"The Odium of Doubtfulness"; or, The Vicissitudes of Metaphorical Thinking

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All thinking [is] metaphorical.
—Hannah Arendt, *Denktagebuch*

Pondering the question of "style" in historiographical narration, Hannah Arendt notes: "The question of *style* is bound up with the *problem of understanding* which has plagued the historical sciences almost from their beginnings."[1] What is the "style" of Arendt's monumental *Origins of Totalitarianism*, the text I am primarily concerned with here? And how does its efficacy relate to the problem of *understanding* totalitarianism? In her response to the political philosopher Eric Voegelin, one of the first reviewers of *Origins*, Arendt elaborates on her decision to, as it were, allocate more historiographical legitimacy to the valences of metaphorical thinking than to statistical scientificity. After conceding that she failed "to account for a rather unusual approach . . . to the whole field of political and historical sciences," she hypostatizes the merits of metaphorical thinking on the basis of a central metaphor employed in *Origins*, that of the concentration camp as a place of

1. See Hannah Arendt, "A Reply," *Review of Politics* 15 (1953): 79. Hereafter cited as R. Unless otherwise noted, all italics in this essay are mine. For a nuanced discussion of the anachronism of Arendt's "style," see Seyla Benhabib, *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt* (Oxford: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000), 86–95. See also Julia Kristeva, *Hannah Arendt*, trans. Ross Guberman (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001).

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"Hell" (R, 79). To recapitulate the context briefly, Arendt distinguishes three types of concentration camps, each corresponding to one of the three basic Western conceptions of life after death: Hades, Purgatory, and Hell. Hades, Arendt explains, is represented by those "relatively mild" camps for displacing "undesirable elements of all sorts—refugees, stateless persons, the asocial and the unemployed." After those so-called displaced-persons camps, she lists the Soviet Union's labor camps, metaphorized as Purgatory, "where neglect is combined with chaotic forced labor." Hell, "in the most literal sense," is embodied by those camps perfected by the Nazis "in which the whole of life was thoroughly and systematically organized with a view to the greatest possible torment" (*O*, 445; *E*, 918–19).[2]

Arendt frequently turns to the Nazi extermination camps, the site of Hell, as it is here that both the nature of human beings, on the threshold between life and death, and the nature of totalitarian regimes can be studied.[3] Arendt also dwells on the metaphor of Hell in explaining her rather idiosyncratic style vis-à-vis possible approaches in line with the positivistic paradigm. *Hell* is a biblical metaphor with a distinct moral connotation. Arendt explains that she parted quite consciously with the tradition of *sine ira et studio* (without indignation or partisanship), for describing a phenomenon like the extermination camps without indignation would mean to deprive them of an inherent dimension. Rather than suggest detached scholarly rigor, it would imply the dismissal of an integral element of these camps. The Nazis' extermination camps existed "in the midst of human society." "To describe the concentration camps *sine ira*," Arendt writes, "is not to be 'objective,' but to condone them; and such condoning cannot be changed by a condemnation which the author may feel duty bound to add but which remains unrelated to the description itself" (R, 79). Since all that happened took place among human beings, and since human beings are by definition ethical beings, who, in contradistinction to animals, assume an understanding of justice, the question of ethics is *intrinsic* rather

2. Arendt wrote and published *The Origins of Totalitarianism* first in English in 1951; it appeared in German four years later. The German edition, however, is not a translation *sensu stricto* but is revised, rhetorically sharpened, and often elaborated. All citations are therefore based on the German edition. Whenever possible, I have consulted the English edition for translations; all other translations are my own. See Hannah Arendt, *Elemente und Ursprünge totaler Herrschaft: Antisemitismus, Imperialismus, Totalitarismus* (Munich: Piper, 1986); and Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt, 1968). Hereafter cited as *E* and *O*, respectively.

3. Arendt's Hades, Purgatory, and Hell, of course, do not take the difference between concentration and death camps within Germany itself into account—a distinction that she, however, repeatedly problematizes in interviews. See also Wolfgang Sofsky, *The Order of Terror: The Concentration Camp*, trans. William Templer (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996).

Despite all evidence, "understanding lacks the guiding threads of indubitable proofs." How are we to understand this paradox?

