

**THINKING BEYOND PHILOSOPHY:  
HANNAH ARENDT AND THE WEIMAR HERMENEUTIC  
CONNECTIONS**

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**Abstract.** While there is increasing interest among Hannah Arendt’s readers in the ways in which her political ideas can be traced back thematically to Weimar influences, there are only fleeting reflections on the junctions between her famously unorthodox approach to political philosophy and the hermeneutic revolts of her youth. The present paper will explore some of these connections, arguing that the theoretical-methodological background of Arendt’s youth shaped her approach to what she later formulated as the basic predicaments of political modernity. In this context, I read Arendt’s early work in genealogical conjunction with the writings of Friedrich Gundolf, her literature teacher. It was particularly Gundolf’s critique of Romanticism that became relevant for Arendt’s work on Rahel Varnhagen, a Jewish hostess of a Berlin salon in the age of Romanticism. This link is not merely interesting, especially in the light of Arendt’s life-long passion for literature and weaving elements of it into her political theory. More importantly, it constitutes a crucial episode in the conceptual evolution of her critique of political modernity, and as such, in the genesis of her theory of politics.

**Keywords:** Hannah Arendt, Friedrich Gundolf, Rahel Varnhagen, Romanticism, inter-war critique of modernity, anti-historicism, Weimar intellectual history, dialectical theology

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## **1. Introduction**

“I was interested neither in history nor in politics when I was young,” claimed Hannah Arendt retrospectively in a letter to Gershom Scholem, a German-born scholar of Jewish mysticism. “If I can be said to “have come from anywhere,”” Arendt continued, “it is from the tradition of German philosophy” (Arendt 1964). Indeed, many of the earlier attempts to trace the intellectual roots of Arendt’s political thought have tended to take her by her word, emphasizing the importance

of German existentialism and in particular of Martin Heidegger's and Karl Jaspers's work in the shaping of her theoretical imagination. A number of more recent contextualising readings, however, have begun to reflect on the implications of the intensely interdisciplinary character of the young Arendt's education and scholarly interests (Grunenberg 2006, Chacon 2012).

Arendt began her studies as a theology student at the University of Marburg, where one of her instructors was Rudolf Bultmann, a front figure of existentialist theology – from whom Arendt said she “had learned a lot” (Arendt, Jaspers 1995: 221). Later in Heidelberg, she became a student of theologian Martin Dibelius, a pioneer of “form criticism” who wrote her first reference letters (ibid:7), and her doctoral dissertation bordered on theology, philosophy and classical studies. During her Heidelberg years, Arendt also attended the sociology seminars of Karl Mannheim, and as a young author with a doctoral degree, participated in the “sociology of knowledge debate”. Moreover, she took a serious interest in German Romanticism and studied literature with Friedrich Gundolf, one of the most celebrated and charismatic literary theorists of the time (Grunenberg 2006:123). All these scholars were pioneers in their own fields, as well as widely read and influential across disciplines. Their cross-disciplinary influence had above all to do with a shared effort to overcome the contemporary crisis of the Neokantianism and historicism – and in this attempt, they sought to rethink the human world (or, its relation to the divine, as in the case of theologians), as well as to revise the methods for its study.

While there is increasing interest among Arendt's readers in the ways in which her political ideas can be traced back thematically to Weimar influences, there are only fleeting reflections on the junctions between her famously unorthodox approach to political philosophy and the hermeneutic revolts of her youth. The present paper will explore some of these connections, arguing that the theoretical-methodological background of Arendt's youth shaped her approach to what she later formulated as the basic predicaments of political modernity. In this context, I propose to read Arendt's early work in genealogical conjunction with the writings of not only Weimar theologians, but also Friedrich Gundolf, her literature teacher. It was particularly Gundolf's critique of Romanticism that became relevant for Arendt's work on Rahel Varnhagen, a Jewish hostess of a Berlin salon in the age of Romanticism. This link is not merely interesting, especially in the light of Arendt's life-long passion for literature and weaving elements of it into her political theory. More importantly, it constitutes a crucial episode in the conceptual evolution of her critique of political modernity, and as such, in the genesis of her theory of politics.

## 2. Anti-historicist revolts in Weimar

“It is the destiny of our generation to stand between the times,” announced Friedrich Gogarten, a young theologian in 1920. “We never belonged to the period

presently coming to an end; it is doubtful whether we shall ever belong to the period which is to come [...]. So we stand in the middle – in an empty space” (Gogarten 1968:277–280). Gogarten’s programmatic statement acutely captured the abyss between the world before the Great War – its sanguine expectations of the future, robust self-confidence – and the world thereafter, in its disappointments and anxieties. Yet the essay also set the agenda for the epistemic and hermeneutic revolutions of the time. Its title alone – *Zwischen den Zeiten*, “Between the Times” – disclaimed the previously dominant paradigm of historicism: for not belonging to any time is identical with not belonging to the logic of the time as a whole.

