

**HANNAH ARENDT: THE APPEARANCES OF ESTRANGEMENT**

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*The times we live in are perverse in diverse ways, not only, but also not least, politically. In 2016 we elected a president whose appearance in public is avaricious, destructive, deceitful, predatory, and incoherent. It would be hard to imagine a Balzac or Dickens depicting a fictional character more brazenly self-absorbed than this braggart who has no hesitation in calling himself “like, really smart.” Was it Trump alone who visualized himself presiding over—literally, sitting before—more than 300 million Americans? According to him, that qualifies “as not smart, but genius.” But what are the odds, one wonders, of this vulgarian stinging and awakening us, the people, from the political narcolepsy we’ve dreamed in for the past 50 years?*

THE WORD “ESTRANGEMENT” WILL BE USED HERE, AT LEAST IN PART, TO avoid the word “alienation,” especially in its association with the thought of Karl Marx, and, to a lesser extent, Sigmund Freud. This presents a certain linguistic problem as far as Hannah Arendt is concerned. She detested Freudianism, or “depth psychology,” as she ironically called it, considering it a primary symptom of the various disorders it affects to alleviate. She was never a Marxian, though she held Marx as a thinker in high regard: his thought, after all, has influenced and moved greater numbers of men and women to act than that of any other philosopher in western history. Arendt uses in German the same word as Marx, *Entfremdung*, which most often, in her own English as in his English translations, appears as “alienation.” But Arendt is explicit and insistent that she means nothing like “the famous Marxian ‘self-alienation,’” which first and foremost refers to “man’s alienation from being a *Gattungswesen*,” that is, alienation from his own social existence and nature. Marx himself formulates it thus: “*die Entfremdung des Menschen von dem Menschen*,” which is but another way of saying human beings, historically, have been dispossessed of the essence of their species (Arendt 1958, 89, n21). The means to freedom from oppression, proposed by Marx and Engels in the great Manifesto of 1848, is a revolution of the proletariat, indeed, of the working classes worldwide: “*Proletarier aller Länder, vereinigt euch!*” Marx believed that the workers’ revolution would need to be both preceded and succeeded by a correspondingly radical revolution in philosophy and philosophers.

It is not always noted how emphatically Arendt thinks with and against Karl Marx throughout *The Human Condition*, and not just in the third part, where it is most apparent. She wrote this book after having thought for years about the theoretical and practical role Marx’s thought and Marxism as an ideology played in the Bolshevik version of totalitarianism, a matter she had left untouched in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951). In *The Human Condition* (1958), Marx is both her antagonist and protagonist. On one hand, a glance at the index of the later book shows that the entries under “*animal laborans*,” “Labor,” and

“Marx, Karl” outnumber the entries under “Homer,” “Greece,” “Plato,” and “Aristotle” combined. Although *The Human Condition* has often been said to betray a Germanic “nostalgia” for ancient Greece, to Arendt that failing, if it is a failing, is Marx’s rather than hers. “The classless and stateless society of Marx,” she writes, was “obviously conceived in accordance with the Athenian democracy, except that in communist society the privileges of the free citizen were to be extended to all” (ARENDDT 1958, 131, n82).

On the other hand, as I shall attempt to show later, it is undeniable that Arendt at times dons the mask of an ancient Athenian youth imbibing a fundamental trust in human life from Homer’s *Iliad*. Where she decisively departs from Marx, and especially from his conception of *Entfremdung*, is in the fifth part of *The Human Condition*, on “Action.” For example, while considering Max Weber’s “discovery of the enormous power that comes from other-worldliness directed toward the world,” Arendt notes that the “increase in power of man over the things of this world springs ... *from the distance which man puts between himself and the world, that is, from world alienation*” (1958, 252, n2, emphasis added). Now this is not at all what Marx means by man’s alienation from his species-being, and so henceforth, when it is Arendt’s meaning that is invoked, I shall call it *estrangement from the world*.

