

Introduction

This volume contains almost all of the essays and reviews Hannah Arendt wrote about literary texts and the idea of culture. It also contains passages from three of her major books, each of which is principally concerned with either specific works of literature or certain general characteristics of art. A few previously unpublished lectures and lecture notes about literature and culture are also included. The texts are arranged in chronological order, so that the reader can trace the course of Arendt's thought.

Despite the fact that many of the texts included in this volume were written solely for a particular occasion and that Arendt in any case never intended to collect them in this—or any other—manner, they evince a remarkable degree of consistency, from beginning to end. The language of the essay with which this volume begins and the language of the two essays with which it concludes are, to be sure, vastly different: in the former, one finds strained German academic prose; in the latter, idiosyncratic German and idiomatic English. But despite the forty years that separate them—some of which were unprecedented in their horror—these essays are fundamentally akin: Rainer Maria Rilke explores the experience of a “being without an echo” (*Echelosigkeit*); Robert Gilbert lives the life of a poet who knows himself to be “without laurels” (*Lorbeerlos*); and W. H. Auden creates a body of poetry that does not shirk from the sober knowledge that “poetry makes nothing happen.” All of these reflections then converge on one and the same problem—finding the words that would praise the world without imagining that this praise will somehow glorify the poet as well.

As the texts in this volume attest, however, Arendt subtly alters the manner in which she addresses this problem. In her earlier essays and reviews, she is especially attentive to the phenomenon of loss—the loss of a relation between the divine and human realms in her essay on Rilke; the loss of cultural continuity experienced by the “lost generations” of the 1920s and 1930s in many of her subsequent writings. For Arendt, the loss of continuity is prefigured in the development of a separate sphere of secular culture, which self-consciously compensates for the decay of religious traditions. Beginning with her inquiry into the phenomenon of the Berlin salons, Arendt’s reflections on culture are drawn toward figures who recognize the illusory character of culture but do not, then, renounce it in favor of either nature worship or revived religiosity. In the texts Arendt wrote in the last decade of her life, she is again interested in poets whose experience of loss stamps their work; but instead of stressing this trait, she emphasizes—and celebrates—something else: their ability to endure all manner of misery without erecting defensive shields that would consist either in soothing condolences or in fanciful “philosophies of history” predicated on the promise that everything will work out in the end.

Literature: No Longer and Not Yet

In her never-completed work on judgment Arendt proposes that we should not look for Kant’s political philosophy in the various essays he wrote on this topic; instead, we should turn to the first part of the *Critique of Judgment*, which is ostensibly devoted to the idea of aesthetic taste but, as she writes at the beginning of her inquiry, “actually should have become the book that otherwise is missing in Kant’s great work.”¹ Having stated this daring hypothesis, Arendt does not then ignore Kant’s essays on political philosophy; on the contrary, the hypothesis allows her to discover the crowning achievement of “the entire critical business” in some of these late reflections, especially the section of the *Conflict of the Faculties* that identifies the enthusiastic spectators of the French Revolution as a “historical sign.”² One might then ask whether a similar line of inquiry can be pursued in light of the other major thinker who hails from the Old Prussian town of Königsberg, namely, Arendt herself. Just as Kant occasionally devoted himself to political reflection without having produced a major work of political philosophy, Arendt occasionally devoted herself to literary and cultural reflection without having produced a

major work of aesthetic theory. The point of posing this question is not to search among Arendt's works for a book that ostensibly concerns itself with political philosophy but "should have become" a contribution to aesthetics or cultural studies; the point is, rather, to discover a perspective from which to view some of her often-neglected reflections on literature and culture as an integral dimension—if not the crowning achievement—of her great work.

And there is good reason to pursue this line of inquiry. Arendt is justified in pursuing the suspicion that Kant drafts the outlines of a political philosophy in the guise of a "Critique of Aesthetic Judgment" only under the condition that she recognize a fundamental and, as it were, timeless affinity between political and aesthetic forms of judgment. Whoever recognizes such an affinity is automatically excused from participating in debates about the "aestheticizing of political life," which seeks to explain the roots of fascism in terms of a perverse cult of physical beauty. And Arendt, for her part, remained indifferent to these debates despite her keen interest in the works of Bertolt Brecht and Walter Benjamin.³ If political judgment is always already akin to aesthetic judgment, then there is no sense in looking for the conditions in which politics somehow becomes aestheticized. Stating the precise nature of their "elective affinity" is by no means a simple matter, however. Fortunately, Arendt gives certain hints in this direction. In conjunction with her reading of Kant's *Conflict of the Faculties*, Arendt makes the following claim: "The judgment of the spectator creates the space without which no such objects could appear at all. The public realm is constituted by the critics and the spectators, not the actors and the makers."⁴ In light of her essays on literature in particular, a corresponding thesis can thus be formulated: just as political judgment creates public space, aesthetic judgment, which suspends direct involvement in all *pragmata*, grants access to political *time*. At least one reason for this connection is not difficult to establish: as Arendt emphasizes, citing Kant, imagination is the faculty of making present what is absent,⁵ and insofar as both the creation and the reception of specifically literary works are based on a highly developed use of this faculty, literature provides a particularly powerful medium for reflection on the relation between absence and presence, the "then" and the "now." From the very beginning of her career as a writer, Arendt has made her literary criticism into a forum for reflection on the nature of time, with particular attention to the uncertain breach "between past and future."