Although “historicism” denoted at least a century of diverse currents of historically oriented humanistic scholarship, it was only its critics around the turn of the century that brought it to wide use as an anti-term. By the early 1920s, historicism had become something of a universal subterfuge for accusing one’s opponents of a whole range of moral and academic insufficiencies (Hardtwig 1990:104, Heussi 1932). The linear and progressivist ideas of human history dominant in the nineteenth century made little or no sense in the context of the newly dehumanised post-war world. Moreover, the young generation had no patience for the acclaimed objectivism and value-neutrality of historically oriented scholarship that had dominated disciplines as diverse as philosophy and jurisprudence, theology and *Staatwissenschaften*. When all cultural phenomena are variable and historically conditioned – asked the critics – how can we avoid confessing to historical, cultural, and ultimately ethical relativism? The historical approach either refuses to distinguish between right and wrong, in its first incarnation, or wants to distinguish between them, but is unable to, in its second version – claimed its critics. Also academically, to write „history merely for the sake of history” meant for them to produce little else but “minute” studies of the past unable to meaningfully relate to the present. Historicism’s mere accumulation of materials and facts came to represent for the young humanists the smuggling of “positivism” and “antiquarianism” into the human sciences. Finally, for its critics, the historical approach was not concerned with and bringing to life the historical sources, but had achieved precisely the opposite. By cutting off its bonds to the present, by refusing to judge the past it had in fact *silenced* the sources. Far from revealing the past “as it actually was” – as ran the famous Rankean dictum – historicism had imposed its own narrow-minded scientism on the past. It had rendered the humanities barren and unable to relate in any way meaningfully to life, either in the sense of doing justice to its richness or in bringing clarity to ethical predicaments (cf. Mannheim 1924:2–3, 9–13, Jaeger 1996:52–70, Wittkau 1994, Vowinckel 2001).

To “stand between the times”, although itself a contingent occurrence, meant in the positive sense for the young generation of humanist scholars to open the possibility of accessing an original horizon of interrogation in human sciences. While in the nineteenth century, theologians had been among the leading thinkers to conceptually develop and ensure the prominent standing of the historical

approach in the human sciences, now they were among its fiercest critics. Among one of the first and most influential anti-historicist treatises of the time, *The Epistle to the Romans* (1919), was authored by Karl Barth, Gogarten's fellow founder of what came to be known as the "theology of crisis". In the opening lines of the widely read and discussed commentary, Barth insisted that "Paul spoke to his contemporaries as a child of his age. But much more important than this truth is the other, that he speaks as a prophet and apostle of the Kingdom of God to all men in all ages" (Barth 2010:3). In an outspokenly anti-historicist tone, Barth set out to inquire into "what is there," until the "wall" between our time and Paul's becomes "transparent" (ibid:13). In contrast to historical-critical readings that had sought to liberate the early Christian texts from some of their mythical-naïve elements, Barth insisted on the essential link between the "unfamiliarity" or even "transcendence" (ibid:18) of these original sources, and the content of the Christian revelation. When one seeks to translate these sources into contemporary language in order to adapt these to the tastes of our supposedly more rational and enlightened age, one only risks adding specifically modern layers of miscomprehension between the reader and the text. The primary hermeneutic task is thus, to the contrary, to seek to shed one's own contemporary prejudices, such as presumptions of logicity, consistency and historicity, and give voice to the "tensions" (ibid:14) expressed in the sources – as well as their "timelessness" (ibid:17–18). The readers should not expect sources to confirm contemporary ideas and beliefs, but allow for incompatibilities, even antagonisms between the past and the present – and thus let the past open perspectives to inspire a radical questioning of the present.

The effort to "regain access" to the "wellsprings" of tradition – nay, the idea that a new beginning in thinking was realizable only in "dialogue with the first sources" (Heidegger 1927:58) – promptly gained momentum in post-World War I philosophy, classical studies, literary theory and Jewish studies, among other disciplines. For instance, starting the intellectual movement known as "Third Humanism", Werner Jaeger's presentations of the Greek and Roman texts were explicit appeals to pre-modern experience and language, and as such of course no mere exercise in interpretation, but effective rhetorical tools in critique of progressivist modernity. In order that they could address our age, hermeneutics ought not conform past sources to our contemporary world, Jaeger similarly argued, but pay heed to their unfamiliarity – as only the latter has the potential of providing a radically critical perspective on the present (White 1992:267–268).

The quest of re-discovering the past, coupled with a re-narration of Western canon as decline rather than advancing enlightenment, was similarly formative for the work of Franz Rosenzweig, a German-Jewish philosopher, historian and the founder of the popular *Freies Jüdisches Lehrhaus* in Frankfurt. The only way to regain one's Jewishness concealed by centuries of assimilationism, or so Rosenzweig argued, was to seek it in the past yet untouched by historicist modernity (Rosenzweig 2000). Accordingly, the *Lehrhaus* – whose list of instructors included, among others, Arendt's later friend, Scholem – sought to offer German

Jews a path of return to their Jewish roots through knowledge of their pre-modern sources (Brenner 1996). Scholem laid the main emphasis of his pronouncedly anti-historicist, closely text-bound scholarship, on the intactness and autonomy of the textual sources. The meaning of the text was only obscured by references to its historical context; instead, the reader ought to be guided by the text's specific integral clues, its component parts: its narrative structure, style, language, elements of play, and use of metaphors (Weidner 2003).

Inquiries into the intellectual roots of Arendt's political thought have increasingly underlined the importance of her close familiarity and even engagement with Weimar theological debates (Chacon 2012). Also Arendt's position vis-à-vis Weimar political theology, and its possible influences on her own politico-philosophical language have been subject to recent scrutiny (Gordon 2007). I want to suggest, however, that not only Weimar thematic but also its distinctive hermeneutic and methodological agendas shaped the young Arendt's understanding of how to read the present through the past and its sources. I will begin by shortly explaining this in reference to the young Arendt's dissertation on Augustine, and then continue to explore how some characteristically anti-historicist features of her method in her postdoctoral work on German Romanticism provided the background for its politically relevant insights.