RECENTLY, SUSAN RICE, FORMER NATIONAL SECURITY ADVISOR AND US ambassador to the United Nations, wrote an op-ed piece in the *New York Times* (January 26, 2018) clearly in anticipation of Trump’s first State of the Union address. Rice’s theme and premise evoke estrangement from the world in America today: “Americans are ever more divided,” she writes, not only ideologically, but also economically, demographically, racially, and religiously. Thus we have in our representative legislative bodies, according to Rice, “policy stagnation,” one aspect of which is our government’s inability to cope with “the most pressing threats to our security,” whether they come from North Korea, Iran, Russia, or nonnational terrorism. “Today,” Rice says, contrasting this year with 2001, “a terrorist attack is more likely to divide than unite us.” In every case, our enemies and competitors benefit from our withdrawal from the treaties we in fact initiated; and this despite the fact that foreign treaties, according to Article VI of our Constitution, are to be respected as *the supreme Law of the Land*.

Domestically, according to Rice, the ideologically driven legislative branch of our government impedes any inquiry into the government’s investigative agencies. In short, there is “little prospect” of “put[ting] country over party.” Domestic divisiveness is worse now than during the Vietnam War, the political center has atrophied due to the presence of extremists at both ends of the political spectrum, and the borders of ideological positions are closed to “civil discourse.” Trump “fuels” all this from his “bully pulpit,” and Rice sees “no silver bullet” to cure a situation in which factual truths are elided by lies. The term “alternative fact” is a contradiction in terms whose only function is to avoid the word “lie.”

In her conclusion, using a striking image, Rice says “we need to decide whether we want to remain the world’s pre-eminent power— a strong cohesive beacon of democracy—or if we are content to allow our national autoimmune disorder, like a flesh-eating disease, to devour our body politic.” She hopes Trump’s upcoming address will strike a “unifying tone,” but wonders, even if it does, whether his “actions can ... match [his] words.” What Rice does not consider—however reasonable her hopes and fears may appear—is the prospect that Trump, the embodiment of division, disorder, stagnation, incivility, and outlandish behavior, may be rather well suited to be president of the world-estranged American society she describes.

WHAT I WANT TO EMPHASIZE IS THAT, AT LEAST FROM HANNAH ARENDT’S perspective, it is not the world that has estranged itself from us, but rather we who, by abandoning the quest for a human world, have estranged ourselves from the actual world, the world into which we come as newcomers from nowhere. Our identity is not given us at birth, but is achieved as the result of our activity in the world into which we are born. How greatly we have today distanced ourselves from that world can be judged in a remarkable passage that occurs in Book 7, chapter 5, of the *Confessions* of St. Augustine. Though Augustine lived more than a millennium and a half before her, Arendt not only regarded him as her “old friend,” as she once put it, but also, and of greater import here, found that his most profound thinking was bound neither by his times nor the church doctrines he initiated and promulgated.

Today, indeed, his thought may seem especially timely, for Augustine wrote as the extraordinarily long-lived world of the Roman Empire and the peace, or *pax Romana*, it established, whose edges for more than a century had been chipping away, collapsed. Yet in his *Confessions*, in which Augustine seeks to discover and disclose who he is, he creates an image of a world saturated with God, all that is visible and material, as well as what is invisible and immaterial, all spiritual things, massively arrayed, a “sort of sponge, huge but finite on every side. Encircling, penetrating, and filling” the sponge “in all its parts” is God, who, in Augustine’s image, is an “infinite and immeasurable sea, everywhere through measureless space.” For the church father and Christian saint, this offers a resolution to the question of sin, which burned in him personally: if the world and everything in it is made out of one omnibenevolent God, that is, out of Goodness itself, evil is literally nothing, *no-thing* at all. Augustine asks specifically *how can evil have a root?* For Arendt, 1500 years and a whole bunch of history later, Augustine’s great flash of poetic insight illuminates less the goodness than the potential glory and hence immortality of the human world. Can one doubt that the Latin phrase so often associated with Arendt, *amor mundi*, love of the world, came as a gift from her “old friend”?

