trial; reviews of her book about Eichmann, and newspaper articles and letters relating to the bitter, emotional controversy that book generated; reviews of her other books; manuscript drafts; and, in approximately forty of the containers, handwritten, typewritten

and printed notes, poems, articles, book reviews, speeches, lectures, and essays. The earliest of these writings dates from 1925, the year Arendt was nineteen; the latest, from 1975, the year of her death. The greater part of them are from the period after her emigration to the United States in 1941.

With Arendt's worldwide stature today, virtually everything she wrote can be of interest to the general public as well as to scholars. Moreover, publication of her uncollected and unpublished writings may shed light in the controversy that today continues to be an element in the reception and evaluation of her thought. That element may have been most apparent in the disputes that raged over her account of the trial of the Nazi bureaucrat Adolf Eichmann. The idea that "evil" could be realized in the world through banality or thoughtlessness, the sheer conventionality, of such a man as Eichmann was perceived by many who read *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (and many more who never bothered to) as an assault on their propriety. In some cases the hurt from thirty years ago still smarts.

But the problematic aspect of Arendt's thought did not begin with her report on the banality of evil; nor did it end there. For more than a decade she has been increasingly the focus of scholarly attention, and the critical commentary on her work is striking for the sharp disagreement it contains—not only on the accuracy of her distinctions and judgments (which is to be expected), but also over what she meant by them and how, if at all, they fit together. To take a single but important example: What, exactly, does she mean by political *action*? What in today's world does it refer to? If it is, as she says, the "field of experience" of "freedom," does it follow that social and economic matters are distinct from politics? Is this feasible or even meaningful in the world in which we now live?

Despite the variety and incompatibility of the answers scholars have given to such questions, interest in her work remains undiminished. That Arendt is difficult to interpret is mainly due to her originality as a thinker, and, to a lesser extent, to the fact that she was nourished by classical and European sources often unfamiliar to contemporary readers. Nevertheless, the passionate, independent, poetic quality of her writing and, especially, her recognition that the political events of our times have no historical precedent have added to her reputation as one of the twentieth century's most fecund and compelling thinkers.

The English political theorist Margaret Canovan in *Hannah Arendt: A Reinterpretation of Her Political Thought*, has written a keen and discriminating work, one that is not at all polemical. She states her aim with deceptive simplicity: "to discover and explain what Arendt's political thought is about." Of particular interest is her thesis that, when a full appreciation of what Arendt meant by the "elements of totalitarianism"—the entire array of phenomena she has specified—is seen as its ground, Arendt's political thought comes into focus as a whole. She does not mean that Arendt's distinctions and judgments necessarily demand assent, but that they cohere when seen in relation to her fundamental analyses of the conditions from which totalitarianism as a form of government arose. Those conditions, however, were not the *cause* of totalitarian regimes and did not disappear with their fall, and *that*, in a nutshell (as Arendt used to put it), is the crisis of our times. It is *our* crisis, composed of *our* predicaments, and it makes Arendt's thought at least as relevant today as during the recent hot and cold global conflicts that threatened us externally.

In Canovan's felicitous words, Arendt's major works "rise like islands out of a partially submerged continent of thought, some of it recorded in obscure articles, some of it only

unpublished writings,” and in no case is this of greater consequence than in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. That strange masterwork—historical, political, philosophical, and full of literary allusions; its tripartite structure and even the meaning of its title often debated; its clear lack of balance in its treatment of Nazism and Bolshevism—has prompted its misapprehension. Canovan claims that when the “submerged” context of totalitarianism is brought to light, the grounds for misunderstanding the book are eliminated, and a new perspective is opened on Arendt’s subsequent thought. Perhaps the most important of the several “trajectories” traced by the present volume stretches from the mid-1940s, when the vast project of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* was forming in Arendt’s mind, to the year following its publication in 1951. The latter period was one of intense reflection on the book, in part explaining it, in part righting its imbalance as more information on Stalin and the Soviet Union became available, and in part deepening and securing its theoretic foundations.

In addition to casting light on obscure areas of Arendt’s thought, publication of her uncollected and unpublished writings should contribute to the interest in her life and character stimulated by Elisabeth Young-Bruehl’s richly detailed biography, *Hannah Arendt: For Love of the World*, and by *Correspondence: Hannah Arendt—Karl Jaspers, 1926–1969*. As compared to those publications, the writings collected here will contribute to an overall judgment of Arendt’s work, for, as Wittgenstein once wrote, “the greatness of what someone writes depends on everything else he writes and does.”

The chronological order of these ancillary writings should encourage readers to construct in their imaginations an exemplary person, a traveler through crucial events of the twentieth century, thereby to gain perspective on those events, as well as a sense of their unfolding. The acuity of Arendt’s vision and the probity—even what at times may seem the rashness—of her judgment can generate an awareness of the immediacy of politics. She used to teach courses called “Twentieth Century Political Experience”—the emphasis always on *experience*—the point of which in part was to stem the tide of political apathy that tends to follow disillusion with political ideals and convictions.

This project was conceived from the first as a selection, rather than a complete edition, of Arendt’s uncollected and unpublished writings. Book reviews, for instance, were never her favorite genre of writing and she stopped doing them on a regular basis as soon as she no longer needed the income. But during her early years in this country, she needed every commission she was offered, and some of the reviews she wrote then were extraordinary exercises—sometimes profound, sometimes sardonic—in thinking with or against (and therefore also with) the book’s author. Three of the essays Arendt collected in *Men in Dark Times* were originally book reviews, and more of the many she wrote are included here.