### 3. Rethinking historicity: hermeneutics and beyond

In her doctoral dissertation, *The Concept of Love in Augustine*, Arendt similarly embarked on an experimental approach to canonical texts. First of all, Arendt set out to explain that she would set aside the theological-doctrinal problems of Augustine's work in order to more adequately grasp his "pre-theological intention". In doing so, she would neither seek to reconstruct a comprehensive, doctrinal teaching, nor overcome what appeared as Augustine's apparent inconsistencies. Arendt in particular emphasized that we need to consider the reasons for the "disjointedness" of Augustine's thought: "We must let the contradictions stand as they are, make them understood as contradictions, and grasp what lies beneath them" (Arendt 1996:7).

So what lied "beneath" these contradictions? In contrast to traditional scholarship on Augustine, the Church Father, the young Arendt approached him as a philosophical, rather than a theological thinker. Such an untraditional approach was justified, she argued, because Augustine himself was a thinker outside traditions, or, to be more precise, between traditions – between the end of Platonic and the beginning of Christian tradition. In this sense, he could be classified neither as a theologian nor a philosopher, but a religious thinker who "never wholly lost the impulse of philosophical questioning". Whereas for Arendt's Augustine, "the radical choice" between reason and faith did not exist, the fact that he belonged to two traditions, still created what appear to us as "tensions" in his thought (ibid).

After Arendt published her dissertation as a book in 1929, it was reviewed in three academic journals, notably, in different disciplines: *Kantstudien* for philosophy, *Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte* for theology, and *Gnomon* for classical studies (Hessen 1931, Eger 1930, Zepf 1932). The reviewers appreciated neither the novelty of her approach – even if all three pointed out that the young author’s reading had been original – nor the fact that the dissertation did not yield to clear disciplinary divisions. The author of the theological review stressed that no interpretation of Augustine, even if it focused on a particular aspect of it, could exclude the theological context and dogmatic dimension of his thought without risking misconstruing his intent (Eger 1930). The second reviewer, in *Kantstudien*, called Arendt a “phenomenologically educated author” and pointed out that she had failed to consider the prolific existing scholarship on Augustine from which she “could have learned a lot” (Hessen 1931:175). The third reviewer regarded the concept of love of relative irrelevance for understanding the central concerns of the thinker (Zepf 1932). Most importantly, all three reviewers reproached Arendt for having ignored the established tradition of scholarship and opted for an unorthodox approach that they believed had failed to deliver new insights.

Arendt structured her dissertation into three parts, each addressing a different “conceptual context” of Augustine’s thought within which the problem of love arises. As I noted, she did not have in mind here historical contexts, but instead, as she explained, what could be characterised as temporal contexts. In each “context”, which Arendt defined in the titles of the three parts of the dissertation as “anticipated future”, “remembered past” and “social life”, two different notions of love, *caritas* and *cupiditas*, are discussed (Arendt 1996:9–13, 27–30). They are discussed in relation to these three contexts as well as to each other. All the three sub-themes also have an overarching question: what is the neighbour’s relevance for the believer who, by the virtue of his faith, is necessarily estranged from this world? How can a believer, who in God’s presence is indifferent towards the mundane things, be at all concerned with the neighbour?

On the one hand, indeed, much of Arendt’s investigation echoed Heidegger’s phenomenological analysis of being as temporality. This is true especially regarding the first part of the dissertation, entitled as “anticipated future”. Desire is always a combination of “aiming at” and “referring back to” – wrote Heidegger’s former student – just as life is a constant concern with transience, either a constant “not having” or “fear of losing” (ibid:9–13). Worldly life is constituted by the unbridgeable tension between man’s yearning for permanence and the fact of the transience of things in this world.

On the other hand, the young Arendt was above all interested in how Augustine overcame this seemingly inevitable human transience – the “present” of which is always “no longer and not yet” – and moreover, whether this required one to go beyond human categories altogether (ibid:27–28). The absolute good for Augustine was “present without future,” Arendt wrote, that is, “eternity”. But just as even life’s highest goal cannot “deny its origin in human temporality” as it arises from its fearful negation (ibid), Augustine did not conceptualise human

temporality only in terms of this negation. For human time is more than expectation – which, as such, is hardly a blessing for man, since it is foremost an expectation of loss in the future. For Arendt's Augustine it is as importantly "remembrance" (Arendt 1929:7–13, 10–11).

Whereas Christian love is craving and future oriented, the objects of desires, on the contrary, are, according to Arendt, derived from the past, from the memory of good and of happiness. Memory provides man with an image or idea of what is to be desired, and the happiness that man yearns is but "recalled past", a happy life "remembered" (Arendt 1996:47). Memory is the place where not only divine but also human time stands still and which also grounds the dimensions of past and future. This Augustinian *nunc stans*, the "timeless present", finds its only anchor in *memoria*, which "transforms the past into the future possibility", as well as retrieves man from his future as an expectation of death to the remembrance of past happiness. "The absolute future turns out to be the ultimate past and the way to reach it is through remembrance" (ibid:47–49).