If it is not the world that has lost us, but we who have lost the world, perhaps we

should pay more attention to the activity inherent in transitive verbs. In Arendt's understanding of active life (*vita activa*), to act and to speak are two distinguishing human activities. They are both transitive verbs with subjects (actors and speakers) and objects (actions and speeches). Both activities, acting and speaking, are comprehensible only if they appear and are seen, approved or disapproved, by a *plurality* of men and women. In leaving their dwellings and joining together, men and women form a community conscious of its responsibility for the common interests that relate them to one another. To put it another way, their coming together proclaims publicly in the light of openness their ability, and the courage it requires, to respond to what lies between and separates them from each other. Appearing in public provides an alternative to suffering in silence what often, but not necessarily, has been imposed by force; and if obedience may be invoked and expected in the nursery, it is antithetical to the freedom of movement, mental as well as physical, of everyone who dares to appear in public. In Arendt the presence of many persons, which she calls human plurality, is the *conditio sine qua non et per quam* of public space, which in turn is the *conditio sine qua non et per quam* of a human world. Nothing like that, as far as I know, had ever been thought before (ARENDDT, 1958, p. 07, *passim*).

PLURALITY MAY BE, AS MARGARET CANOVAN SAID SOME YEARS AGO, THE most consequential word contributed by Arendt to our political vocabulary (Canovan 1992, 280–81). Can a world in which human freedom is conditional on the sheer contingency of what eventuates in the world be imagined apart from human plurality? The point is not only that a world cannot be constructed by a lone man or woman, but also that no godforsaken being would be inclined even to attempt to build a world. Is that not the actual meaning of the biblical tale of the Tower of Babel, in which God in his fury demolishes the endeavor to erase distinctions between men? “She lives in a world of her own” is said of someone who chooses for a reason—for example, to create an artwork that will not endure apart from its being seen by others—to live isolated from the common world, but not, and the example implies this, estranged from it.

Arendt chose not to think of herself as a philosopher, and though there may be several reasons for this, certainly one of them is that philosophers tend to think and write of *man* in the singular, assuming there is evidence, linguistic or physical, to support the notion that what affects one human affects all humans, and in more or less the same way. In the realm of politics Arendt found nothing to substantiate and much to challenge that assumption. For example, in recognizing and responding to the unprecedented brutality and suffering in the world of her own time, she discovered a different viewpoint from which the equivalent of appearing in public can be an inner experience hidden from the world. In that case, the light of the public illuminates neither one's peers nor the uniqueness of each one of them.

Arendt found confirmation of this new point of view throughout the French poet

René Char's *Feuillets d'Hypnos*, the tightly packed book of aphorisms he wrote (and never revised) when he fought with the Résistance, toward the end of World War II, not only against Nazis but also against Vichy, the official government of France. Char, in hiding from all except his peers, experienced what Aristotle first called political friendship (*philia politikē*), and, as had Aristotle and Arendt, Char realized that this kind of friendship is not the result but the experience of men and women joined together as equals in the name of freedom. That is almost the opposite of the "intimacy," in which, as Arendt writes, the heart is "unmolested by the world and its demands." As Rousseau made clear, intimacy "conforms so well" to modern world estrangement, in which self-revelation happens "only in privacy and in the intimacy of face-to-face encounters" (ARENDT, 1968a, p. 24).

Almost two centuries after Rousseau, Char discovered what he called the treasure (*trésor*) of freedom. This treasure was found in the darkness of the caves in which he and his comrades lived as maquisards, speaking a language unintelligible to those in the world beyond the caves. Most telling of all is that the treasure of freedom discovered by Char is destined to remain hidden. That is the poet's unique insight when he writes, ironically, of the time when the war would end, and he can appear once again in the light of day: then he says he will have to "reject (not repress) my treasure.... We will be quick to forget. We will quit throwing out rubbish, cutting away and healing" (Char 1946). Here is exemplarily, in the denseness of a poet's words, what Arendt means by *estrangement from the world*.

As it was with Char and his comrades, political friendship is the opposite of a shared ideology, which means, politically speaking, that there is no such thing as public opinion. It is an individual's own opinion (*doxa*) that moves him or her to appear in public in the first place. To offer one example: Arendt has been cited in support of opinions both pro and contra the divisive matter of politically appropriate speech, known today under the rubric of "political correctness," but this is absurd. Political speech can dazzle and persuade by its spontaneity, but spontaneity is of the essence of *being* free, and not at all its condition. How difficult is it to see that if a speaker accepts conditions upon his speech he ipso facto estranges himself from his auditors, and if an audience or potential audience imposes conditions on what a speaker is permitted to say, such an imposition estranges both audience and speaker from the world?