The preface to the collection of essays entitled *Between Past and Future* is exemplary in this regard. Two literary fragments guide Arendt's inquiry into "the gap between past and future": an aphorism by René Char and a parable by Franz Kafka. Char's aphorism indicates what has opened up this gap—the loss of a heritage for which there would be generally recognized documents and forms of evidence: "Our heritage is preceded by no testament." And Kafka's parable shows the resulting condition: isolated from others and even, in a sense, from its own self, an anonymous "he" is at the mercy of the combined and incongruent forces of past and future.⁶ Long before she wrote this preface, Arendt had experimented with a form of literary analysis that explored a similar gap. In 1930 the twenty-four-year-old student, along with her first husband, Günther Anders, who at the time still used his original patronym (Stern), produced a complex analysis of the philosophical and religious significance of Rilke's *Duino Elegies*. The presupposition of their strenuously argued essay—which takes the form of a line-by-line commentary only because a systematic analysis would be "inappropriate to the sense of the poetry" (308)⁷—is that the *Elegies* are conscious of their total "absence of an echo" (1). Just as the *Elegies* proceed from no discernible literary heritage—and the co-authors nowhere discuss Rilke's literary predecessors—they neither hope nor expect to find readers in the future. The paradoxical situation of the poem in relation to its non-existent reception is then reflected in the equally paradoxical "mission" (*Auftrag*) of the poet: he is supposed to praise the world to an angel; but, as the opening question of the poem emphasizes—and this famous question serves as the epigraph to the essay—the poet cannot be certain that any "among the angel's orders" (quoted at 1) will hear his cry. The basic trait of the world to be praised is therefore loss, more exactly, the breakdown of any reliable relation to the divine order and the corresponding absence of a stable home that would shield both human beings and finite things from their constitutive transience. The only "rescue" or "redemption" (*Rettung*), for Rilke, lies in a transformation into "stronger existence" (*stärkeres Dasein*). Associating "stronger existence" with the Kantian sublime, the co-authors go in search of its defining characteristics: "In Rilke . . . human life does indeed hang in the air, but not because there is no God; on the contrary, it does so because the human being has been rejected and abandoned by Him. This abandonment by God and world, this belonging-nowhere, constitutes both the poetry's religious and its nihilistic character. In this way, nihilism becomes 'positive nihilism'" (23).

The essay on Rilke's *Duino Elegies* is a unique item among Arendt's literary reflections in two respects: it is the only one she co-authors, and it is the only one that is so entirely absorbed in the dynamics of the text under consideration that it foregoes any reference to the concrete historical situation of its author. Nothing, for example, is said about the difference between the elegies written before the First World War and those composed afterward, despite the enormous gap of time that separates them. A very different attitude toward the situation of the writer is evinced in Arendt's review of Hermann Broch's *Death of Virgil*. This review, which, like the book itself, appeared at the end of the Second World War, can be regarded as a characteristic example of Arendt's engagement with literary texts in the 1940s and 1950s. Its title alone indicates its principal concern: "No Longer and Not Yet." And in its opening paragraphs Arendt proposes a systematic schema of modern European literature. The schema develops, once again, out of an awareness of loss; but the nature of the loss that takes shape in the literary work has altogether changed. It does not now follow from a break in the relation between divine and human orders but, rather, from an irreparable gap in the "chain" that binds one generation to another: "In Europe such an absolute interruption of continuity occurred during and after the First World War. All the loose talk of intellectuals about the necessary decline of Western civilization or the famous lost generation, as it is usually uttered by 'reactionaries,' has its basis of truth in this break, and consequently has proved much more attractive than the corresponding triviality of the 'liberal' mind that puts before us the alternative between going ahead and going backward" (121). Two writers, then, make this temporal gap especially visible: Proust, whose massive "farewell" to the world of the nineteenth century "is written in the key of the 'no longer,'" and Kafka, who seems to have written "already from the vantage point of a distant future, as though he were or could have been at home only in a world which is 'not yet'" (122). Arendt's appraisal of Broch's achievement follows from this temporal schema. After describing *The Death of Virgil* as "something like the missing link between Proust and Kafka," she comes close to adopting its language for the purpose of depicting its definitive mission: "this book is by itself the kind of bridge with which Virgil tries to span the abyss of empty space between the no longer and the not yet. And since this abyss is very real; since it has become deeper and more frightful every single year from the fateful year of 1914 onward, until the death factories erected in the

heart of Europe definitively cut the already outworn thread with which we still might have been tied to a historical entity of more than two thousand years; since we are already living in the 'empty space,' confronted with a reality which no preconceived traditional idea of the world and man can possibly illuminate—dear as this tradition may have remained to our hearts—we must be profoundly grateful for the great work of poetry which clings so desperately to this one subject" (122).

There is nothing dogmatic about Arendt's schematization of modern European literature. The point of her introductory remarks on *The Death of Virgil* does not lie in establishing, once and for all, that Proust represents the perspective of the "no longer," Kafka that of the "not yet," and Broch that of the bridge between the two. The main point of her review lies, rather, in promoting its presupposition: that reflection on certain outstanding literary works in their historical context makes visible "this gap, this opening of an abyss" (121). With few exceptions, therefore, the writers in whom she takes a direct interest belong to the generation that lost its relation to its predecessors because of the breakdown in tradition that began in 1914. And the exceptions are themselves indicative of the degree to which she is drawn to literary reflection primarily in its capacity to illuminate the dimensions of the resulting abyss. This is particularly apparent in the few earlier authors whom she chooses to discuss. Arendt shows no interest in the great novelists of the nineteenth century who explore the intricate dynamics of the social order. Of the writers who are largely indebted to this category, only Proust attracts her attention—as the one who bids farewell to the complex social world that novelists like Austen, Balzac, and Fontane lay bare. The few nineteenth-century novelists on whom she concentrates are, each in his own way, far removed from the world of society—so far removed that measuring this distance is, at least in part, the aim of her reflections on their achievements. In *Billy Budd* Melville envisages a "goodness beyond virtue," which is positively destructive to the social order, even in its most rudimentary form. In the story of the Grand Inquisitor, by contrast, Dostoevsky discovers the inverse of Melville's fable: pity for "*le peuple, les malheureux*" (Robespierre), followed to its logical conclusion, does away with the space of freedom altogether (see Chapter 26). And Adalbert Stifter provides a revealing complement to Melville and Dostoevsky, for, as Arendt writes in an unpublished review of "Rock Crystal" (an English translation of a story drawn from the wonderful collection *Stones of Many Colors*), Stifter sim-