Although here Arendt evoked the Augustinian *memoria* as the decisive mental context for human thought and action, it is only in her later work that the concept of memory or "remembered past" acquired critical force against her interpretation of the modern condition that wished, and to some extent succeeded in liberating itself from the yoke of the past. When *memoria* has been jeopardised – or as Arendt often used to quote Tocqueville: "the past has ceased to throw its light upon the future" (Arendt 1978a:7) – the "gap" between past and future has indeed become an "abyss of nothingness" (1978b:207). Whether the contemporary characterisation of modernity as disruption of cultural continuity at that time already informed Arendt's reconstruction of the Augustinian concept of memory cannot be ascertained from the dissertation. Nonetheless, in another article on Augustine, published in 1930, Arendt returned to the role of memory as decisive not only for the "unity" or "meaningfulness" of human life, but also as the warrantor of "reality". Whereas Augustine was the thinker who opened up "the empire of the inner life", his concept of memory prevented man from falling into a "naïve" experience of reality in self-sufficiency: "It was [...] memory that saved the reality for us" (Arendt 1994:26). At the time, the concepts of memory and past as anchors of reality had acquired for Arendt a new significance that went far beyond her engagement with Augustine: they became central themes for her first reflections on the past and present of German Jewry.

#### 4. Reconstructing the romantic persona: a perspective from literature

Arendt grew up in a secular family in Königsberg, where her grandfather, Max Arendt, was a successful businessman and respected member of the city council. In her childhood and youth, she never felt at a disadvantage because of her Jewishness, and had remained, like many of her young contemporaries of German-Jewish origin, indifferent to Zionism (Arendt 1994:6ff). It was only in the early

1930s that all this changed. All of a sudden, Arendt, like many offspring of these largely assimilated families, had become Jewish in the eyes of the society they believed had been their own. They realised that assimilation was no longer the answer, and probably never had been. Even if in the 1920s Arendt had befriended Kurt Blumenfeld (1884–1963), one of the leaders of the Zionist movement, she maintained a distance from the movement itself. By the turn of the decade, however, she became a “fervent Zionist” (Jahanbegloo: 1992:84). For the recent philosophy graduate this also meant engaging with new questions as an author, and at the centre of her work now stood the history of German Jewry and, above all, what she characterised as its escape from Jewishness.

When Arendt found out through a friend about the recovered correspondence of Rahel Varnhagen, a Jewish hostess of a Berlin salon in the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries, she saw an opportunity to realise her long-time wish to study German Romanticism. In Heidelberg she had already taken classes on Schelling and Schlegel with Jaspers and attended lectures on German literature of the seventeenth-nineteenth centuries given by Gundolf. Gundolf’s two main academic books, *Shakespeare und der Deutsche Geist* (1911) and *Goethe* (1916), were widely read not only by humanist scholars but also by the general culturally interested public. Apart from being a theorist and critic of literature, he was also a well-known poet and, perhaps even more importantly, one of the few Jewish members of the famous Stefan George’s (1868–1933) “circle”.

At the time, there was probably no German student who would not have heard of Stefan George – a charismatic mystic who was revered as a national poet from the turn of the century well into the Nazi era. Underlying the novelty and spell of much of George’s lyric and anti-realist poetry is a handling of language as though it had a life of its own. It is language and not the poet that makes poetry, and it is language that grants the essences and stable meanings in thought and life, instead of being their mere expression. George too sought “return” to classicism, particularly to the Greeks, through which he sought to revitalise what appeared to many his contemporaries decadent Western culture. It was through the Greeks that one would have access again to human greatness, especially through its ideals of beauty and courage, and its tragic sensibility, while centuries of Christian legacy had led the West to a culture of weakness and, after its decline, a loss of orientation expressed in its contemporary crisis and bourgeois decadence. Especially in the early period of his fame, George isolated himself in highly elitist aestheticism and emphasised his distance not only from the concerns of the masses, but also from politics in every possible sense. He was also one of the few influential public figures to distance himself from enthusiasm for the war in 1914 (Norbert 2002).

Yet, while George was an aloof figure, who despite his fame seemed to avoid the role of a public intellectual, his influence was not limited to his poetry alone. He attracted a “circle” of followers who saw themselves bringing about a new literary era, a rebirth of the ancient spirit, even if its impact was to be limited in their view to the selected few. It was a group of young men – for the circle was closed to women and consciously sought to seal itself off against all forms of

feminine influence – mostly consisting of aspiring literary figures, who were often homoerotically oriented (at least in their aesthetics). They claimed art to be the highest way of life and genuine art for them meant “art for art’s sake”. This aesthetic spirituality appealed to many hearts and minds of the young generation, especially those who perceived nothing but emptiness in the “Old World”. The circle made its artistic agenda public in the periodically published *Die Blätter für die Kunst*, which included verses, translations, esoteric essays, literary criticism and explorations in history in search of forgotten or misunderstood heroes. Despite all of its eccentricities – not least a cult-like worshipping of George as a divine genius, encouraged and even demanded by the latter himself – the group included many well-known future scholars and authors (ibid).

Gundolf was perhaps one of the most eminent among them, even if after his marriage in the mid-1920s he was excluded from the George Circle. One of his students, Benno von Wiese (1903–1987), with whom Arendt had a relationship during her Heidelberg years and who later became a literary scholar himself, later recalled that Gundolf had a presence that was not only the opposite of that of the ethically oriented and systematic studiousness of Jaspers but “entirely something else” (Benno 1982:63). Whilst Jaspers was an intense thinker as well as an admired professor, he lacked an appreciation for arts and aesthetics. In the words of Wiese, Jaspers only “accepted the symbiosis of a thinker and a poet, and even then reluctantly, in the case of Nietzsche,” and as a rule denied art any “existential seriousness” (ibid). This must have left many of his students in the 1920s – especially those attracted to the aesthetic sensibility – with a feeling of insufficiency. Gundolf, on the contrary, brought the realm of aesthetics and the creative artist to the centre of his teaching and research. He was always on the lookout for the *Gestalt*-ideal and his lectures often consisted of sessions of reading works of literature and poetry out loud. This earned him, to cite Wiese, the “worshipful attitude of the listeners” (ibid:60–65).