Not included in this volume are lecture materials that are repetitive or less precise or forceful statements of similar points made elsewhere. In a few cases the subjects of essays—Adam Müller, Adalbert Stifter, Robert Gilbert—seemed too little known for inclusion. An essay on Hermann Broch’s *The Death of Virgil*, a masterpiece of immense importance to Arendt, is included, but a review of his *Sleepwalkers* is not. Two essays on Bertolt Brecht are excluded because they appear to be preliminary studies for Arendt’s wonderful 1966 essay “Bertolt Brecht, 1898–1956,” published in her *Men in Dark Times*. A difficult decision was not

to publish a long essay on Rilke's *Duino Elegies*, written in 1930 in collaboration with Arendt's first husband, Günther Stern (Anders). Its historical importance notwithstanding (at the time, just four years after his death, Rilke was hardly known in Germany), the essay's close analysis of the prosody and diction of the *Elegies* would be inaccessible to non-German readers; moreover, it is not clear how much of it Arendt actually wrote. But the essay's emphasis on inner life and on the alienation of the lover from the transitory world; its reading of the poems as a "conscious renunciation of being heard," thereby transforming the "elegy" into the essential "voice of being lost, rather than a mourning for what has been lost"—all that is in the spirit of other Arendt essays of the same period, in particular the one on Kierkegaard. The "despair" of the *Elegies* is, indeed, seen as "the last religious vestige."

The most important of the unpublished writings from the period covered by this volume and not included in it is the 1953 lecture series entitled "Karl Marx and the Tradition of Western Political Thought." These lectures initiated investigation into a field of inquiry that falls within a later period, an immensely fruitful one in Arendt's mental life. The mid-1950s burgeoned with so many diverse ideas that a strictly chronological order is difficult to maintain. Some of the later essays in this volume clearly indicate a fundamental change in her attitude toward the Bolshevik version of totalitarianism, a growing awareness that it was more completely realized than that of Hitler's Germany, in spite of the fact that its origins seemed "noble" in comparison to those of Nazism. Since the Soviet Union emerged from the Marxist revolutionary movement, and since Marx's thought purported to set straight the whole of Western political philosophy by realizing justice and freedom in the here-and-now, a huge project opened before her. What, exactly, was the tradition of political thought that started with Plato and Aristotle in ancient Greece and culminated in Marx? What relation did it bear to a form of government so terrible that it could not be likened even to tyranny? When the tradition was revealed as bankrupt, what did that imply for the foundations of morality and the meaning of evil? Or for human freedom, spontaneous action, and political association? What did it say about philosophy as such, about the relationship of solitude and plurality, and hence about the possibility of *political* philosophy? These were among Arendt's principal concerns from the mid-1950s until her death, the period to be covered by the subsequent volume.

Many references to Jews as victims of the Nazis inevitably figure in discussions of totalitarianism in this volume, but a separate collection of unpublished and uncollected essays will contain Arendt's writings on such topics as the Jewish question vis-à-vis German education and Enlightenment, modern Jewish history and culture, anti-Semitism, Zionism, the Jewish experience in World War II, Jewish politics and the formation of the State of Israel, Jewish-Arab relations, and the Eichmann controversy. They show that for Arendt Jewish existence, being Jewish and being a Jew in "this none too beautiful world," has both a "subjective" and an "objective" meaning.

In editing these writings certain general principles have been followed. It is apparent in the uncollected essays that some magazines and journals edited Arendt's originally quite awkward English with more care than others (on arrival in New York her knowledge of the language consisted of "one sonnet by Shakespeare," yet a year later she was publishing articles written in English). An effort has been made to attain clarity and some uniformity. The unpublished

writings presented a different situation. In the Gaus interview Arendt says she frequently wrote as fast as she could type, and the manuscripts bear witness to that. They were for the most part prepared for lectures, with a plenitude of repetitions and ellipses, German rather than English grammatical constructions, including page-long sentences, and difficult and sometimes impossible to decipher handwritten corrections and additions in at least five languages. Moreover, the manuscripts are frequently in poor condition. Because Arendt used the “cut and Scotch tape” method of composition, and the tape long ago came loose, marks left on the primary pages had to be matched with marks on pieces sometimes far removed from the manuscript, or even in other manuscripts. Where editing has been needed, the overriding concern has been to keep intact Arendt’s “voice” as well as her meaning.

Editorial comment and textual notes have been added only when clarification of references or obscure but interesting matters seemed called for. Arendt thought politics too serious a matter by far to be left to either experts or scholars. She wrote swiftly and surely (if not always grammatically) for a general audience, not a specialized one, and therefore it would have been neither in her spirit nor in the interest of her readership to add excessive academic appendages.

A number of essays in this volume exist in both German and English versions. There is, for instance, a German text of the Kafka essay that in some respects is more finished and refined than the English one. “When I came to this country I wrote in my very halting English the Kafka article ... when I came to talk to them about the Englishing [Arendt’s word for correcting her English usage] I read this article and there, of all things, the word ‘progress’ appeared! I said: ‘What do you mean by this?’ ” (“Hannah Arendt on Hannah Arendt,” *Hannah Arendt: The Recovery of the Public World*, M. Hill, ed., 334). So we know that Arendt, who had used “progress” ironically, wrote the English version—it was the first of many articles she published in *Partisan Review*—and therefore, in keeping with the principle of maintaining her “voice,” it has been edited by consulting the German version but resisting the temptation to translate it. “Organized Guilt and Universal Responsibility” and “The Ex-Communists” also exist in German versions and were handled in the same way. It should be noted that Arendt never *translated* her own work, but sometimes—though she didn’t much like doing it—*rewrote* in English what existed in German, and vice versa.