ply wishes to pursue "his supreme desire 'to grasp the innocence of the things outside ourselves'" (110). Once again, a systematic schema is at work: Melville creates a figure of goodness beyond virtue, Dostoevsky produces images of wickedness beyond vice, and Stifter paints a motley picture of natural innocence. Despite their insuperable differences, all three novelists are united in one respect: they actively forget the social world, with all of its distracting disputes about relative status, as if an absolute break in the chain of generations had already occurred.

The question around which this schematization of moral extremity revolves can be succinctly stated as follows: how is it possible to acknowledge the claims of compassion without at the same time denying—and thereby contributing to the destruction of—the "in-between" (*Zwischenraum*) that, for Arendt, defines the world and makes it irreducible to the arithmetic sum of the people who inhabit it? Both goodness beyond virtue and wickedness beyond vice can be seen in Melville and Dostoevsky to be world-destructive, and as for natural innocence—it requires the kind of total immersion in nature that the children whom Stifter describes in "Rock Crystal" undergo (113–14). One thing is certain, moreover: this question presses itself only upon those who, despite the experience of loss, fully repudiate self-pity. And, for Arendt, one poet provides a particularly problematic answer to this question, namely, Bertolt Brecht, who not only experiments with each of the moral extremes in his writings but is also a telling representative of the "lost generations." In both of the major essays Arendt devotes to the poet, something like the following sentence establishes the context for further reflection: "Born in 1898, he belongs to the first of that 'lost generation' whose productive talents were sacrificed over and over again to private bitterness and to sentimental self-pity" (see 133 and 231). Brecht does nothing of the kind, however: he never collapses the distance that, early in his life as a poet, he established between himself and "poor B. B." But this precarious stance does not impel him in the direction of a Gottfried Benn or Louis-Ferdinand Céline, both of whom—like many other writers and intellectuals of the interwar period—take a kind of obscene pleasure in "murder, destruction, death, and decay" (138).

Brecht solves the problem of acknowledging the claim of compassion without succumbing to the anti-worldly character of pity in two conflicting manners. One of his solutions involves a self-consciously political decision; the other is the source of his greatness as a poet. On the one hand,

Brecht makes himself into an exponent of communist doctrine, with the result that he writes a play like *The Measure Taken* and, even worse, emphasizes the ultimate usefulness of “the useful one,” code-name for Josef Stalin. On the other hand, drawing on the “actual anti-bourgeois element in him”—namely, his pathos of self-distance, which underlies a “Stoicism in ‘dark times’” (137)—he grounds his poetry in a non-doctrinaire yet exacting conviction that those who have been defeated should never be lost to memory. What she writes of “Ballad of the Waterwheel” goes for all his best work: “The ‘philosophy of history’ suggested by this poem has nothing to do with either socialist realism or proletarian poetry. It deals with something much more general, which is at the same time something much more precise, namely the production of a world in which all people are equally visible, and the planning of a history that is not remembered by a few and forgotten by many, that doesn’t induce forgetfulness under the pretense of remembering, that doesn’t involve some while making others the instruments of history” (326).

Not only do these words capture the best of Brecht; they can be seen to reveal Arendt’s own “philosophy of history”—which, as the scare quotes in the quotation immediately suggest, should not be confused with a “real” philosophy of history in the Hegelian or Marxist mode. The world can be compared to a waterwheel precisely because it never “develops.” But the sober knowledge that the human species does not make “infinite progress” and that there is no such thing as “cultural development” provides no support for either pessimistic lamentations about the sorry state of humanity or Nietzschean celebrations of an “eternal return” that only the *Übermensch* can bear to contemplate. Instead, for Arendt, another aspect of the waterwheel must be emphasized: the fact that *every* paddle comes to light.

Culture: Pro and Contra

In response to Brecht’s expressed rationale for abstaining from suicide—“it shouldn’t look as though one had too high an opinion of oneself” (235)—Arendt has only this to add: “Above all, therefore, no pompous self-importance [Wichtigtuerei]!” (339). At the end of her essay on Kafka, she insists on a similar point: “he clearly did not want to be considered a genius” (108). A world in which everyone is equally visible is averse to claims of genius, to the extent that claims of this sort always come down

to a demand that attention be paid to a few, while the many—who are, by definition, not geniuses—can be forgotten in good conscience. In order to imagine a world without pompous self-importance Brecht produced “instructional plays” (Lehrstücke) and made “absurd demands upon his ‘collaborators’ to learn what was beyond learning” (235). As for Kafka, who had no collaborators, he had no choice but “to anticipate the destruction of the present world” (108). For this reason—and not because he set himself up as a prophet of doom—his work is anchored in the future. As Arendt argues in the conclusion to her essay on Kafka, the last chapter of the last of his novels to enter into print reveals the source of this vision. At the beginning of this chapter, the protagonist of the novel comes across an advertisement for employment that captures, as it were, the spirit of non-pomposity: “everyone is welcome”⁸—welcome, that is, to join the “Nature Theater of Oklahoma,” which not only accepts all of its applicants but also makes no demands that its actors know anything in order to play their parts. The performances of the “Nature Theater of Oklahoma” do not owe their origin to a genial author, and none of the participants in its spontaneous performances is a genial “star” whose brilliance would eclipse the visibility of a “supporting cast.”

