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Of the Reality of the World and *of My Own* Hannah Arendt and Autotheory

In aktuellen Diskussionen über ‚life writing' nimmt der Begriff 'Autotheorie' als Form der kritischen Auseinandersetzung eines (pluralen) Selbst im Verhältnis zu anderen einen zentralen Platz ein. In diesem Beitrag möchte ich mich mit life writing im Sinne der Autotheorie befassen, indem ich mich auf ausgewählte Aspekte des Werks von Hannah Arendt konzentriere. Darüber hinaus ist dieser Beitrag auch ein Versuch, einige frühere Werke zu beleuchten, die oft aus schwarzen, jüdischen, feministischen, queeren, poststrukturalistischen, postkolonialen und dekolonialen Kontexten stammen und autotheoretische Reflexionen hervorgebracht haben oder betonen. Diese Werke stehen oft in Zusammenhang miteinander, bleiben jedoch wieder marginalisiert, wobei ihre Überschneidungen unsichtbar bleiben.

In current discussions on 'life writing' the term 'autotheory' occupies a central space as a form of critical engagement of a (plural-) self in relation to others. In this paper I wish to look at life writing, in the sense of autotheory by focusing on select aspects of Hannah Arendt's work. Furthermore, this contribution is also an attempt to shed light on some earlier works, often from Black, Jewish, feminist, queer, poststructuralist, postcolonial, and decolonial backgrounds, which have engendered or emphasize autotheoretical reflections. These works are often related to each other but hitherto still remain marginalized, with their overlaps unseen.

1 Some Theoretical Considerations First…

So far Hannah Arendt is primarily considered as a political theorist and philosopher. But although aesthetics as well as literature and her life experiences play a major role in her oeuvre, her often poetic style, and the ethical-autobiographical instances of her thought, and her angle toward an other, frequently expressed in reflective, meditative and lyrical form, have been, if at all, to a much lesser extent at the center of academic attention.[1] Such instances of Hannah Arendt's writing could be

[1] Thomas Meyer in „Die Denkerin der Stunde? Neue Schriften von und über Hannah Arendt." In: Politische Vierteljahresschrift 62 (2021):341-361 provides an overview of her writings and the secondary literature. See also Thomas Meyer: Hannah Arendt: Die Biographie. München: Piper Verlag 2023 and the critical edition of Arendt's writings, edited by Meyer since 2020, which owes its publication not least to the continued relevance of her thought and work. See also Dana Villa: Hannah Arendt. London: Oxford University Press 2023. The following works examine, to varying degrees, the significance of poetic and rhetorical

understood as different facets of autotheory. Considered as an important, intersectional trait of her vast oeuvre, autotheory may be an essential link between the different aspects of her work, including its aesthetic, political and theoretical dimensions. An autotheoretical approach may therefore contribute to showing the paramount bio-graphical character of her thought and writing. This is what this contribution attempts to do. Autotheory, is employed here likewise as a reading lens and category of analysis. Although there is a long tradition of self-theorizing, the more recent use of autotheory implicitly or explicitly relies on the work of theorists from the margins of academia, or subjectivities reflecting marginalized experiences. Such theories, which have influenced different discourses on a vast range – remain still marginalized in more recent debates. However, these works are not yet exhausted. Reading them alongside reflections on autotheory – which is also what I try to aim at – can still shed light on our perceptions of theory and open our critical lens to further thought.

Commonly the academic umbrella term life writing is associated with the subject as it explores itself in writing within various formats like autobiography, biography, memoir, diaries, letters, testimonies, autofiction, or social media entries, embracing fictional and factional aspects, exploring the meanings and work around identity-formation. In their introduction to life writing titled *Reading Autobiography*