The version of the deeply reflective essay “What Is Existential Philosophy?” that was published in *Partisan Review* is an incomplete version of her original German manuscript. Parts of it seem less rewritten than mistranslated. It is not known who was responsible for the English version, but it seems unlikely that it was Arendt, though she may well have collaborated on it. Because it is a tightly argued and complex philosophical essay, one of critical importance to Arendt’s development as a thinker—an essay she was shy of showing to Jaspers, and shyness is not a characteristic often associated with her—it was decided to make a new translation from the German for this volume. The process described above was thus reversed, the earlier *Partisan Review* text being consulted for hints of Arendt’s “voice” while preparing the final version. Among much else, the essay is remarkable as an early indication of the fundamental influence of Kant on Arendt.

“Foreign Affairs in the Foreign-Language Press” presented a different problem. The title belongs to a manuscript, part of which had been extracted, cut up, added to, and published as “Our Foreign-Language Groups.” What was added dealt with Jewish Americans, whose cases

as Arendt says, is “different from all the others.” What was left out were references to individuals who were “politically” controversial at the time (wartime America). The whole presented here has been woven together from its pieces. The focus of the essay is in some ways unusual for Arendt, but it clearly shows her growing interest in the socio-political makeup of her adopted country—an interest born out in a number of other essays in the collection, as well as her respect for journalism as a calling and for at least *some* reporters who were, for her, along with *some* historians and poets, the only reliable guardians of factual truth. The news from the foreign-language press (in so many languages!) was filtered and made available to Arendt by *Aufbau*, the German Jewish newspaper for which she wrote.

In the Library of Congress two manuscripts are clipped together: one is called “On the Nature of Totalitarianism: An Essay in Understanding”; the other, untitled but separately paginated, continues from the first, but about three-quarters of the way through veers off on a not unconnected but nevertheless new tack. It ultimately breaks off in mid-sentence, coming to no conclusion (a relatively uncommon occurrence in Arendt’s papers). Virtually every sentence and paragraph of “Understanding and Politics,” which shows Arendt first grappling with the concept of judgment, is included in the first of these two manuscripts, but not in the same order. It is evident that the manuscripts were lecture materials, and it seems clear that Arendt did not extract from but consulted the first manuscript when she wrote “Understanding and Politics,” which was published in *Partisan Review*. To add to the confusion, there is another manuscript in the Library of Congress that is the original of “Understanding and Politics,” called “The Difficulties of Understanding.” It is an educated guess that the magazine opted to change that title which has here been reinstated. Two sections of “The Difficulties of Understanding” that did not appear in “Understanding and Politics,” probably due to what was thought in one case controversial and in the other obscure, have also been reinstated. With those additions, “Understanding and Politics” presented here in the form in which it was published. Sections of the manuscript in which it was originally embedded, which genuinely complement the essay, were extracted and are now in the notes at the end of the essay.

“On the Nature of Totalitarianism” picks up where “Understanding and Politics” leaves off and continues into the second, “clipped” manuscript, of which the last, incomplete page embarking on a new tack, are not included here. A few paragraphs from an earlier manuscript in the Library of Congress, “Ideology and Propaganda” (most of which is repetitive of or used in previously published work), have been incorporated into the text of “On the Nature of Totalitarianism”; they round out Arendt’s thoughts on the topic of ideology.

Toward its end, “On the Nature of Totalitarianism” distinguishes between loneliness and solitude. That, in a highly imaginative form, is the subject of the little fable about Heidegger, “Heidegger the Fox.” In one sentence from the unused—and otherwise disconnected—part of the second, “clipped” manuscript it is difficult not to hear an ironic commentary on Heidegger’s own reflection (which Arendt greatly appreciated) on the “distant nearness” of philosophy and poetry: “Philosopher and tyrant are as far removed from each other and as close together as solitude and loneliness.”

There are exceptions to the chronological order of Arendt’s writings presented here (Exceptions, one finds, while not proving rules, do make them practical.) The first piece, “‘What Remains? The Language Remains,’ ” is from 1964, considerably beyond the dates of

this collection. The reason for beginning with it is that Arendt rarely spoke personally about herself, and almost never for publication. Here she does speak about her life, and in particular about her youth, about her political awakening, and about discovering the evil of totalitarianism—all of which are directly relevant to many of the writings that follow. She also speaks poignantly about the German language, and about Karl Jaspers, who was always her friend and counsellor, whether or not they saw eye to eye on any given issue.

The following six essays date from 1930, when Arendt was twenty-four years old, to 1933, the year she fled her homeland. The first three are characterized by inwardness and spirituality, an emphasis on subjective life that some readers may find surprising in Arendt, while the following three give evidence of a burgeoning social and political awareness. Two of the first group deal with Christian thinkers, Augustine (the subject of her doctoral dissertation) and Kierkegaard, both greatly significant figures for Arendt. There is no question of theology here—Augustine is not treated as a Father of the Roman Catholic Church, and the piece commemorating the 1500th anniversary of his death is addressed to Protestants rather than Catholics—but, rather, of the two entirely different ways that these men, widely separated by time and circumstance, thought and lived their deep, inner relationship to God. Augustine was “exemplary” in his individual confession, and Kierkegaard “exceptional” in his experience of what Arendt explains as the “paradox” of Christian existence.