With this remark about what might be called “Kafka’s last word,” Arendt silently repudiates the interpretation of Kafka that Günther Anders had proposed in a lecture he delivered for the Institut d’Études Germaniques in Paris, where the couple had fled soon after the Nazi seizure of power. According to Anders, Kafka’s work is firmly anchored in the past; more exactly, it derives from the decay of a religious tradition that only half-heartedly sustains itself under the hollow pretense of being “cultured.” *His* conclusion about Kafka’s “last word” thus runs as follows: “it formulates *the bad conscience of culture with respect to its ‘ur-text’*—the self-humiliation of culture before an ur-text in which it no longer believes yet whose authenticity . . . appears to be the only thing still worth believing in.”⁹ The sphere of culture, in other words, cannot honestly free itself from the religious tradition against which it more or less proudly defines itself. The title of the published version of Anders’ lecture captures its self-conscious ambivalence with respect to the Czech-Jewish writer: “Kafka pro and contra.” One should be for Kafka, according to Anders, insofar as his work reveals the “bad conscience” of culture; one should be against him, however, insofar as he capitulates to this “bad conscience” by reaffirming the authenticity of the no-longer credible ur-text.

“In the audience of the lecture,” Anders later recounts, “with the exception of Hannah Arendt and Walter Benjamin, [Kafka] was simply ‘unknown.’”¹⁰ Both Arendt and Benjamin, however, reject Anders’ case against Kafka, even as they sharpen his formulation of the “pros and cons” of secular culture in general. Benjamin does so in an essay that was first published under the title “Franz Kafka, An Appreciation” on the tenth anniversary of Kafka’s death.¹¹ Arendt follows suit in an essay that commemorates the twentieth anniversary of his death and first appeared in German under the title “Franz Kafka, Appreciated Anew.” According to both Benjamin and Arendt, Kafka can be heard to assert a humble yet unyielding “no.” In Benjamin’s version, this “no” is directed against the uncanny forces of *forgetfulness*; but his denial of forgetfulness, it is important to add, does not arise out of a belief in the restorative power of memory. Only a certain kind of thoughtful remembrance—for which Benjamin invents the term *Eingedenken*—can thwart the distorting forces of forgetfulness.¹² In Arendt’s version, by contrast, Kafka’s “no” is directed against *automatic processes*; but his rejection of automation, it is equally important to add, does not arise from a belief in some natural drive or supernatural destiny that “culture” and “civilization” have somehow conspired to suppress. Only a certain kind of novelty resists the drift toward automation. In search of a name for this novelty, Arendt, too, turns to the Czech-Jewish writer, who both announced that he could spontaneously produce “perfect” (108) sentences and refused to see this ability as proof of his genius.¹³

At the center of Arendt’s essay on Kafka, the basic problem of culture is lucidly presented. As the Latin term *colere* suggests, the point of all “culture” consists in gaining a certain protection from the potentially overwhelming overgrowth that simply *is* nature in its most primordial form. Furthermore, as the German term *Bildung* emphasizes—and Arendt uses this word even when she is writing in English (272)—the acquisition of culture consists in a process of “development” (*Ausbildung*). For this reason, culture can be compared to a house that protects its inhabitants from nature only insofar as they continually rebuild it: “Just as surely as a house built by men according to human laws will fall into ruin as soon as men abandon it, so surely the world fabricated by men and constituted according to human and not natural laws will once again become part of nature, and will be surrendered to catastrophic destruction when man decides to become part of nature himself—a blind but highly precise in-

strument of natural laws" (101). For Arendt, *The Trial* recounts the story of this surrender. It therefore becomes a peculiar kind of Bildungsroman that reveals the ironically destructive nature of *Bildung*—ironically destructive, because the aim of *Bildung*, as Arendt indicates in an early review article (Chapter 2), consists in the development of one's natural capacities under the guidance of an image (*Bild*) that derives from a secular-historical model (*Vorbild*): "As part of this development, K. is 'educated' [*gebildet*] and transformed until he is fit to assume the role forced upon him, which is to play along as best he can in a world of necessity, injustice, and lies. It is his way of adapting to existing conditions. The internal development of the protagonist finally coincides with the functioning of the machine in the last scene, namely the execution, where K. lets himself be taken away and killed without a struggle, and indeed without so much as a protest" (97).

What Kafka shows, according to Arendt, is the fallacious character of the opposition between ruin and progress. Whenever progress assumes the air of necessity, it cannot be distinguished from destruction. Assimilating oneself to whatever claims to be necessary is catastrophic—and this is true even if the necessity in question is nothing other than the natural development of one's predetermined abilities. At the center of her Kafka essay, Arendt unexpectedly quotes a manuscript that Benjamin had given her in France for safekeeping across the ocean: "Where we see a chain of events, he [the angel of history] sees a single catastrophe which unremittingly piles ruins on ruins and hurls them at his feet. He wishes he could stay to awaken the dead and to join together the fragments. But a wind blows from Paradise, gets caught in them. This wind drives him irresistibly into the future to which he turns his back, while the pile of ruins before him towers to the skies. What we call progress is *this* wind" (102).¹⁴ Arendt does not offer an interpretation of Benjamin's now famous fragment—which appeared in print for the first time in the English version of her essay on Kafka.¹⁵ She lets it speak for itself, without so much as a word about its author, who would have been even more "unknown" to the first readers of her essay than Kafka was to the audience Anders encountered ten years earlier. She simply suggests that Benjamin's fragment records the image of a perfectly cultured world, which is to say, a world in which there is no difference between nature and history because irrevocable and unimpeachable laws are said—and seen—to hold sway in both.