Gundolf’s academic unconventionality did not hinder him from receiving a “call” to Heidelberg, the most prestigious chair of German literature after Berlin. Challenging the previous historical-biographical approach in literary studies, he called for a new language of criticism – an appeal he shared with his colleagues in other fields. He had become, in the words of another Heidelberg student, a “representative figure of the victory of the new literary scholarship over that of the nineteenth century: its factualism, its dependence on external biography, its accumulation of filiations, parallels, sources and analogues, in short, the antiquarianism dominating the German [...] universities” (Wellek 1968:394ff).

As a literary critic Gundolf paid minimum attention to what he called “external” biography. Literary studies must focus on the literary work of an author alone – which is written to be displayed publicly, yet without any external aims apart from artistic achievement (Gundolf 1916:14). Whereas some of Gundolf’s colleagues reproached him for having mixed poetry and scholarship, and thus for lacking scientific objectivity, others appreciated the innovative impact of his interpretations. Dibelius, himself a reformer in Bible exegesis, contended that

whereas the older generation of scholars of literature tried to achieve biographical understanding from “numerous minor observations”, from letters, “from expressions and sayings and contemporary reports”, the “inadequacy” of this method became obvious under the “criticism of the younger generation” (Dibelius 1931:179–211):

*One may grasp the parts while the spiritual entity as a whole escapes. Under the influence of contemporary philosophy, particularly the phenomenological school, there arose the demand to grasp intuitively a total view of the figure to be exhibited. [...] And it was in the study of Goethe, in the work of Friedrich Gundolf, that this method found its most striking and best-known application. By renouncing the use of individual biographical details and the psychological continuity reconstructed therefrom, Gundolf was able to realise a completeness of form in presentation such as the older method had never attained. On the other hand, the reader of these new books placed himself completely at the disposal of the author and was in no position to test in detail the accuracy of the picture (ibid:184).*

Much in line with the ideas of other members of the George literary circle, Gundolf presented his protagonist Goethe as having followed an inner necessity of his life, which created a “demonic unity or the mutual penetration of the inner and outer forces in his life” (Gundolf 1916:235). Whereas Goethe comes forth as an ingenious hero on the verge of changing times, yet remaining immune to its trends, his followers remained, in contrast, in the ruthless grip of what Gundolf judged as the most uncreative era – the Romantic period.

Well-known for his fervent criticism of German Romanticism, Gundolf disparaged it as a reactionary and purely destructive movement and thus devoid of any creativity. Romantics, seeking to resist the impersonality and abstractness of Kantian ethics and Enlightenment ideals, yet limited by their adherence to modern epistemology, were unable to coin a positive ideal of their own. Instead, they fell into what Gundolf characterized as the sentimental-hedonistic void. The only “ideal” that the[a] world exhausted with Idealism still knew was enjoyment. For the Romantics, enjoyment becomes an aim in itself, the primary principle guiding human life: “All the deepest experiences of the Romantics are the experiences of *reception and enjoyment*” (Gundolf 1924:428). In this mood of disappointment, one became focused on the most private kind of enjoyment, which in turn made one’s self, the “I”, the sole objective content of the world.

It is noteworthy that in his study on Schleiermacher as a Romantic, Gundolf singled out the Berlin Jewish salons as the most characteristic form of social life for the Romantics. The turn of the nineteenth-century circles, such as those of Rahel Varnhagen and Henriette Herz, offered a suitable environment where the joys of private life could be experienced and communicated in the company of others. These private circles were the perfect retreat where one could confirm the intuition that the meaning of life lies not in “doing” but “being” – explained Gundolf Schleiermacher’s attraction to them. “One Romantic enjoys religion, the other enjoys art, the third politics, the fourth science, the fifth women.” One needed the salons because “sociability” rendered certain intellectuality to what had

been formerly regarded as idle everyday existence. Yet this was an intellectualism “without creativity”, a mutual acknowledgement of the principle of self-obsessed passivity (ibid:426–427).

Gundolf argued that with Schleiermacher the same longing for meaning from experience was transferred into and came to dominate religion. Analysing Schleiermacher’s sermons, Gundolf traced the increasing subjectisation of religion in his work: “Nowhere does he clearly distinguish between religion and religiosity, between the objective realities wherein religion reveals itself and the subjective constructions through which one has or practices religion” (ibid:440). Religion has become, first and foremost “an opinion and a feeling” (ibid:445, cf. Arendt 1994: 138). But not only religion: Schleiermacher prepared the way for a faith in which God himself is no longer necessary.

By choosing to give her study of Rahel Varnhagen the form of a biography, Arendt distanced herself from her previous mentors, Heidegger and Jaspers, who both thought little of this genre. Also, Arendt’s approach was unconventional: she intended to tell the story of Varnhagen’s life “as she might have told it” (Arendt 1958a:xv) and remained more focused on the construction of a captivating narrative than ordering the sources in their chronological sequence. This, together with her critical treatment of Romanticism, suggests similarities with the work done by her literature professor.