Between these two pieces, the long reflective review of Karl Mannheim’s *Ideology and Utopia* deals with a somewhat different relationship, that which mind or spirit (*Geist*) bears to the world and to time, a topic of fundamental importance to Arendt and on which she ran through many changes until the end of her life. The essay takes in earnest Mannheim’s notion of the “existential boundness” of all thought, not excluding philosophic or contemplative thought, seeking to disclose its origin in the “homelessness” of modern man. Such homelessness is seen by Arendt as a condition of socio-economic “reality” and in contrast to reflective thought, her own “solitude” which is “a genuine possibility of human life.” Heidegger and Jaspers appear here (as they do frequently in this volume) as pre-eminent representatives of contemporary philosophy, and in particular Jaspers’s notion of transcendence *in* human existence (and not an ideological or utopian escape *from* reality) is vividly evoked in the example of St. Francis of Assisi. This essay also gives the first clear statement of the reasons for Arendt’s rejection of psychoanalysis, as a practice and as a theory, from which she never wavered.

The next two essays from this period were abstracted from Arendt’s work on the biography of Rahel Varnhagen. They have been translated and reprinted to call attention to that singular study of an astonishing woman, which has been unduly neglected by many of Arendt’s critics and readers alike. (Exceptional in this respect is Dagmar Barnouw’s *Visible Spaces: Hannah Arendt and the German Jewish Experience*; the chapter “Society, Parvenu, and Pariah: The Life Story of a German Jewess” offers an extremely knowledgeable and insightful account of Arendt’s life of Rahel.) Taken together, they reveal Arendt’s first and virtually palpable encounter with what was to become for her the crucial distinction between *public* and *private* realms of experience, a distinction that was to characterize and inform, if not determine, her mature political thought; and also with what later became for her the disastrous confusion of public and private matters in the realm of the *social*.

The essay published on the 100th anniversary of the death of the writer and statesman Friedrich von Gentz brings that most worldly of men—vain, hedonistic, unprincipled

recognizing only power, and seeking only “reality”—to the foreground, whereas in the biography one tends to regard him as only a player, though a major one, in Rahel’s life. When Arendt wrote this piece, Gentz was, as she says, pretty much “forgotten” (the biographies by Paul R. Sweet and Golo Mann were not published until the 1940s). Arendt’s attitude toward Gentz, a figure who bridges the Enlightenment and Romantic periods (which are not nearly as distinct in Germany, culturally or historically, as they are, for instance, in France) is ambivalent, just as Gentz’s career was “ambiguous.” In some respects he was conservative and in others liberal; he was an absolutist who believed that the very principle of legitimacy was historically relative; and he was a Romantic who above all wanted the world not to change. Yet he knew and could accept that the world was changing and that everything he had intervened to preserve would be lost. It was neither principle nor cause but knowledge of the affairs and course of the world that afforded him his place in it. It was from such a spectator’s view, his “participatory knowledge” of his age’s spirit and its secrets—in his own much more worldly way he shared the *Mitwisserschaft* ideal of the old Friedrich Schlegel—that he found his political credo in the Roman poet Lucan, *Victrix causa deis placuit, sed victa Cato* (“The victorious cause pleased the gods, but the defeated one pleased Cato”), with which Arendt closes her essay. But just as she presumably did not at this time share Gentz’s equivocal political position,* so she gives no hint, in citing this verse, of the meaning it would hold for her later. On the contrary, here it almost seems to mean that Gentz preferred the defeated cause because it was defeated. But on July 24, 1954, she referred to it in a letter to Jaspers as “the spirit of republicanism,” and still later it encapsulated for her the very essence of political judgment.

It is noteworthy that just ten years after this early essay was published, in a short and favorable review (not included here) of Sweet’s biography, *Friedrich von Gentz: Defender of the Old Order*, Arendt singles Gentz out from the company of Talleyrand, Castelreagh, Canning, and Metternich, all of whom served their respective “national” interests, as the defender of “the interest of Europe.” She characterizes him as primarily a figure of the Enlightenment who resisted its “decay ... into chauvinism” and “based a completely independent and disinterested policy on the non-existence of a German nation.” In 1942, while World War II raged, she praised the “strange and exciting timeliness” of Sweet’s book, and found “the question of European unity” to be among “the most important political tasks” of the time. Moreover, the “tradition of political thinking” stretching back to Gentz (who had been Kant’s student), after having been “almost lost in the nationalism of the 19th century,” was then seen to be “our particular concern.”†

As far as Gentz and Rahel Varnhagen are concerned, she alone, among his many lovers, understood him, and they both knew that. What she understood was that his attitude toward the world only seemed hypocritical to others, whereas in fact he had opened himself to the world naively, like a child. Arendt speaks of the possibility—had their love been consummated (which it was not)—of another “world” coming into existence, one held “up against the real world,” a world that would “isolate” Gentz from the reality he craved. In his private life he was dependent upon her understanding,” but he was unwilling to sacrifice “his naïveté, his clear conscience, his position in the world—in short, everything” to it.* The distinction between private understanding and public participation could hardly be more sharply, or more concretely, drawn.