In the original version of her essay on Kafka, Arendt says nothing about

his Jewishness. Indeed, readers of the essay who knew nothing else about its subject matter might wonder whether or not he was Jewish, especially since the only discussion of this question comes in the following sentence: "Kafka, an employee of a workmen's insurance company and a loyal friend of many eastern European Jews for whom he had had to obtain permits to stay in the country, had a very intimate knowledge of the political conditions of his country."¹⁶ In another essay of 1944, however, the situation is very different. "The Jew as Pariah: A Hidden Tradition" includes a remarkable reading of Kafka's *Castle* as the story of modern Jewish existence. K. wants nothing more than to live a "normal life" (86) in the place where he happens to live—without special dispensations from the authorities above and without special attention on the part of the people below. K., who is supposed to have entered into the vicinity of the Castle for the purpose of surveying its land, thus rejects the German principle of *Bildung*: he wants to be able to live out his life in the village simply because he happens to find himself there, not because of anything he achieves, still less because of anything he represents. This is, in a sense, the unifying core of the "hidden tradition" Arendt recounts in her essay. To see Jews as pariahs is to disregard two other competing perspectives: Jews are seen neither as the subjects of a body of religious commandments nor as the proponents of a particular secular culture. "Pariah" Judaism is a "*hidden* tradition" for precisely this reason: escaping the alternative "either religious or cultured," the Jew as pariah only wants to be *unexceptional*—so much so that it would be a major mistake to say that he or she wishes to be just like everyone else insofar as this kind of likeness—achieved through a process of "assimilation"—can be a particularly blinding form of exceptionality. Kafka, whose novels and stories repeatedly expose the illusory and even self-deceptive character of *Bildung*, thus stands at the opposite end of a path Arendt begins to retrace in her reflections on the short-lived phenomenon of the Berlin salons.¹⁷

The salons that developed in Berlin in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries in the homes and apartments of Jewish women were sites of transformation. Instead of being exceptions to society because of their religious beliefs and practices, these women wanted to be seen as exceptionally well cultured and correspondingly receptive to the purity of their own sentimental nature. At their supreme moments the salons would foster the kind of shared insulation from the "philistine" world that Arendt describes at the end of her essay on the conservative diplomat and

political journalist Friedrich von Gentz: “If this ‘affair’ [between Gentz and Rahel Varnhagen] had ever been consummated, Gentz might have found in it the possibility of holding a second self-contained world up against the real world and so have created for himself a way to isolate himself from reality” (36). But Arendt’s essay on the Berlin salons is much less interested in the salons *per se* than it is in the consequences of the “catastrophe” (50) that destroys them. Before Napoleon’s invasion and occupation of Berlin in 1806, it was possible for a few Jewish women and a few members of the Prussian nobility to form an alliance with a new generation of writers and thinkers—all of whom wished to distinguish themselves from the prevailing bureaucratic-commercial norms in which their lives would otherwise be anchored. After the Napoleonic invasion, however, this fragile alliance was undone and a new idea gained widespread acceptance: the revival of a Germany of a bygone era, organized on the basis of certain eternally divided “estates” (*Stände*).¹⁸ To be German in this context meant, above all: to fight the French, who were associated with a “superficial” Enlightenment, and to be suspicious of everything Jewish, old and new. As a direct consequence of the “catastrophe” of 1806, the organizers of the salons were therefore left with their allegiance to culture and a few unpleasant choices, which Rahel Varnhagen summarizes as follows: either become “pious” or resign oneself to being “bourgeois.”

None of this is meant to suggest, however, that Arendt’s essay on the Berlin salons—or any of the subsequent texts in this volume—is “against” culture. Far from attacking the salon women for having relinquished their Jewish upbringing, she views this event with a certain detachment, from which it becomes possible to grasp the historical situation in which the word *culture* becomes a term of disparagement. Of course, Arendt can also at times be highly polemical: against Stefan Zweig, for example, who believed that his literary fame should have shielded him from exposure to the unpleasantness of politics; or against Victor Lange, who indiscriminately—and disgracefully—equated a poet like Rilke with a Nazi-apologist like Rudolf Binding (126). But the object of her polemics is never culture *per se*; it is always only the illusion that a high degree of cultivation provides a degree of protection from political reality. Under this illusion a writer like Zweig could imagine himself secure in the world of the Austrian Empire; under a similar illusion, a literary scholar like Lange could imagine that Binding’s propaganda represents the continuation of a trend begun by Rilke’s *Duino Elegies*. Arendt never set herself in opposition to culture,

because she recognizes that culture has something of potentially great significance to say about the sphere of politics: it can teach us what it means to forego the schematization of things into means and ends.