For instance, in his analysis of several Romantic personas, Gundolf framed the story of his only female protagonist, the poet Anette von Droste-Hülshoff, in terms of passively living what is perceived as one’s destiny. The notion of *Schicksal*, contended Gundolf, was central for the formation of self-consciousness in Romanticism. Yielding to their *Schicksal*, individuals lived their lives as “dramas of fate” where the characters are mere ghosts with no active role in the plot (Gundolf: 1922). A similar motif is central for Arendt’s narrative of Rahel Varnhagen. In fact, Arendt wanted to show that Varnhagen’s self-conception was based on her understanding of the meaning of her *Schicksal*:

*Her whole effort was to expose herself to life so that it could strike her “like a storm without an umbrella.” [...] Following this principle, she could neither choose or act, because choice and action in themselves would anticipate life and falsify the purity of life’s happenstance. All that remained for her, was [...] to verbalize what had happened (Arendt 1958a:xvi, cf. ibid:69).*

Similarly, Rahel’s significant others became mere characters in this “drama of fate”. Arendt too used the allegory of the stage to describe Rahel’s relationships in which who the other person was mattered less than the role he or she played:

*The drama so thoroughly wiped out the distinctions between the persons that they seemed merely to be playing their parts and stepping off the stage. The stage imposed a role upon the individual so forcefully that he had no opportunity to display his differences (ibid:92).*

The idea of fate, especially since Varnhagen’s own appeared from the outset to deprive her of any chance of happiness, served as a sort of protection from the rudeness of reality, the outside world: “If one merely accepts fate, one does not act

at all. One attains a security which enables one to offer the same passive resistance to all misfortune” (ibid:94). One, furthermore, mends the insults of reality by escaping into the security of the inner world, the life of emotions and introspection, into “reflections within the psyche” which seemingly protect one’s power and autonomy against the world:

*In the isolation achieved by introspection thinking becomes limitless because it is no longer molested by anything exterior; because there is no longer any demand for action, the consequences of which necessarily impose limits even upon the freest spirits. Man’s autonomy becomes hegemony over all possibilities; reality merely impinges and rebounds (ibid:10–11).*

Sealing oneself off from reality, the Romantic conjures up a different reality, intensified with boundless expectations, feelings, moods and daydreams. Romantic life is comprised of fragmented moments, and its lack of continuity results in “the boredom of empty time”. This “imaginary game of Romanticism” is reinforced by the sad fact that even whenever reality briefly makes its way into “the isolation of the Schleiermacherian individual”, one is either struck by its banality or “feeling nothing but his own emptiness”. Thus one returns to the “magic” of the “self-informed world” (ibid:60–63).

In order to be someone, in order to act, “a person must stand within a framework which keeps him from being at the mercy of chance and reality” (ibid:168). Yet whenever Varnhagen tries to act, “she would find she had no starting point from which she could meaningfully begin” (ibid:49). When recounting Rahel’s “story”, Arendt pointed at Rousseau who had turned the earlier conception of memory as the guard of reality into something that now became “the most dependable guard against the external world”. By turning remembered events into experienced feelings, into “nothing but reflections within the psyche”, Rousseau sentimentalised memory. This, however, could happen only “at the price of truth,” argued Arendt, as “[i]ntrospection and its hybrids engender mendacity” (ibid: 10–15).

Only memory as “remembered events” *versus* “sentimentalizing memory” pulls one back into the “disturbing” reality, but Varnhagen was both uprooted from tradition as well as excluded from society. Being a Jewess without knowledge or ties to the Jewish past and community, without wanting to be a Jewess, yet treated as one by the gentiles, left Varnhagen in a position of a permanent outcast. But as critical as Arendt might have been of Romanticism, she was not wholly without sympathy for her protagonist: her Rahel understood, at least at the end of her life, the futility of assimilationism, that is, of an attempt to cut oneself off from one’s own past. “What is man without history? Product of nature – not personality” – Arendt quoted Varnhagen’s diary, agreeing with her that the acting of the persons who have been liberated from the burden of the past can only lead to the future of “Crusoes” (Varnhagen) (ibid).

The young Arendt made a similar argument – lack of history amounts to a lack of reality, both politically and personally – in her first “Jewish” article, “Enlightenment and the Jewish Question” (1932). In this article, written at the

same time with the Varnhagen manuscript, Arendt gave the example of Moses Mendelssohn as someone for whom the truth-seeking individual could learn little and owed little to history, and described him as someone who had attempted to cut himself off from “reality”. Since the age of Enlightenment, the Jews had believed that remembering their history could only hinder them from being recognized as equal men among others. For Arendt, to be sure, the case was precisely the opposite, and she continued to see in this a-historical self-perception a twofold political problem. On the one hand, the European Jewry was impeded internally by the fact that the only history they had was “the history of others”, a history of repression and humiliation. On the other, the rejection of one’s past equalled a self-imposed lack of political self-assertion (Arendt 2007).