It is the power of Arendt's imagination that accounts for the uncanny originality of her portrait of Rahel, so utterly unlike the conventional one first contrived after her death by her gentle husband, Karl August Varnhagen, and then perpetuated by others (cf. Barnouw, *Visible Spaces*, 48). Arendt's ambivalence toward Rahel exists on an even deeper level than toward Gentz. Of course this has something to do with the fact that Arendt was a Jew and a woman like Rahel, but she was not trying to understand her own *political* situation in the 1930s in terms of Rahel's life or experience in "society" more than a hundred years before; she was attempting, rather, to gain understanding of the "Jewish question," as it was embedded in German history and culture, by seeing it from the perspective of a unique Jewish woman.

"Berlin Salon" deals with an extraordinary but short-lived social phenomenon that grew out of German Enlightenment ideals, emerged in full Romantic flower in Rahel's attic, and came to an abrupt end when its "social neutrality" was overwhelmed by events in the real world. "It went under like a ship," as Rahel said, as if exploded by the cannons of Napoleon. Between the League of Virtue (with its notion of equality based on goodness) that preceded it, and the highly discriminatory, bourgeois Table Society that succeeded it, Rahel's salon was the epitome of Romantic "indiscretion." It was this indiscretion, a sort of bohemianism, unconventional and anything but bourgeois, that collapsed the distinction between public and private by taking seriously the interesting human being as such—whether woman, prince, statesman, Jew or whatever—the interest being life itself (happiness or unhappiness, for instance) and not the person, not the bearer of the life. Thus it was not at all a person's place in the world that recommended him to Rahel, but, instead, such a thing as a capacity to suffer "more than anyone I have ever known." Rahel herself epitomized the lack of discretion insofar as her life was ruled by the passion to escape the "misfortune" of her birth—of being a Jewess—by becoming "similar" (assimilated) to every other "cultivated personality." Her salon may have granted her the illusion of such assimilation, but it was a false dream of equality; the time "when we were all together" had vanished like a mirage when she wrote of it to Pauline Wiesel in 1818. In the intimacy of love, Rahel's understanding of Gentz might have shut out, even replaced reality, but it could never reconcile her to a world in which she was discriminated as a Jew. It was the same privacy of love for which Gentz refused to sacrifice the allure of the world that so delighted him in all its circumstances.

Arendt was struck by Rahel's brilliant mind, her great capacity to love and her understanding of others arising from that capacity, as much as by her wonderful undiscriminating openness to life. But what Arendt discovered, in her own experience of political anti-Semitism—as distinguished from social discrimination—was that being a Jew was indeed a political, a public, *fact*. It did not matter whether, personally, she held religious beliefs or had Jewish "characteristics," or if under other circumstances her own brilliant mind and other gifts would have made her an "exception" in the eyes of society. Politically, the fact that she appeared in the eyes of the world as a Jew counted for more than "questions of personal identity," and to have claimed otherwise would have been "a grotesque and dangerous evasion of reality." Through that discovery she understood that the only real, nonillusory equality is political freedom; that the condition of political freedom is having a place, not in a salon, but in the world; and that the only way to obtain a place in her world was to claim it by saying: Yes, I am what I appear to be, a Jew. In 1933 Arendt went to work for the German Zionist Organization, although personally she was not a Zionist; that work led

to her arrest. This is a hard and risky business, requiring courage (among much else accounts for her calling out loud and clear for the formation of a Jewish army during World War II), and it is probably not too much to say that without such an experience of freedom she never would have been able to develop her concept of action.

“On the Emancipation of Women” is the only text Arendt devoted to women’s issues (perhaps reason enough to include it here), although she alluded to contemporary debates within the German women’s movement in her biography of Rahel Varnhagen. Arendt argued that the confusion of social with political aims can never unravel the specific complexity of a woman’s life-situation, the first hint of a kind of criticism that later informed her approach to Marxist thought. Alice Gerstel, the author of the book that is the subject of Arendt’s review and her husband, Otto Rühle, were prominent figures in radical German political movements. Gerstel was also close to Milena Jesenská, Kafka’s friend and correspondent, which makes a nice (if fortuitous) connection to the essay that follows, “Franz Kafka: A Reevaluation.”

The hiatus of eleven years that separates the last piece Arendt wrote in Germany in 1933 from the 1944 essay on Kafka may seem surprising. From the Gaus interview it is clear that Arendt, on leaving Germany, was disgusted with intellectuals and intellectual life, and it is also clear that as a stateless refugee she had pressing practical concerns. In Paris she worked for Youth Aliyah, preparing Jewish children for emigration to Palestine, to which, in 1935, she accompanied a group of them. Yet she did not divorce herself entirely from the intellectual life of Paris. She attended some of Alexandre Kojève’s famous seminars on Hegel where she first encountered the philosophers Jean-Paul Sartre and Alexandre Koyré (she considered Koyré a far more subtle interpreter of Hegel than Kojève); she was also friendly with Raymond Aron and Walter Benjamin.* In view of the fact that she was so prolific a writer in all other periods of her life, it is certainly possible that some writings from the Paris years have been lost.