The "Discovery" of the Lie

Arendt considers the "discovery" of the lie one of the Nazis' greatest "achievements," in that the immensity of their crimes guaranteed that the murderers, who "proclaim their innocence with all manner of *lies*," will be more readily believed than the victims, whose "truths" offend any sane listener's common sense:

> Hitler circulated millions of copies of his book in which he stated that to be successful, a lie must be enormous, i.e., when you are not content to lie about individual factual data within a factual context that is left intact, whereby the intact facts already uncover the lie, but instead *cast such a web of lies around the entire factuality that all the individual constituent facts replace the real by a fictional world, coherent in itself.* (*O*, 439; *E*, 909–10)

Arendt speaks here of an "entire factuality," a "real" world substituted for a "fictional" world—an analysis that in the later essay "Truth and Politics" (1967) leads her to classify totalitarianism as a "modern lie": "The modern political lies are so big that they require a complete rearrangement of the whole factual texture—the making of another reality, as it were, into which they fit without seam, crack or fissure" (TP, 253). The modern lie thus epitomizes the paradox of a lie so enormous that, in a narrow sense, it no longer can be called a "lie." For what distinguishes the "lie" from an "error" or a "mistake" is of course its *intentionality*, the deliberateness of the falsification. In the case of self-deception, this intentionality is no longer given. At the same time, Arendt's nominal classification of the modern lie does, as we shall see, harbor some explanatory potential for the phenomenon of collective mendacity.[13] To be

13. Benjamin calls this feature of societal mendacity "objektive Verlogenheit" (objective mendacity) and deems it a phenomenon that "dominates world-historically in our time." In "Remarks on 'Objective Mendacity'" (written about 1921) he explains: "Warum 'objektive' Verlogenheit? 1) Sie herrscht objektiv weltgeschichtlich in dieser Zeit. Alles was nicht ganz groß ist, ist in unser Zeit *unecht*. 2) Es ist nicht die subjektiv, vom Einzelnen klar verantwortete Lüge. Sondern dieser ist 'bona fide'" (Why "objective" mendacity? [1] It dominates objectively, world-historically in these times. Everything not great is considered unreal in our time. [2] It is not the subjective lie for which the individual would have to take responsibility. Rather, he is "bona fide") (*Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser, vol. 6 [Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1977], 60). For a discussion of the question of objective mendacity, see Peter Fenves, "Testing Right," *Cardozo Law Review* 13 (1991–92): 1099–113.

sure, the concept of the modern lie, the notion of self-deception, is more than just an accompaniment to ideology. Arendt speaks about the question of ideology at length, attributing to it the analytic force of a modern, all-encompassing lie. While her motivation for this interpretive symbiosis will gradually emerge, for now I shall follow her on the argumentative path on ideology.

What distinguishes totalitarian ideology from authoritarianism, tyranny, despotism, and the like is its disjunction from reality. If we try to fathom the word *ideo-logy*, we are generally dealing with the *logos* of an *idea*. The pseudoscientific character of all ideologies, Arendt says, is based on the presupposition that an idea or a body of ideas—such as "Jews are inferior"—can become the subject matter of a science as animals are the subject matter of zoology (cf. *O*, 468; *E*, 962). What we must ask time and again is, what is the linguistic reality or referentiality of totalitarian domination vis-à-vis the linguistic reality or referentiality of Arendt's presentation of totalitarian domination?[14]

Ideological thinking, Arendt says, is a form of political thinking and can be described by three elements:

1. Ideologies raise a claim to *total explanation*. Thus totalitarian historiography appropriates past, present, and future according to its pseudoscientific idea.
2. Ideological thinking becomes *independent of experience*; it becomes emancipated from "the reality that we perceive with our five senses" and insists on a "truer" reality, of which we become aware only through a "sixth sense," acquired through ideological indoctrination.
3. Ideological thinking follows a *coercively logical procedure* that starts from an axiomatic premise and deduces everything else from it; that is, "it proceeds with a consistence that exists nowhere in the realm of reality." (cf. *O*, 470–71; *E*, 965)

How can Arendt expound totalitarian thinking without reconstructing it? The totalitarian-ideological element of the *emancipation from reality and experience* directly corresponds to the thematic of the totalitarian lie and finds an illustration in Arendt's metaphor of the onion. First in *Origins* (1951) and then in the essay "What Is Authority?" (1961),[15] Arendt compares the

14. "What we call ideology," Paul de Man writes, "is precisely the confusion of *linguistic* with natural reality, of *reference* with phenomenalism" ("The Resistance to Theory," in *The Resistance to Theory* [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986], 11).

15. Hannah Arendt, "What Is Authority?" in *Between Past and Future*, 91–141. Hereafter cited as A. See also Jean-François Lyotard, "Survivant," in *Lectures d'enfance* (Paris: Galilée, 1991), 78.