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devices in the work of Hannah Arendt. Sebastian Hefti: „Zwischen Welt Sprache. Denkbilder und Hannah Arendts Schreibwerkstatt." In: Text + Kritik Zeitschrift für Literatur: Hannah Arendt. Edited by H. L. Arnold, Heft 166/167 (2005), pp. 114-124; Siegrid Weigel: „Dichtung als Voraussetzung der Philosophie. Hannah Arendts Denktagebuch." In: Text + Kritik Zeitschrift für Literatur: Hannah Arendt. Edited by H. L. Arnold, Heft 166/167 (2005), pp. 125-137; Siegrid Weigel: "Personare, poetische Differenz und Selbstübersetzung – Der Sound von Hannah Arendts Denken und Schreiben." In: Hannah Arendt zwischen den Disziplinen. Edited by Ulrich Baer & Amir Eshel. Göttingen: Walstein 2014, pp. 63-90. Barbara Hahn, Marie-Luise Knott: Von den Dichtern erwarten wir Wahrheit. Berlin: Mattes&Seitz 2007. Wolfgang Heuer, Irmela von der Lühe: Dichterisch denken: Hannah Arendt und die Künste. Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag 2007. Pierre Pachet. "Die Autorität der Dichter in einer Welt ohne Autorität." In: Dichterisch Denken – Hannah Arendt und die Künste. Edited by W. Heuer und I. v. d. Lühe. Göttingen: Wallstein, 2007, pp. 62–69; Thomas Schestag: Die unbewältigte Sprache. Hannah Arendts Theorie der Dichtung. Basel/W.a.R.: Urs Engeler Verlag 2006; Susannah Young-ah Gottlieb: "Introduction." In: Hannah Arendt, Reflections on Literature and Culture. Edited by S. Young-ah Gottlieb, Stanford: Stanford University Press 2007, pp. xi-xxxi. Amir Eshel: „Hannah Arendts Politik und Poetik der Einfügung." In: Hannah Arendt zwischen den Disziplinen. Hg. v. Ulrich Baer & Amir Eshel. Göttingen: Walstein 2014, pp. 151-182; Achim Geisenhanslüke. Die Sprache der Infamie – Literatur und Ehrlosigkeit. Paderborn: Wilhelm Fink 2014; Anne. Bertheau: ‚Das Mädchen aus der Fremde' – Hannah Arendt und die Dichtung. Münster: transcript 2016, and Marie Luise Knott: Verlernen – Denkwege bei Hannah Arendt. Berlin: Matthes & Seitz 2017.

Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson provide a brief definition of autobiographical writing based on its Greek origins as *self-writing life.*[2] They relate life writing to a critical feminist and expanding understanding of the genre of autobiography that according to them has freed the 'masculinist' "ideologically fraught category of autobiography" form the specific constraints of a specific genre-definition.[3]

What may come into the fore in autotheory may not only be the political and social relations of a subject in a temporal and spatial context, it also is an exploration of their affective states within these specific contexts. Such texts describe a critical, searching oscillation between the centering and decentering of experiences of the embodied self in relation to an other, a context, the wor(l)d. These conglomerations within threads of history, language, and discourse find expression in the traces of the (writing) subject and, to an extend at least, show themselves shadowy in the subject's orientations – and thus their singular acts and movements that are transcribed in the wor(l)d. This transposition from 'life' to 'text' and from the 'actual self' to the written self can be understood as a translation of the inaudible language of thoughts and memories into the silent language of a written text – which is 'living' only in the moments it is written and read. The term autotheory is connoted with 'self-writing' as critical theorizing that follows poststructuralist approaches – not in a refuting way, but in its footsteps.[4] Thus, autotheory is neither new nor an American 'genre'. [5] While there is no consensus on the definition of autotheory, this more specific depiction emphasizes the critical stance and the emblem of the self's writing of life as a transgressive genre of writing. This form of theorizing is experiential and embodied (rather than abstract). It is akin to turning the margins of the self outward at the seams of writing. This does not detach autotheoretical writing from deconstructive readings, the economy of power, the question of subjectivity, or access to avenues of speaking and being heard. However, as a singular act of deconstructive reading, it may illuminate the various structures of silences that accompany the traces of writing and speaking.

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[2] Sidonie Smith, Julia Watson: Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Narrating Life Narratives. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010, here p.1.
[3] Sidonie Smith, Julia Watson: Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Narrating Life Narratives. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010, here p. 17.
[4] Cf. Robyn Wiegman: "Introduction: Autotheory". In: Arizona Quarterly: A Journal of American Literature, Culture, and Theory, Volume 76/1(2020), pp. 1-14, here p.10.
[5] Émile Lévésque-Jalbert. „This is not an Auto-Fiction: Autoteoría, French Feminism and Living in Theory" Arizona Quarterly 1(2020): 65-84, p. 66.