By far the greater part of the essays following the one on Kafka deal in one way or another with World War II and the multiple phenomena of totalitarianism. Even apparent exceptions—such as the pieces on Dilthey, Dewey, Broch, Jaspers, and Heidegger; the essays that consider philosophical issues, in particular German and French existential thought and political philosophy in general; and those on a variety of matters relating to religion—were written from a perspective that is unmistakably informed by Arendt’s understanding of what were, for her, the unprecedented political events of the twentieth century. The reevaluation of Kafka is itself made from precisely such a perspective: he is not viewed as a “prophet” of things to come, but, rather, as the sober analyst of the “underlying structures” of “unfreedom” in his own time, issuing in “blueprints” of socialized mankind, of a bureaucratic society and a society ruled by superhuman as opposed to human laws. For Arendt, a mark of Kafka’s genius was his ability to grasp the structures of “the subterranean stream of Western history”^{*} while they were still hidden from general view. Moreover, his “image ... of man as a model of good will,” of “anybody and everybody” wanting to be free, is redolent of the “trust in people” of which Arendt speaks at the end of the Gaus interview, a trust “in what is human in all people.”

Arendt believed that political thought in the twentieth century had to break with its own tradition in as radical a sense as the systematic mass murder enacted by totalitarian regimes broke with the tradition of political action. An early and clear example of her thinking can be

seen in the distinction she makes between “organized guilt” and “universal responsibility.” Moreover, it was Arendt, a Jew, who in the last days of the war spoke out against Vansittartism; she saw that the German people had no “monopoly of guilt” for the inhuman crimes of a racist ideology. She felt that the defeat of the Nazis ought not to be greeted with euphoria; her response was not victorious exultation, but a profound lament over the destruction of German culture. Her anticipation of evil as “the fundamental question” to be faced in the postwar world explains her recognition of the need for peoples to be reconciled for a new beginning, for a European federation of states. Evil had become manifest as the inversion of the age-old foundation of Western morality—Thou shalt not kill—and was less abstractly understood as the “monstrousness,” the “inhumanity,” of the creation of “absolutely innocent” victims to demonstrate the natural or historical movement of the world. The linking of “monstrousness” and “inhumanity” with “innocence” seems strange indeed until the utter novelty of totalitarianism as a form of government is understood. This understanding is difficult, and it was a considerable theoretical achievement for Arendt drawing on Kant and, especially, Montesquieu, to have justified the addition of a new form of government to the list begun by Plato and Aristotle and hardly altered since antiquity.

By no means only a matter of theory, totalitarianism—its threat to humanity—is such a danger that Arendt tirelessly alerts us to the political conditions and mental attitudes from which it rises. Thus, it is not just Stalin’s smashing of “eggs,” terrible as that may have been, but the notion of action as fabrication—in the sense of making history—lying behind the violence to which she directs our attention. What distinguishes “ex-Communists” from “former Communists” is a fundamentally totalitarian way of thinking, an impatience with the “basic uncertainties” of action, and an ideological belief in an “end” of history. She is uncompromisingly critical of secular bourgeois society, of its deadly conventionality, and is alert to its tendency to rob man of his spontaneity and change him into a “function of society.” Typically attracted to neo-Catholic critics of bourgeois “morals and standards,” such as G. K. Chesterton and Charles Péguy, she is impatient with Catholics, or anyone else, who seek to escape reality by hiding within the “certainty” of bygone truths.

If there is no escape in either the “not yet” or the “no longer,” if the thread of tradition in Western thought is definitively cut, then not even the greatest philosophy of history can effect reconciliation between mind and world. Hegel’s notion of History, his explication of human affairs and the course of events as a “dialectical movement towards freedom,” has become unreal—not philosophically unreal (whatever that may mean) but lacking “a sense of reality” when weighed in the balance with the political events of the twentieth century. It is not those events conceived abstractly—not, for instance, as signs of doom—that matters, but their actual weight and gravity in human experience. As this volume ends, Arendt views political philosophy, in full contrast to the philosophy of history, as having become possible in a way that it never had before. For decades thinkers had thought, as writers had written, that “the crisis of Western civilization” was imminent, and finally that crisis had emerged for everyone to see—in totalitarian regimes, in huge factories manufacturing corpses—on the earth men share with one another. It was not *another* political philosophy that was needed to account for this, but a new understanding of politics as such. Even though her serious researches into the thought of Heidegger, Jaspers, and others proved inconclusive, in 1951 Arendt seems convinced that it might, for the first time, be possible to “directly grasp the

realm of human affairs and human deeds.” To do that would require an act akin to the “speechless wonder of gratitude” even if it were now “speechless horror at what man may do and what the world may become.” These words do not anticipate a return to traditional philosophy; they are, instead, the appeal of one who, while never entirely at home in it, ventured to understand and judge the world as long as her sojourn lasted. In four strong, beautiful lines from a poem written the same year as this collection’s final essay, Arendt put it this way:

*Ich lieb die Erde
so wie auf der Reise
den fremden Ort
und anders nicht.*

(I love the earth
as a traveler loves
a foreign place,
and otherwise not.)

Shortly after Hannah Arendt’s sudden death in December of 1975, her close friend and co-executor of her estate Lotte Kohler asked Larry May and me (both of us had worked for Arendt for some years as research and teaching assistants) to help her prepare the vast number of papers in Arendt’s apartment on Riverside Drive for delivery to the Library of Congress. It was strange to be there day after day in her absence, the weeks stretching into months (the task was not completed until the summer of 1977). To the sadness of that time there was added a sense of discovery. Almost daily we came upon often wholly unexpected documents and discussed them over the excellent German lunches Lotte Kohler prepared.