Political correctness, in short, enables the varieties of human suffering to be mentioned in public *and* be kept obscure, and the only purpose it serves is to shelter speakers and audiences alike from the public light of a common world. Orwell noted a long time ago that political language, from conservatism to anarchism, "is designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable, and to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind" (Orwell 1946). To tie that knot a bit tighter, it may be noted that the ends of what Arendt means by speech and action appear in their enactment; they are never known

in advance. Yet, in the historically rare cases in which a community has enjoyed public freedom, the ends of speech and action may constitute and thereby establish the boundaries of public spaces. In the Modern Age, however, which may be called the age of estrangement, Arendt found that traditional or handed-down boundaries are deliberately ignored, thus encouraging trespassers.

IN 1958 ARENDT LIKENED THE “MODERN GROWTH OF WORLDLESSNESS, the withering away of everything *between us*,” to a spreading “desert,” which she insists, against Nietzsche, is not within us. For her, on the contrary, the greatest danger a desert-world presents is the possibility of becoming adjusted to it, which would dissolve “the conjoined faculties of passion and action,” that is, throw out, and God knows for how many centuries, the human incentive to transform the desert into a human world. She speaks of “oases” in the desert-world, which are never political in nature but still activities—such as doing the work of art or philosophy—that do not require the presence of others but “let us live in the desert without becoming reconciled to it.” To put it differently, after the collapse of political structures under totalitarian regimes, closely followed by the collapse of social structures dependent on them, the human world was transformed into a no-where (ARENDT, 2005, p. 201).

The danger that persists today, after totalitarianism, is that when government becomes a matter of administration and democracies become bureaucracies, the principal political faculty that disappears is action. No one better than Kafka, “by sheer force of intelligence and spiritual imagination” (ARENDT 1968b, p. 10), conveys the experience of the loss of action, in both *The Trial* and *The Castle*. Such a world, no matter how small it may become through the ever-faster means of electronic communication, will not be a common world. Yet it is not the case that formerly diverse peoples will have nothing in common: they will have in common the sameness of themselves.

What is the world, according to Arendt, from which we are estranged? To put it as simply as possible, it is our human home. Our natural home may be the earth, but the world is the artifice we weave and unweave on its surface; the world, the space of human appearance in all its variety, is a “web of relations.” The fiber of that web is primarily human speech; and in it, by chance or choice, our singular viewpoint, our opinion (*doxa*), establishes our uniqueness, which is to say our distinction from each other. The world, as Arendt perceives it, is exemplified in the biblical parable of the Tower of Babel (Genesis 11:1–9), in which God in his fury demolishes men’s attempt to erase distinctions between themselves by creating a single language in which God, who is by himself, can be addressed by anyone. A man alone might endure “a solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short” existence in nature, as Hobbes said more than 350 years ago, justifying his singular vision of politics. However greatly Arendt’s politics differ from Hobbes’s, they both understand that the world is the condition of a *human*

life. And indeed, Hobbes's commonwealth, or tyranny, may better merit the three words engraved on our National Seal: *e pluribus unum* (out of many, one). "Let Hobbes have it," one can almost hear Arendt saying, "for there can be no human world without a plurality of human beings in it."

We hear today a lot about rootlessness, homelessness, and loneliness, but we could not estrange ourselves from the world if we were *rooted* in it. Likewise, to be homeless in the world is possible only if we are estranged from it. Most curious of all, a seeming loneliness, the essence and essential danger of world-estrangement, is the condition of the activity of thinking, of withdrawing from the world and distancing ourselves from it; yet thinking is the only way we can become reconciled to the world and overcome being estranged from it. As early as 1954, in her *Denktagebuch*, Arendt writes: "To speak to yourself is not yet to think, but it is the political aspect of all thinking: *plurality manifests itself in the activity of thinking*" (ARENDT 2002, p. 484, emphasis added).