### **5. Hermeneutic connections, political implications**

Arendt’s post-doctoral research on Rahel Varnhagen was interrupted first by the Nazi regime that forced her into exile in France and later by the war from which she took refuge in the United States. In the late 1950s, when she was revising the book for publication, she wrote to Jaspers that it “was written from the perspective of a Zionist critique of assimilation, which I had adopted as my own and which I still consider basically justified today. But that critique was as politically naïve as what it was criticizing.” Arendt also explained that “[e]xcept for the last chapter, the book was finished in 1933 or even in 1932. I completed it, rather grumpily, in the summer of 1938” (Arendt, Jaspers 1995:197). In its published version, the book lacks any references to her contemporary literature – including possible references to the research of Gundolf – and lists only sources from her protagonist’s time. The reason for this, as Arendt noted in the preface of the first German edition in 1959, was that adding an extensive apparatus of references to the manuscript which had lain untouched for a quarter of a century would have taken a considerable amount of time and it was unclear how much it would have benefited the book. In fact, as Arendt added, it was her editor in America who had been responsible for the formalities of preparing the manuscript for print and for checking the existing references to primary sources (Arendt 1959).

Therefore it is unclear whether Arendt appreciated her literature professor’s work on Romanticism or whether his research on Varnhagen ever directly influenced hers. Nonetheless, the explored conjunctions suggest that the young Arendt’s writings and thought belonged to a much wider framework of cross-disciplinary debates than has been recognised. She was never only a follower of Heidegger or Jaspers, neither an exclusively philosophical author, but possessed a remarkable ability to combine a variety of perspectives and disciplinary languages. Arendt’s readers are far more familiar with her later calls for thinking beyond philosophy and establishing a more substantive link between experience and thought, but also with her frequent appeals to religious thinkers and literary

figures. In fact, these interconnections became a key element in her impressive attempt to give a novel reach, appeal and meaning to the exercise called political thought.

There is another sense in which Arendt was never a “merely” philosophical author: her concerns and aims, even in her earliest writings, as we saw, always had an unmistakable politically and socially engaged focus. What perhaps most influentially Elisabeth Young-Bruehl, Arendt’s semi-official biographer, has characterized as her “youthful unworldliness” (Young-Bruehl 2006:22) turns out to be, at a closer look, an early engagement in particular with the concepts of the “world” and “worldliness”. As early as her dissertation Arendt focused on the relevance of neighbourly love, community and the “world” for the Christian believer. It is clear, however, that, in her post-doctoral research on Jewish assimilationism, the explicitly political dimension of her early thought began to develop in directions that remained highly relevant for her mature philosophy. The young Arendt was an explicitly *political* critic of the Jewish-German history of assimilation as a process that had led to an “uprooted” way of life, “losing one’s place in the world”. Later, in her narrative of modernity, the concept of remembered past acquired critical force against her interpretation of the modern condition that wishes and to some extent succeeds in liberating itself from the past and tradition. This modern “uprootedness” became for Arendt a key “element” in the political failures of mass societies that made the emergence of totalitarianism possible: “Without past, we are no longer human” (Arendt: 1953).

At the centre of Arendt’s genealogy of the modern eclipse of politics stood not the self-alienation – as for instance in the work of Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, and other Frankfurt School critics of modernity – but what she called the “world-alienation” of man. For Arendt the horizon of meaning emerges from the reality of the world that men cherish as common in shared speech and practices. In her narrative of modernity, to the contrary, the emphasis on subjectivity signified the modern man’s “flight into the self” (Arendt 1958b:9) – a number of aspects of which she first formulated in her critical investigation of Romanticism. The modern prioritization of the private vis-à-vis the public man, its concern with the *Innerlichkeit* rather than the realm of the shared that Arendt placed “outside of men” (Arendt 2002:17–18), its preference for the deceptive excitement as well as safety of the private realm – all had turned citizens into isolated subjects.

In Arendt’s later genesis of political modernity, the modern turn from the “world” to the “self” allowed one “to derive public good from private interest” (Arendt 1973:139-147), while freedom lost its public meaning and came to denote activities outside the political realm. Individualist political ideologies – such as liberalism – had substituted principles of public life with those of private life. For Arendt, by contrast:

*the individual in isolation is never free; he can become free only when he steps out into the polis and takes action there. Before freedom can become a mark of honour bestowed on a man or a type of men [...] it is an attribute of the way human beings organize themselves. Its place of origin is never inside man,*

*whatever that inside may be, nor is it in his will, or his thinking, or his feelings; it is rather in the space between human beings, which can only arise when distinct individuals come together, and can continue to exist as long as they remain together* (Arendt 2005:170).

Arendt's insistence on the public aspect of freedom played an important role in her reflections on the genealogy of the twentieth-century political calamities. From the outset even the security and the retreat to privacy that liberalism claimed to guarantee was aimed at the exclusion of individuals "from participation in the management of public affairs". On the one hand, thereby "the individual loses his rightful place in society and his natural connection with his fellow-men" and becomes an "isolated" subject, "powerless" in political matters. On the other hand, the retreat of the citizen into the private sphere turned politics into a sphere of "absolute obedience" and political matters "regulated by the state under the guise of necessity" (Arendt 1972:141). Thus while for instance liberalism is most commonly associated with the intention to protect the individual against the state, Arendt's modernity, by excluding the citizen from politics, made the state more irresistible than ever. This may not yet, in Arendt's narrative, "be the beginning of terror", but it certainly is "its most fertile ground" (ibid:474. cf. Arendt 2007:129–130).