With this thought—which she pursues most thoroughly in “Culture and Politics” but which can be found throughout the writings collected here—Arendt refines and revises one of the foundational documents of modern German culture, namely, Friedrich Schiller’s *Letters on Aesthetic Education* (1795), which argues for the establishment of an “Aesthetic State” as the prerequisite for a non-violent transition from the rule of brute force to the reign of moral freedom. “In the Aesthetic State,” Schiller writes in the last of his famous letters, “everything—even the tool which serves—is a free citizen, having equal rights with the noblest; and the mind, which would force the patient mass beneath the yoke of its purpose, must here first obtain its assent.”¹⁹ As this quotation itself indicates, however, the Aesthetic State has certainly not overcome the means-end schema; on the contrary, it comes close to universalizing it. But—and this is the other famous theme Schiller pursues—the Aesthetic State is principally established for the purpose of satisfying the “play drive” (*Spieltrieb*). Unlike labor, play has no purpose beyond its sheer performance. For Arendt, the “pros” and “contras” of culture can be derived from these basic political-cultural theses. There can be no culture in the proper sense of the word unless it is free from the exigencies of biological processes. Aesthetic enjoyment, as an integral phenomenon of everything cultured, may not be “higher” than the consumption of enjoyable things; but it is categorically different. Because cultural pursuits are ends-in-themselves, they are also comparable to the mode of the *vita activa* that Aristotle calls *praxis* and Arendt translates as *action*. From the perspective of the artist, by contrast, the means-end schema is all-consuming. What Schiller affirms of the artist captures—against his own intention—the case against culture: “When the artist lays hands upon the same mass [as the artisan], he has just as little scruple in doing it violence; but he avoids showing it. For the material he is handling he has not a whit more respect than has the artisan; but the eye which would seek to protect the freedom of the material he will endeavour to deceive by a show of yielding to the latter.”²⁰ Schiller immediately adds a word of warning that takes the form of a simple declarative sentence: “With the pedagogic or the political artist things are very different indeed. For him Man is at once the material on which he works and the goal toward which he strives”—unless, that is, the pedagogical or political artist aims for some other goal, which is far from

unlikely.²¹ Under these conditions the pursuit of culture is positively destructive: the production of art gives the impression that everything—including “human material”—can be used at will. The only difference between political artists and political artisans would be that the former have a talent for concealing the violence done in service of their “work.”

A case for culture can be made, therefore, only when the perspective of the artist is carefully constrained. Arendt interprets a paradox at the heart of ancient Greek politics in this regard: “It was as if the Greeks could say in one and the same breath: ‘He who has not seen the Zeus of Phidias at Olympia has lived in vain’ *and*: ‘People like Phidias, namely sculptors, really should not be granted citizenship’” (186). With this same paradox in mind, Arendt interprets a remark of Hölderlin to which Heidegger had previously drawn attention: “When Hölderlin called poetry the ‘most innocent’ occupation, he may have been thinking of the violence inherent in all other art forms. But, of course, the poet violates his material as well; he does not sing like the bird living in the tree” (192).²² This paradox more or less silently traverses all of the texts in this volume. When Arendt reflects on a literary work, she is wholly absorbed in the perspective of its author: recognizing the break in the chain of generations, she reflects on the conditions under which a poet could do a peculiar kind of violence against language that results in the “coin[ing of] the words we live by” (255). When Arendt returns to the question of culture, however, she insists on turning away from the perspective of the artist. Even more innocent than the occupation of the poet is a certain kind of non-occupation—that of attending to poetry. Something similar can be said in relation to all other cultural occupations: whoever reflects on works of art is less guilty of universalizing the schema of means-ends than the artists who produce them. In this context, Arendt returns to the principal source of Schiller’s plans for the establishment of an “Aesthetic State,” namely, Kant’s *Critique of Judgment*. In the case of the third *Critique*, however, it is quite clear that the spectator—not the artist—is at the center of attention. Indeed, critics of Kant, from Schiller onward, have complained that he neglects the perspective of the artist. For Arendt, this is all to Kant’s credit. Because he wants to draw an insuperable distinction between aesthetic taste and technical skill, and because technical skill is an irreducible element of all artistic activity, including poetry, he concerns himself solely with the position of the spectator, who may know nothing about the processes by which a work of art is made. Knowledge is unimportant; only

judgment or “opinion” matters. In this way, Kant inadvertently discovers a new space—that of the political: “Judgment issues from the subjectivity of a position in the world; at the same time, however, it claims that this world, in which everyone has his or her own position, is an objective fact, and thus something that we all share” (199).

The *Critique of Judgment* does not entirely ignore the perspective of the artist. As Arendt notes at the end of her Kafka essay, it includes an influential discussion of genius. But Kant’s concept of genius should not be confused with its nineteenth-century counterparts: “Genius [in the nineteenth century] was no longer a gift of the gods to man, who after all remained perfectly human; the whole person became a full incarnation of genius and therefore could no longer be regarded as a mere mortal” (108). There is no question that, for Arendt, a genuine poet is different from a mere writer: “in contrast to the large class of professional writers, there are also poets, and a poet is something altogether different.”²³ It is equally certain that, for Arendt, the word “poet” (*Dichter*) is not defined by formal considerations of the literary object. Broch becomes a “poet” when he writes a particularly enduring novel, *The Death of Virgil* (123). These two distinctions—between the poet and the writer, on the one hand, and between aesthetic taste and more or less indiscriminate consumption, on the other—are characteristic of what is often called “cultural elitism.” And in response to Arendt’s “Culture and Politics,” Herbert Marcuse, for one, accuses her of seeking to resurrect the dubious distinction between “culture” and “civilization” that had assumed an important function among German cultural conservatives during the Weimar era.²⁴ But Marcuse’s criticism misses the point: her utter rejection of the category of genius. There is doubtless a difference between poet and writer; but the poet has no *right* to greater visibility. And there is a categorical difference between aesthetic taste and mere consumption; but the eyes of the “cultured” spectator are no more capable than any other of deciding who should shine and who remain obscure. This is why Arendt is drawn to the poetry of Robert Gilbert, who is hardly considered among the great poets of the century. And this is why many of the texts in this volume are haunted by the apparition of a poetic “genius” whose work endures, even when his existence is negated. Because Heinrich Heine’s “The Lorelei” stamps the character of the German language; because it coins the words by which speakers of German live—“Ich weiß nicht, was soll es bedeuten, / Daß ich so traurig bin . . . [I don’t know what it means that I’m so

sad]”²⁵—the Nazis could not eradicate it from the speech of German-speaking peoples, and so, despite their penchant for banning and burning books, “The Lorelei” continued to be read and recited during the Hitler years under the pretense that the name of its author was unknown.