In the last chapter of *The Human Condition*, "The *Vita Activa* and the Modern Age," Arendt traces three developments that, at least for her, inaugurate the modern age. It is important to note that she does not mean the *modern world*; indeed, it is on the brink of the modern world, with its nuclear potential to destroy the entire world, that her book ends. The three developments of the modern age, mainly in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, to which Arendt refers are, first, the exploration, and hence diminishment, of the vastness of the earth; and second, the Reformation, "which by expropriating ecclesiastical and monastic possessions started the two-fold process of individual expropriation and the accumulation of social wealth." Arendt always sharply distinguishes between property and wealth, and here she marks the event that began the process of the success of the latter over the former. The third development is "the invention of the telescope," which crucially supported the "new science that considers the nature of the earth from the viewpoint of the universe" (Arendt 1958, 248–49). It is important to realize that the viewpoint of the universe—the hypothetical Archimedean point, a point of vantage from which the *totality* is being examined—is distanced or estranged from the examiner. According to Kafka, whom Arendt here quotes joyously, he who found the Archimedean point used it only against himself; "it seems that he was permitted to find it only under this condition" (*offenbar hat er ihn nur unter dieser Bedingung finden duerfen*).

These events, then, are critical elements of our contemporary, parlous estrangement from the world. One wonders if it could only be love of the world (*amor mundi*), the opposite of world-estrangement, that could illuminate these elements in the present. That is not the purpose of the last chapter of *The Human Condition*, which, though not despairing, points in another direction. If politics has become mainly a set of economic decisions, then political life, *homo politikos*, has become indistinguishable from work (*homo faber*), and ultimately from labor

(*animal laborans*). Thus the potential uniqueness of human beings is replaced by their homogeneity. No one has more sharply distinguished between loneliness and solitude than Arendt, loneliness being without company, solitude being in company with oneself. The distinction is stark, opposing no companionship at all to the closest companionship imaginable. Solitude is the experience of the thinker to the same extent that loneliness is not the experience of the actor. Thus Arendt, at the end of her book, quotes Cato the Elder, a man of action, and therefore a potent example: “Never am I less alone than when I am with myself.”

Is everyone drawn to the activity of thinking? Is the activity of thinking coeval with human life? Is there, in Arendt, any connection between loneliness and solitude? In March of 1933, when she was living in Berlin and not yet 27 years of age, the Reichstag, or Parliament, went up in flames. She experienced then what she later called the shock of reality, which almost displaced the shock of wonder she had experienced as a burgeoning philosopher. Arendt did not become a professional philosopher, but she is perhaps the first thinker to insist that the activity of thinking, if it is to be meaningful, must remain bound to whatever in the world calls it forth, that is, to what calls out from the world to be thought. If her experience of estrangement from the world was in some sense the origin of her thinking—of the solitude in which she was never alone — then that may account for her uncanny ability to reveal the world in both its horror and beauty. According to some of her readers, she considered *Amor Mundi* for the title of *The Human Condition*, but if one does not question Arendt’s need to love the world, there is still a question about how far she succeeded in it. She understood a great deal about unrequited love, enough for us to ask whether her love for the world was reciprocated. Perhaps the richness of her work lies in its essential ambivalence toward the world. As she says, thinking matters in desperate situations, when no one else is thinking; that is, in “society,” when, in short, the chips are down. This is what is dramatic in thinking, and a thinker who experiences that drama recognizes thinking as a public activity. If politics is our highest calling it is because nonappearing principles come to light in human action. Such principles as “honor or glory, love of equality... or distinction or excellence ... but also fear or distrust or hatred” (Arendt 1968b, 152) admit no compromise and are not negotiable. In this sense, principles are the opposite of opinions. Of course actions and their principles change, or there would be no such thing as history, but principles as such are what they are or nothing at all. In Homeric times, principles may have inspired actions, but without doubt our modern world has progressed beyond such naïveté.

It is still true, however, that in manifesting principles men transcend their given natures. Yet in Arendt it is “world-withdrawal” that overcomes world-estrangement as the condition sine qua non of the activity of thinking. For her, thinking is the only reliable means— regardless of its adequacy—of becoming reconciled to the world, and of regaining

the faculty of action. Isolation, which may look like estrangement, is a necessary condition for doing the work of art, in much the same sense that solitude is the necessary condition for the activity of thinking. It is a matter of interest in this regard that, in Arendt's hierarchy of human activities, the work of art is the highest except for action and speech, and as such is the transition to them. The last two parts of this paper consider that transition from the point of view of the work of art, attempting to show that the meanings of artworks "pass beyond the experience of the individual poet and light up the world we hold in common," as Mark Edmundson so well put it (2013). To forget a thought is literally to forget something you have said to yourself, but not that you have forgotten having heard it; whereas to forget the meaning of what you have seen or read is to lose the awareness of having understood. If these are aspects of world-estrangement, they do not entail loneliness, in which activity as such is without meaning. In Arendt, loneliness destroys public happiness (*eudaimonia*), because loneliness is the deprivation of human plurality. For Augustine, who found God deeper in himself than himself, it is the most radical form of self-denial. For Arendt, it is the denial of actuality, of what is present.