The term autotheory, though, comes with its own problematics. Is it possible, one might ask, to demonstrate and transcend the limits of the self by acknowledging, in passing, the myriad and multivocal facets of that self? Does it then turn into something else, more open? Or is this rather a gesture that, from a good-willed unconscious backdoor, reestablishes the desire for a 'narrative smoothing',[6] albeit in a disguised manner? But aren't stories always fragments of a larger entity called language, which dispossesses every kind of writing and 'self'? Is it not a reduction of the complex possibilities of reading texts to center it all once again on the 'auto', whether as an act of goodwill or even as a combative act of resistance and subversion? It seems that autotheory circles around the question of how to pronounce the 'auto' in the face of – given the facticity of – the other. Is autotheory an inherently more just and ethical form of writing? Does it carve out space for the other to speak and represent themselves? What remains of a critical approach when it is disciplined within an academic discourse? What remains of a critique's value when it is appropriated within the parameters of the managerial university system, where reading itself appears as a void and new ideas are ingested into its orbit and shelved? One could further ask – with more hope – if there is a form of reading or work that would ensure that such forms of critique aren't sucked into the abyss of consumable, categorizing, and commodifying knowledge production machinery churned out on an assembly line. And then, given the reflections of authors who have engaged with these questions – such as Sigmund Freud, Jacques Derrida, Gloria E. Anzaldúa, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, and more recently, Cristina Sharpe – but who often remain at the margins of the debate, I wonder if the framing of terms and turns in academic knowledge production is not still very much embedded in the neoliberal economy of self-promotion. Would paying attention to a 'tradition' of such works and their traces not offer a critical approach and help embed and situate autotheory on fairer and deeper historical basis? Although it seems necessary to keep such questions in mind, and this may be an attempt to do so, there is an aspect connoted by the term autotheory that makes it an important issue, especially with regard to marginalized subjectivities – and thus as a form of critical engagement and in(ter)vention – that may also be important to consider with regard to the work of

[6] Sigmund Freud, qtd. in Carolyn Laubender: Speak for Your Self: Psychoanalysis, Autotheory and the Plural Self 2020/1, pp. 39-64, here p. 50

Hannah Arendt. As an extended reading of poststructuralism in response to ontologically inspired backlashes, it seems to oscillate between a phenomenological registration of the *intentional contents of thought* and deconstruction. Intertwined with questions of subjectivity and historically conditioned regimes of inclusion and exclusion, it could be described as a theory of un-doing intentionality as Edmund Husserl defined it: the mind's directedness toward an animated or inanimated other in a specific way – but within the framework of a deconstructive angle as Jacques Derrida would have preferred. As such, it appears relevant, and, of course, never final.

The term autotheory was first coined by the feminist thinker Stacey Young to describe critical threads of feminist and queer counter-writing within 'discursive political activism'[7] in an attentive rather intersectional approach against hegemonic claims of mainstream *white* middle class feminism. Young emphasizes the different approaches, specificities, and forms of subtle and manifest oppression that are expressed in such works. She especially mentions the anthology *This Bridge called My Back* (1981) by feminists of color, which is edited by Cherrie Moraga and Gloria E. Anzaldúa. Young thereby emphasizes the self- and community-critical-approach of these writings.[8] An other anthology that she mentions is *Nice Jewish Girls: A lesbian Anthology* published shortly after that in 1982, which too draws attention on the diversity of allegiances, identities, their constructions, meanings, and critical reflections. Drawing on these and other publications Young writes of a *new feminist writing* "[…] which I am calling 'autotheoretical'" – a form of counter writing from marginalized and racialized spaces. She refers to such works as: "[…] autobiographical works that are also explicitly theoretical in nature" and describes them as "books rather than slogans, informed speech acts, or direct action campaigns" that "offer sustained and well-developed discussions of the politics of discourse and of identity and subjectivity in relation to gender, class, race, sexuality, and other major social divisions".[9] Besides the theoretical acumen of these works, she also points out another characteristic of this cross-disciplinary 'new mixed