“Stronger Existence”

Arendt and Anders close their analysis of the *Duino Elegies* by emphasizing that, in Rilke’s hands, the poetic form of the elegy is no longer a “lament over what has been lost but [is], rather, the expression of loss itself” (23). Something similar can be said of all the poets to whom Arendt is attracted. At the same time, however, another Rilkean motif that she identifies in her early essay begins to give direction and provide a certain unity to her last reflections on literature: beauty is a “derivative” of “stronger existence” (10). Strength in this context has nothing to do with ruthlessness or brutality; nor is it a property of the angels to whom the *Duino Elegies* appeals. Neither a demonic nor an angelic quality, “stronger” characterizes those who unflinchingly expose themselves to creaturely misery without succumbing to the allure of self-pity—and without seeking refuge in a supposedly self-enclosed sphere of culture, which they, by virtue of their “genius,” would presumably reinvigorate. Brecht’s carefully delineated distance from “poor B. B.” is, for this reason, an exemplary version of “stronger existence.” The consistency of Arendt’s reflections on literature can be gauged with reference to a writer who would otherwise appear to have little in common with either Brecht or Rilke. At the beginning of her reflection on Nathalie Sarraute, Arendt quotes the following passage from the French novelist’s own analysis of the loss on which her work is predicated: “‘Since then’”—namely, since the era in which author and reader could assume that they could understand each other because the protagonist of any given novel was endowed with a sufficient number of self-evident attributes and qualities—“[the protagonist] has lost everything; his ancestors, his carefully built house, filled from cellar to garret with a variety of objects, down to the tiniest gewgaw, his sources of income and his estates, his clothes, his body, his face . . . his personality and, frequently, even his name” (213). Far from lamenting this condition of homelessness, Sarraute’s novels are its exacting expression. For this reason, the end of *Fruits of Gold*, which Arendt quotes as the conclusion to her review, is a startling literary achievement. A tenuous relation between author and

reader is unexpectedly restored under the rubric not now of shared experiences or generally accepted values, but of a singularly paradoxical and highly uncertain strength that consists in an uncertain recognition of common fragility: "Shortly before the end, Nathalie Sarraute turns from the 'they' and the 'I' to the 'we,' the old We of author and reader. It is the reader who speaks: 'We are so frail and they so strong. Or perhaps . . . we, you and I, are the stronger, even now'" (222).

"Stronger" is scarcely the first word one would associate with the poets whose portraits Arendt drew in the last decade of her life. She compares Randall Jarrell to a "figure from fairy land" (258), finds in Robert Gilbert's poetry the reverberations of childhood, when school was not yet compulsory (285), and concludes her discussion of W. H. Auden by describing him as an "obedient servant" of "cruel gods" (302). Loss, though, is everywhere apparent in her account of these strangely similar poets. The first book Jarrell gave to Arendt was even entitled *Losses*, and as she subtly suggests, the loss of an audience for poetry in general—"the absence of an echo" (1), to recall her essay on Rilke—can even be seen as the cause of his death. Gilbert, for his part, was expelled from "the streets of Berlin" (128) and therefore lost the only world in which his poetry could freely circulate. As for Auden, who could easily be considered an exemplary representative of the "lost generation," Arendt emphasizes something else in her commemoration of his death: "[he was] unable to do anything about the absurd circumstances that made everyday life so unbearable for him" (296). Arendt, in short, does not conceive of these poets principally in terms of the irreparable break in the chain of generations they each experienced. Still less does she attempt a systematic schematization, in which each of the three poets would represent a temporal moment or moral extremity. Arendt does not even assert that these poets, like Rilke, are able to transform lamentation over a loss into the expression of loss itself. All three of her portraits nevertheless have something in common: they summon a kind of strength that consists in sheer vulnerability. Attentive to the ever-intrusive environment of the metropolis, Gilbert captures the "nimble-witted way of thinking that will not let itself be fooled, least of all by itself" (292). Jarrell was almost wholly defenseless: "Randall . . . had nothing to protect himself against the world but his splendid laughter, and the immense naked courage behind it" (260). And in Arendt's portrait of Auden, which is the last of her literary reflections, she presents the poet as the very embodiment of "stronger existence."