ARENDR KNEW ALMOST ALL OF HOMER'S ILIAD BY HEART IN ITS ORIGINAL language. If asked about the meaning of a passage in the poem, she would more likely than not recite the passage in question in Greek, and let it go at that. For example, when asked if Homer "valued" human life—since so much of *Iliad* describes in often horrific detail the death of its heroes—she would reply, reciting from memory Book IX, lines 406–9:

*lē istoi men gar te boes kai iphia mē la,  
kētē toi de tripodes te kai hippon xantha karē na  
andros de psuchē palin elthein oute leīstē  
outh beletē, epei ar ken ameipsetai herkos odontō n.*

Which is to say: "Fat sheep and oxen you can steal; tripods and golden-maned horses you can buy; but once it has left the circle of his teeth, the life of a man can be neither replaced, nor stolen, nor bought." Arendt would not add anything, nothing like what Roberto Calasso wrote some years later, but not because she would have disagreed with it. Somehow she was not inclined as a teacher to explain the sounds she wanted her students to *hear*. To Calasso, the words quoted above, spoken by Achilles, are the place where a poet for the first time announces a "discovery ... that will put its stamp on history from that moment on and has survived intact to this very day: a foothold in the vast shipwreck of ideas, the only thing still self-evident to everybody, blasphemous or devout." Achilles first pronounces the uniqueness of human life, which, once the breath of life has passed from it, can never return. "It is only because life is irreplaceable and unrepeatable that the glory of appearance can reach such intensity ... Here appearance is everything, the essential integrity of what exists only for the brief period when it is present and visible" (CALASSO, 1993, pp. 102, 116–17).

Later, in Book IX, lines 432–43, Phoenix, tamer of horses, tells Achilles that his father, Peleus, who married the immortal sea-nymph Thetis—from their union Achilles was born—had sent for him to instruct (*didaskemena*) Achilles in the most important things he would require, and these words Arendt said, or almost sang, over and over:

*muthō n te rē tē r emenai prē ktē ra te ergon.*

“To be both a speaker of words and a doer of deeds.” These are the two conjoined activities that make Achilles, who dies young, the timeless example of courage.

Nothing pleased Arendt more than the appearance of a student in a seminar determined to express his or her thoughts on a topic under discussion. If the student stumbled a little at first, which was usual, and then apologized for their jitters, Arendt rather abruptly said, “Never mind how you are—appear as you would like to be— make the world a little better.” Then the well-lit room in which the seminar was held seemed to change, almost like an optical illusion; for to have a sense of oneself as you might be—and not as you are—is akin to becoming a spark, a tiny source of light. Metaphorically, it is a ship’s light beckoning in the dark and being recognized by other ships, in a sea with no safe harbor. In Arendt’s seminar, it was an immediate experience of illumination, of emerging from the dark.

Let me add an example from the faculty of vision. We are accustomed to seeing photographic images of camps, pits dug out of the desert, and lifeboats crammed with thousands of men, women, and children without any space between them. There is no world for these “huddled masses” welcomed by neither a statute nor statue of liberty. They go from country to country, continent to continent, searching for shelter and livelihood in a world more compact than ever before; their expropriation is complete, except, in some cases, for a cell phone, a product of applied science and technology, but to call whom and for what? In contrast, a painting by Nicolas Poussin from the middle of the seventeenth century, entitled “Landscape with a Man Killed by a Snake” (<https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/nicolas-poussin-landscape-with-a-man-killed-by-a-snake>), thickens in paint the sight of a man who has witnessed the killing of another man by an enormous black snake, the likes of which has never been seen in France. The witness, fleeing the scene of the killing, is himself seen by others in a variety of spatial and temporal relations to him, which are achieved by the reflected and filtered sunlight typical of this great artist (cf. *The Sight of Death*, CLARK, 2006, p. 96–97). This is, and I believe Arendt would agree, an atemporal image of the relation, binding or not, between human life and a human world.