Whenever she was in town, Mary McCarthy, Arendt’s literary executor, would join us. Although the cast of that remarkable woman’s mind was in many ways different from Arendt’s, the acuity of their insight was similarly startling. During that time I also talked and corresponded at length with the American philosopher J. Glenn Gray. He had a profound understanding of Arendt’s late thought, which he considered to be many generations, perhaps a century, ahead of its time. Until his untimely death in 1977, he was the best of guides through the intellectual maze of Arendt’s papers.

It was apparent to all of us that a large number of those papers should be made public. Now, after many delays, that is finally happening with the publication of this volume, the first of several planned. Lotte Kohler and Mary McCarthy (until her own death in 1985) encouraged this project from the beginning, and for that, and much else, I owe them a debt of gratitude.

Elisabeth Young-Bruehl was among the first to make use of Arendt’s papers. She studied them intently while writing *Hannah Arendt: For Love of the World*, still the major source for the story of Arendt’s life. Since its publication in 1982, her biography has been widely read by the general public as well as scholars. Elisabeth and I have been friends for twenty-five years, since the day we met in Arendt’s seminar. During that time many hours have been passed talking about Arendt; those ongoing conversations have meant more to me than I can say, not least in connection with the task of selecting and editing these writings.

Larry May and I continued to work with Mary McCarthy, who had undertaken the job of

readying for publication Arendt's last lectures, *The Life of the Mind*. McCarthy's editorial standards were high indeed, and it was then, especially in answering her many long letters filled with queries, that I came to realize something of what editing Arendt's work entailed. At that time, too, I became acquainted with people at Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, both Arendt's and McCarthy's principal publisher. At a memorable meeting with William Jovanovich, Lotte Kohler, and Mary McCarthy, the extent and order of publication of the papers were first determined. Drenka Willen and Julian Muller have been generous with advice. Roberta Leighton—drawing on long experience with Arendt's work—and my own editor, Alane Salierno Mason, and her assistant, Celia Wren, have shown great dedication to this project and contributed materially to its final form.

In addition, over the years many students, friends, and scholars have, perhaps unknowingly, helped inform the selection of the pieces here included. Three scholars must be singled out: Richard J. Bernstein, with whom I have had the pleasure and benefit of teaching Arendt's work; Margaret Canovan, whose acquaintance I made through correspondence thanks to Mary McCarthy, and whose recent work has raised the understanding of Arendt's political thought to a level it did not previously enjoy; and Ursula Ludz, whose thorough (though as yet unpublished) bibliography and excellent German editions of Arendt's work and whose kindness, have aided and encouraged me throughout. April Flakne must also be singled out. While still a graduate student, she prepared successive drafts of the two related essays, "Understanding and Politics" and "On the Nature of Totalitarianism," which together presented the most demanding and, in some respects, most problematic editing task in the collection. She is not, of course, responsible for any inadequacies that may remain in the final versions. Other scholars whose insights have taught me much are Jeffrey Andrew Barash, Seyla Benhabib, Françoise Collin, Melvyn Hill, Suzanne Jacobitti, George Kateb, Giuseppina Moneta, Hans-Joachim Schrimpf, Peter Stern, Ernst Vollrath, and Jean Yarbrough. John Black, Keith David, Iris Pilling, Patricia Ross, Fred Rowley (who gave up a summer's surfing in California to work with me in New York), and Christoph Schönberger have filled some of the many gaps in my knowledge.

The translators of Arendt's German writings included here, principally Robert and Rita Kimber, but also Joan Stambaugh and Elisabeth Young-Bruehl, are hereby thanked for the difficult work they have done. Lotte Kohler painstakingly went over almost every word of translation. I want to thank the staff of the Manuscript Division of the Library of Congress both for their unfailing courtesy and also for their efforts to maintain in as good condition as possible the Arendt collection placed in their safekeeping, which through continuous and ever increasing use has become quite fragile. My thanks go to Gerard Richard Hoolahan and to Mary and Robert Lazarus for their practical and moral support over many years, and to the Graduate Faculty of Political and Social Science at the New School for Social Research, which permitted me to take time off from teaching to complete this collection.

Although Hannah Arendt was decidedly impatient with any suggestion that she was a "genius," maintaining that her road to accomplishment was one of sheer hard work, no one who knew her could doubt her genius for friendship. Encouraging neither disciples nor epigones, she brought together in the bond of her friendship an extraordinary assortment of diverse individuals. It is to two of her greatest friends that this volume is dedicated: To Lotte Kohler and to the memory of Mary McCarthy.

* Arendt said this on the occasion of her induction into the National Institute of Arts and Letters, May 20, 1964.

* Certainly in 1933, after the Reichstag fire, she did not consider it possible to remain a “bystander,” a spectator of events. But much later, in 1972, in reply to a question about whether she was a liberal or a conservative, she replied: “I don’t know ... You know the left think I am conservative, and the conservatives sometimes think I am left or I am a maverick. God knows what. And I must say I couldn’t care less. I don’t think that the real questions of this century will get any kind of illumination by this kind of thing” (“Hannah Arendt on Hannah Arendt,” 333–34).

† Today, more than fifty years later, neither the “task” nor the “concern” seem less timely. Arendt’s review, entitled “Believer in European Unity” (*Review of Politics* 4 (1942), 2, 245–47), was her first published writing in English.