The depth of Auden's vulnerability can be seen in the lines of his face. Arendt's portrait of Auden begins with a reflection on the bewildering mismatch between the starkness of his appearance and the reticence of his speech. This bewilderment is itself reflected in the peculiar syntax through which she captures the experience of renewing her acquaintance with the poet: "I did not recognize him ten years later, for now his face was marked by those famous deep wrinkles, as though life itself had delineated a kind of face-scape to make manifest 'the heart's invisible furies.' If you listened to him, nothing could seem more deceptive than this appearance" (295). As Arendt realizes, however, appearances are not deceptive in this case. Auden's battered face accurately records a form of life that exposes itself to misery of all kinds. Still, something seems to be hidden in his speech. What she calls his "'Count your blessings' litany" (296) serves as a shelter in which the poet withdraws. But—and this is the important point—this verbal shelter offers no protection. Far from being a shield against the myriad mishaps to which his life was prone, especially in his last years, this "litany" represents a dimension of the very misery that etches the lines into his face. In the words of Arendt's reflections on Brecht, the "'Count your blessings' litany" expresses the poet's total lack of self-pity, his distance from "poor W. H. A." And Brecht is indeed the poet in view of whom Arendt measures Auden's greatness, for, as she emphasizes—cognizant of the animosity between the two poets—they "had more in common than [Auden] was ever ready to admit" (297). Beyond the influence Brecht exerted on Auden's early work, there is a revealing affinity in their respective modes of thinking. Both were schooled in the "lost generation" of the 1920s: Brecht in its German version, with its pretense of wickedness, Auden in its English counterpart, with its air of snobbery. In both cases, moreover, their affectation of careless abandon conceals the very opposite: "an irresistible inclination toward being good and doing good" (298). And this inclination, which neither of them would admit, as though it, too, were something shameful from which they had to suffer, is the source of their turn toward politics: "What drove these profoundly apolitical poets into the chaotic political scene of our century was Robespierre's *zèle compatissant*, 'the powerful urge toward *les malheureux*, 'as distinguished from any need for action toward *public* happiness, or any desire to change the world" (298).

It is at this point that Auden parts ways with Brecht, for his *zèle compatissant* never congealed into the exposition of a political doctrine. As

some of his early poems attest, "Spain 1937" in particular, Auden was doubtless tempted by the impulse that drove Brecht to write *The Measure Taken*; but in reflection on the implications of the Moscow trials and the Hitler-Stalin pact, Auden overcame this temptation. What is more: he did not then follow so many of his contemporaries and exchange an early commitment to the cause of international communism for a dogmatic affirmation of "Capitalism or Freudianism or some refined Marxism, or a sophisticated mixture of all three" (299). The reason for this reticence, according to Arendt, lies in "his complete sanity and his firm belief in sanity" (298). In this regard, Auden stands alone among his contemporaries. If he can be compared to any of the other writers and thinkers whom Arendt discusses in detail, it is perhaps only to Kant, whose attitude toward the revolutionary turmoil of his own era is similarly structured—and similarly fractured. In the *Conflict of the Faculties* Kant celebrates the spectators of the French Revolution for publicly expressing their sympathy for the revolutionaries; but he simultaneously condemns any actions or programs that aim at repeating the revolution.²⁶ Just as the sedentary philosopher makes a fundamental distinction between the stance of the spectator and that of the agent, the peripatetic poet draws a corresponding distinction between compassion for those who suffer and obfuscating doctrines that claim to know how all suffering can be eradicated. This, according to Arendt, is "the main thing" for Auden: "to have no illusions and to accept no thoughts—no theoretical systems—that would blind you to reality" (298). Sanity, in other words, is not a shield with which the poet protects himself from the randomness and sheer madness of life; on the contrary, it is redoubled vulnerability. Not only does Auden expose himself to misery; he also recognizes that history will not come to the rescue. In this regard, he is even saner than Kant, who turned his insight into the significance of political spectatorship into a "prophetic" prognosis that the human species is forever making progress. Auden does nothing of the kind. His "complete sanity" is thus, for Arendt, at once his greatest burden and the source of his greatness as a poet: "what made him a great poet was the unprotesting willingness with which he yielded to the 'curse' of vulnerability to 'human *unsuccess*' on all levels of human existence—vulnerability to the crookedness of the desires, to the infidelities of the heart, to the injustices of the world" (300).

Arendt's portrait of Auden represents more than an *aesthetica in nuce*; it refutes the desperate alternatives between which much of political

thought since the eighteenth-century Enlightenment has been caught: either one affirms the idea of progress, which sees in history a cure to suffering, or one embraces some kind of cultural pessimism, in which case one shields oneself from the fact of suffering by ascribing it to the eternal ways of this unhappy world. Auden, in Arendt's eyes, lives out the rejection of this alternative, for despite the misery to which he mercilessly exposes himself, the "key word" of his poetry is *praise*: "not praise of 'the best of all possible worlds'—as though it were up to the poet (or the philosopher) to justify God's creation—but praise that pitches itself against all that is most unsatisfactory in man's condition on this earth and sucks its own strength from the wound" (300). Sucking strength from the wound: perhaps nowhere does the thought of the "stronger existence" find a more exacting image—not even, dare one say, in the *Duino Elegies* themselves. Some forty years after she wrote her essay on Rilke, Arendt does something more than produce a corresponding commentary on a poet who echoes the opening lines of the last elegy: "At times, emerging at last from the violent insight / let me sing out of jubilation and praise to assenting angels" (quoted at 2).²⁷ She also reflects on what it means that a poet obeys the imperative of praise down to the very features of his face. As a minimum, it means that the apparently eccentric "'Count your blessing' litany" hides nothing after all. And in the end, it means ruin. The appreciation of a grateful readership is no recompense for the ruin he experiences—still less is literary fame. Yet the portrait of Auden that Arendt draws shows that reflection on literature can "at times" do more than grant access to the uncertain time between past and future; it can let the very language of time reverberate. But it can go no further: the language of time that reverberates in literary reflection cannot be translated into a universally comprehensible discourse that would represent the cornerstone of a new "philosophy of history." A line from Auden for which Arendt could find no adequate translation into her mother tongue first convinces her of his greatness as a poet—great not only in the power of his language but also in the strength of his existence: "Time will say nothing but I told you so" (295).