Doch eine Würde, eine Höhe Entfernte die Vertraulichkeit.  
—Friedrich Schiller, “*Das Mädchen aus der Fremde*”

THE GERMAN POET FRIEDRICH SCHILLER WROTE “*das mädchen aus der Fremde*,” a poem that was very closely associated with Arendt, not only by her husband,

Heinrich Blücher, and friends who knew her well, but also by herself. When she and Heidegger met in 1950 for the first time in almost 20 years, which period of course comprised the destruction of European Jewry, she described herself in more than one sense as “the maiden from far away” (Arendt and Heidegger 2002, 76). There is even a French film with the same title, *La jeune fille de lointain*, which is a visual and audial, photographic and musical series of images arrayed as an impressionistic biography of Arendt. Schiller’s poem tells a story: A maiden, wonderful and fair, appears each spring in a valley by a peasant’s house. She wasn’t born there; no one knows where she comes from; and when she leaves she leaves no trace behind her. But her arrival each year is joyful; to be in her presence is to feel one’s own heart expand. She brings with her fruits and flowers, which ripened and bloomed somewhere else, under a different sunlight and a more fortunate nature (*In einem andern Sonnenlichte, / In einer glücklichern Natur*). For everyone she meets she has a gift, fruit for one and flowers for another; no one, neither young nor old, goes home without a gift. She welcomes everyone, but when two newcomers who have fallen in love come to her she gives them the finest, most beautiful, and most fertile gift she has.

Here is Schiller’s poem in German:

*In einem Tal bei armen Hirten  
Erschien mit jedem jungen Jahr,  
Sobald die ersten Lerchen schwirrten,  
Ein Mädchen, schön und wunderbar.*

*Sie war nicht in dem Tal geboren,  
Man wußte nicht, woher sie kam,  
Doch schnell war ihre Spur verloren,  
Sobald das Mädchen Abschied nahm.*

*Beseligend war ihre Nähe  
Und alle Herzen wurden weit;  
Doch eine Würde, eine Höhe  
Entfernte die Vertraulichkeit.*

*Sie brachte Blumen mit und Früchte,  
Gereift auf einer andern Flur,  
In einem andern Sonnenlichte,  
In einer glücklichern Natur,*

*Und teilte jedem eine Gabe,  
Dem Früchte, jenem Blumen aus;  
Der Jüngling und der Greis am Stabe,  
Ein jeder ging beschenkt nach Haus.*

*Willkommen waren alle Gäste,  
Doch nahte sich ein liebend Paar,  
Dem reichte sie der Gaben beste,  
Der Blumen allerschönste dar.*

Those of you who read German may have noticed that I skipped two lines, the same two lines placed at the head of this section:

*Doch eine Würde, eine Höhe Entfernte die Vertraulichkeit.*

I do not know how to translate them. A conventional translation might say “Yet dignity, a lofty essence, / Turned familiarity away,” meaning that her high dignity kept her to herself, or something like that. But to me these thick lines in German contain the kernel of the poem. Of course, it is the maiden’s uniqueness that makes her unfamiliar — but one can hardly let it go at that. Was Schiller, as were so many Romantic poets, influenced by Virgil? Aeneas, while fleeing his destroyed and desecrated homeland of Troy, falls in love with Dido, Queen of Carthage. In the first book of the *Aeneid* he tells her that the gods have decreed that he quit her company and sail to Italy, to refound Troy as Rome. In *Aeneid* 1.604, he tells Dido of his sadness at having to leave her and her *mens sibi conscia recti*, her “mind conscious of doing right.” That is as close as I can come to the *sense* of estrangement of Schiller’s *Mädchen* from those to whom she suddenly appears from nowhere to bless them and their world.

In 1930, when she was 24 years old, Arendt and her first husband, Günther Stern (who later changed his name, meaningfully, to Günther Anders), wrote an essay on Rainer Maria Rilke’s *Duino Elegies*. Rilke was hardly better known than Arendt and her husband at the time. They write about the greatness of a poet who suffers and transfigures—and by no means only in his intensely personal love poetry—the extreme unhappiness of a man estranged inside and outside from the world in which he lives. The essay lays great stress on the estrangement of the lover from the temporality of the world; Arendt and Stern—though this sounds more like Arendt than Stern — view Rilke’s poetic achievement as his transfiguration of the traditional elegiac voice of mourning for what is lost into a new and extraordinary voice of *being lost*, even to the extent of consciously renouncing any need to be heard by God and his angels (Arendt and Stern 1930).