* The quotations are from the completed biography, *Rahel Varnhagen: The Life of a Jewish Woman*, 86–87.

* For a full account of this period of Arendt’s life, see Young-Bruehl’s *Hannah Arendt: For Love of the World*, chap. 4, “Stateless Persons.”

* This is Arendt’s phrase in the preface to the first edition of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*.

“What Remains? The Language Remains”: A Conversation with Günter Gaus

[On October 28, 1964, the following conversation between Hannah Arendt and Günter Gaus, at the time a well-known journalist and later a high official in Willy Brandt’s government, was broadcast on West German television. The interview was awarded the Adolf Grimme Prize and was published the following year under the title “Was bleibt? Es bleibt die Muttersprache” in Günter Gaus, *Zur Person*, Munich, 1965. This English translation is by Joan Stambaugh.

Gaus begins the conversation by saying that Arendt is the first woman to take part in the series of interviews he is conducting; then he immediately qualifies that statement by noting that she has a “very masculine occupation,” namely, that of philosopher. This leads him to his first question: In spite of the recognition and respect she has received, does she perceive “her role in the circle of philosophers” as unusual or peculiar because she is a woman? Arendt replies:]

I AM AFRAID I have to protest. I do not belong to the circle of philosophers. My profession, one can even speak of it at all, is political theory. I neither feel like a philosopher, nor do I believe that I have been accepted in the circle of philosophers, as you so kindly supposed. But to speak of the other question that you raised in your opening remarks: you say that philosophy is generally thought to be a masculine occupation. It does not have to remain a masculine occupation! It is entirely possible that a woman will one day be a philosopher....*

GAUS: I consider you to be a philosopher....

ARENDT: Well, I can’t help that, but in my opinion I am not. In my opinion I have said goodbye to philosophy once and for all. As you know, I studied philosophy, but that does not mean that I stayed with it.

GAUS: I should like to hear from you more precisely what the difference is between political philosophy and your work as a professor of political theory.

ARENDT: The expression “political philosophy,” which I avoid, is extremely burdened by tradition. When I talk about these things, academically or nonacademically, I always mention that there is a vital tension between philosophy and politics. That is, between man as a thinking being and man as an acting being, there is a tension that does not exist in natural philosophy, for example. Like everyone else, the philosopher can be objective with regard to nature, and when he says what he thinks about it he speaks in the name of all mankind. But he cannot be objective or neutral with regard to politics. Not since Plato!

GAUS: I understand what you mean.

ARENDT: There is a kind of enmity against all politics in most philosophers, with very few exceptions. Kant is an exception. This enmity is extremely important for the whole problem because it is not a personal question. It lies in the nature of the subject itself.

GAUS: You want no part in this enmity against politics because you believe that it would interfere with your work?

ARENDT: “I want no part in this enmity,” that’s it exactly! I want to look at politics, so I speak, with eyes unclouded by philosophy.

GAUS: I understand. Now, let us turn to the question of woman's emancipation. Has there been a problem for you?

ARENDT: Yes, of course; there is always the problem as such. I have actually been rather old-fashioned. I always thought that there are certain occupations that are improper for women that do not become them, if I may put it that way. It just doesn't look good when a woman gives orders. She should try not to get into such a situation if she wants to remain feminine. Whether I am right about this or not I do not know. I myself have always lived in accordance with this more or less unconsciously—or let us rather say, more or less consciously. The problem itself played no role for me personally. To put it very simply, I have always done what I liked to do.

GAUS: Your work—we will surely go into details later—is to a significant degree concerned with the knowledge of the conditions under which political action and behavior come about. Do you want to achieve extensive influence with these works, or do you believe that such influence is no longer possible in these times, or is it simply not important to you?

ARENDT: You know, that is not a simple question. If I am to speak very honestly I would have to say: When I am working, I am not interested in how my work might affect people.

GAUS: And when you are finished?

ARENDT: Then I am finished. What is important for me is to understand. For me, writing is a matter of seeking this understanding, part of the process of understanding.... Certain things get formulated. If I had a good enough memory to really retain everything that I think, I doubt very much that I would have written anything—I know my own laziness. What is important to me is the thought process itself. As long as I have succeeded in thinking something through, I am personally quite satisfied. If I then succeed in expressing my thought process adequately in writing, that satisfies me also.

You ask about the effects of my work on others. If I may wax ironical, that is a masculine question. Men always want to be terribly influential, but I see that as somewhat external. Do I imagine myself being influential? No. I want to understand. And if others understand—the same sense that I have understood—that gives me a sense of satisfaction, like feeling at home.

GAUS: Do you write easily? Do you formulate ideas easily?

ARENDT: Sometimes I do; sometimes I don't. But in general I can tell you that I never write until I can, so to speak, take dictation from myself.

GAUS: Until you have already thought it out.

ARENDT: Yes. I know exactly what I want to write. I do not write until I do. Usually I write all down only once. And that goes relatively quickly, since it really depends only on how fast I type.

GAUS: Your interest in political theory, in political action and behavior, is at the center of your work today. In this light, what I found in your correspondence with Professor Scholten seems particularly interesting. There you wrote, if I may quote you, that you "were interested in [your] youth neither in politics nor in history." Miss Arendt, as a Jew you emigrated from Germany in 1933. You were then twenty-six years old. Is your interest

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