Arendt's own positive proposal for a renewed understanding of politics – her theory of politics as action in a public sphere where men "act in concert" (Arendt 1972:143) and make "new beginnings" (Arendt 1973:478–479), as she famously phrased it – shared several presumptions and sensitivities with the anti-historicist revolts of her youth. To begin with, for Arendt, the teleological idea of history by definition eliminates what is fundamental and distinctive of politics altogether, since to speak of politics without action is to dismiss what is at stake in politics. In modern philosophies of history, "no man can actually do what he intends to do, [...] in all action the invisible "ruse of reason" directs the hands of the actor" (Arendt 1954). Man becomes – Arendt cites Herder – "like an "ant" that "only crawls on the wheel of destiny"" (Arendt 1994:166). When history becomes "the gigantic stream" of necessity, the acting individual becomes a "means to produce the idea" and "the sharp contours of events and actions are [...] dissolved" (Arendt 1954). For modern histories of necessary processes, the very idea of new beginnings – much less the idea of a doer behind the deed – had become superfluous. For Arendt, on the contrary, the human ability to make "new beginnings", "the supreme capacity of man", is "politically [...] identical with man's freedom" (Arendt 1973:478–479). "The moment man acts into the world," she wrote, "everything becomes unpredictable, he has *begun* something whose end he cannot foretell [...] man wherever he lives together with others cannot abstain from action, from starting these unpredictable processes, because he himself is a beginner" (Arendt 1954). In other words, Arendt's politics was in the first place embodied in the singular, interruptive and memorable moments that break with what we understand today as the long term history, the history of forces and processes. "The new always happens against the overwhelming odds of statistical

laws and their probability” (Arendt 1958b:178) – Arendt did not tire of railing against a holistic causal history, which she believed constituted one of the politically most dangerous ideologies of modern times.

Similarly, Arendt’s method in the formulation of a new concept of politics and human agency – her often criticized “return” to the ancient Greek *polis* as a source for a rediscovery of a more authentic experience and language of politics – is clearly indebted to the hermeneutic currents of her youth. In these discourses, the beginning of an urgently needed “new thinking” (and Arendt’s work bears a similar mark of an exaggerated pathos of novelty) was often seen to be realizable only through a return to the past. The (re)construction of this past was of course no mere exercise in interpretation, but an effective tool in the critique of the present. Arendt shared with the thinkers of her generation the hermeneutic idea that it was the discontinuity in tradition that had also made possible a new manner, a more direct manner as it were, of accessing the past sources. In contrast to the conventional historical scholarship that had sought to familiarise its subject matter through the presumption of continuity and interpret the past through the prism of the present, the new hermeneutics – even if in its various forms – often used the past as a measure for the present. The spell of the past, as we can see also in Arendt’s work, lies for these critics precisely in its unfamiliarity, in its potential to open up novel perspectives in thought and scholarship – and beyond.

## 6. After “Pedigree” histories

Arendt’s monumental legacy as a political theorist – her ideas have become inspirational among others for communitarians, political pluralists, new republicans, and proponents of deliberative democracy (cf. Benhabib 1996, Canovan 1992, Kalyvas 2008) – almost makes her personal intellectual history by definition relevant for the field’s understanding of its own past. However, the discussed continuities are not something pertaining only to the so-called Arendtian political thought; they are increasingly recognized also in the cases of some other contemporaries and their “schools”. Thus it has become more urgent than ever to reflect on what do we make of these continuities and what do they tell us about the dynamics of the political-theoretical imagination in the twentieth century more generally?

For political thinkers and scientists on both sides of the Atlantic, it has taken a long time to admit to the philosophical relevance of their discipline’s intellectual genealogies, especially its interwar episodes. In Europe, the interwar period has remained – politically, ideologically, and socially – as if a misfit in its narrative schemes of modern history. In this self-understanding, which has of course its acceptable political and historical reasons, Europe has decidedly broken with disastrous interwar past, including the period’s politically dubious intellectual legacies. Political and social theorising – like Europe’s political institutions and mentalities – left the interwar radicalisms behind for good and returned to the path

of reason, and the interwar years became understood as little else but a warning as to how both things and thinking can go wrong. American political science on its part has for decades contrasted itself to its European counterparts both politically and methodologically. It has identified itself both as a bastion of democratic-liberal mentality, also distanced itself from the methodological legacy of the so-called continental philosophy. This does not apply only to the post-war American empirical-analytical “new political science“, but also the Rawlsian revival of political philosophy in the 1970s. Even Rawls’s critics, some of them mentioned above, are wary of associating their own philosophical efforts to intellectual influences that might be traced back to inter-war years.

Some of these anxieties regarding disciplinary genealogies also have to do with what can be characterised as a polemical “pedigree” history (Geuss 1999:1-5): the practice of testing the merits of ideas and the political reputation of post-war theorists in reference to their intellectual connections with interwar scholars or schools of thought. This has happened not only in political science or political theory, but also in philosophy, history, theology, jurisprudence, and many other social and humanist disciplines. In Arendt’s case, for instance, her sympathetic readers feel obliged to liberate or at least distance her ideas from their Weimar (especially Heideggerian) elements, while her critics only need to point at the obvious connections. These “pedigree”-histories, however, are based on the evidently problematic assumption that personal and intellectual relationships determine one’s trajectory, and what they omit is the fact that intellectual maturation takes place in multiple, intersecting discursive contexts. These might indeed provide one with a conceptual-theoretical background and sensibilities, but as importantly – and in my view a genealogical approach to Arendt’s political thought supports this historiographical conclusion – intellectual encounters fashion the background *against* which authors carve out their own specific perspectives, concerns and arguments. As authors, we do not only inherit a certain set of problems, debates and conceptual languages, but become engaged in an unceasing process of rethinking and reassessment of this inheritance.

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