Poets are not politicians, and political activity most certainly is not poetry. What they share in common is that they both address common perceptions of a changing human world. Over and over again, modern poets have not so much expressed as deeply *impressed* on their readers the sense of estrangement from the world as it has become. In this regard, T. S. Eliot’s *Wasteland* is exemplary. And yet, in a manner of speaking, there is a way that great poets become reconciled, in and through their work, to the world in which they live. Thus Arendt quotes W. H. Auden, her close friend—a man who had never been at home in the world, or even in his own skin—after a reading of his poems, exclaiming “They loved me!” (ARENDR, 2018, p. 528). For Arendt, as I have attempted to show, political life and activity are possible only when world estrangement ends: reconciliation to the world as it is—that is, not to any utopian or dystopian vision of a world that ought or ought not to be—is the condition of the highest activities of this-worldliness (*Weltlichkeit*), action and speech. Thus there is a division, made by a sharp-edged compass, between this-worldliness and

estrangement from the world. There is yet another human realm entirely, private and, insofar as its condition is world *withdrawal*, interior. Here the German adjective *fremd* means not only “strange” and “far-away” but also “foreign,” as Schiller already indicates.

Isn't the political question today of how to make a world in which displaced and homeless foreigners can dwell together with, and not estranged from, men, women, and children who differ from them ethnically, religiously, and racially ever more urgent? Yes, of course it is, but how can it be resolved? Preparing for her last semester of teaching at the Graduate Faculty of The New School in 1975, and working day and night to complete *The Life of the Mind*, Arendt asked what course she should offer. Knowing how seriously she took teaching, it was suggested that she repeat the first seminar she had given there, almost eight years before, “Political Experiences in the Twentieth Century.” That course, in which students were asked to read no theoretical works whatever but rather biographies, novels, dramas, and a lot of poetry, mainly by Bertolt Brecht, had been a huge success. There were students in it who speak and write of it 50 years later. But in 1975 she said no, it was too late already then. What did she mean? Had she seen something new on the political horizon, something that bore no relation to the events earlier in the century that preceded the emergence of totalitarianism? Or did she mean something entirely different? The year 1968 was five years after *l'affaire Eichmann*, but the grief it brought her had not abated. I believe by 1975 she saw clearly that she owed her students the experience — and this experience would not be vicarious — of the activity of thinking. World-withdrawal as the condition of thinking was not new to Arendt. It appeared as early as the mid-1940s in her analysis of the “conscious pariah” who, though exemplifying estrangement from the world, achieved freedom “by the sheer force of imagination.” It is this essential ingredient of thinking that allowed Bernard Lazare to realize that resisting oppression is “the duty of every human being” (ARENDT, 2007, p. 276, 284). A decade later, in 1954, when Arendt's mind was spilling over with thoughts illuminating and defining politics as that kind of activity that can only be performed in public, in a public space where everyone is the equal of everyone else, she wrote a poem that begins:

Ich lieb die Erde  
 So wie auf der Reise  
 Den fremden Ort,  
 Und anders nicht.

“I love the earth / As if traveling / To a foreign place, / And otherwise not.” The rest of the poem tells us that the poet's life is spun in an unknowable pattern, until suddenly, like a traveler saying *adieu*, a great silence breaks the frame.

Here the “foreign” in *fremd* is clearly intended. It is Arendt's way of impressing the almost-always-present melancholy in the freedom of thinking poetically. Other kinds of freedom — freedom from any form of censorship, for example, or from the restriction to

cross borders (the right to a passport, as Kant had suggested), the freedom to assemble in public, to speak or write our opinions—may in time limit our ability to be struck by wonder, the ancient way of experiencing truth, which unequivocally sets us thinking. The experience of truth as wonder is immediate — **a-ltheia**: *revealed, unhidden*, or more literally, *unforgotten*—not the end-product of thinking but its beginning. To dispel wonder, and truth-as-wonder, risks thoughtlessness — the incapability to reflect, imagine, or even remember what one has done — the peril of which no one understood better than Hannah Arendt.

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