[7] Cf. Stacy Young: Changing the Wor(l)d: Discourse, Politics and the Feminist Movement. Abingdon, New York: Routledge 1997, here p. 61.
[8] Stacy Young: Changing the Wor(l)d: Discourse, Politics and the Feminist Movement. Abingdon, New York: Routledge 1997, here p. 62.
[9] Stacy Young: Changing the Wor(l)d: Discourse, Politics and the Feminist Movement. Abingdon, New York: Routledge 1997, here p. 61-64.

genre', which is that they "enable insights into experiences that are generally excluded from traditional scholarship" and that prompt further critical analysis.[10]

Subsequent scholars have adopted Young's term in more contemporary approaches. Notably, the work and the employment of the term by Spanish thinker Paul B. Preciado in his publication *Testo Junkie*[11] has made a considerable mark. Preciado also uses the term in the sense of critical, theoretical self-reflection embodied and expressed through writing. Another important blueprint for the term's success in literary theory was Maggie Nelson's *The Argonauts*[12], which draws on Preciado and has since enjoyed a remarkable, hyped trajectory. In her award-winning book, Nelson highlights the reflective and distanced manner in which a subject is involved in and invested in the sociopolitical context within a dense, highly theoretical framework. She brings together works by authors such as Roland Barthes and Susan Sontag within a poetic style and form of writing. Nelson explores different meanings of configuring the self within an intimate life context. Another notable influence has been Lauren Fournier's monograph, *Autotheory as Feminist Practice in Art, Writing, and Criticism* (2021)[13]. Fournier uses the term in line with feminist thinker Young, employing the terms autotheory and 'autophilosophy' interchangeably.

Autotheory is not connoted by a definitive concept, but rather by a multitude of ways of critically and engagedly writing about the self while remaining a form of theoretical self-inspection.[14] It is closely related to the 'body' and to experiences of exclusion in various ways and can be understood as an extension of poststructuralist thought, taking the form of a critical, power-sensitive, and deconstructive approach. Rather than denying diversity and the multiplicity of experiences or common facts,

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[10] Stacy Young: Changing the Wor(l)d: Discourse, Politics and the Feminist Movement. Abingdon, New York: Routledge 1997, here p. 64-67.

[11] Cf. Preciado, Paul B. *Testo Junkie: Sex, Drugs, and Biopolitics in the Pharmacopornographic Era*. Trans. Bruce Benderson. New York: The Feminist Press at the City University of New York 2013.

[12] Nelson, Maggie: The Argonauts. Minneapolis, Miinnesota: Graywolf Press 2015.

[13] Lauren Fournier.Autotheory as Feminist Practice in Art, Writing, and Criticism. Cambridge Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2021.

[14] Cf. Lauren Fournier.Autotheory as Feminist Practice in Art, Writing, and Criticism. Cambridge Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2021, here p. 2; Diana Mistreanu: « Écrire le soi à l'âge de la post vérité. De la cognition « 5 e » à la solidarité démocratique : une grille conceptuelle pour théoriser l'autothéorie". In: Studia Ubb Philologia, LXX/1 (2025) pp. 31 – 52, here p. 33; Maria Gil Ulldimolens: "Autotheory and Its Others." In: ArtHist.net. https://arthist.net/archive/38297. (15/03/2023).

as relativist, meta-narrative, and post-truth discourses that are "accentuated with the rise of social media"[15], content in their endeavor to override critical stances and to assert another form of 'truth', postmodernist or rather poststructuralist accounts emphasize complexity, multifacetedness, and contradiction. Poststructuralist approaches to which autotheoretical texts can be counted "ne vise pourtant pas à renforcer la polarisation sociale, mais au contraire, à contribuer à la création d'un vivre-ensemble plus inclusif et plus solidaire"[16]. Autotheory thus brings together questions of subjectivity, so important and central to language and meaning, with singularity. Another point often made is the overlap between theory and literary writing in these works. But can we ever be sure of a clear line between them? Has there ever been one? And if so, was it merely a conceptual and disciplinary distinction set forth beforehand to distinguish one from the other and ensure their different statuses? Be that as it may, autotheoretical texts and life writing, in general, seem to share with all other texts the enactment of meanings within the layers and in-between processes of writing, editing, and reading. At the same time, life writing as autotheory explores writing as a tool and a poetics of epistemology and critique. This poetics delves deep into the fabric of different genres of texts while retaining an aesthetic quality that enables finding a language for that which has not yet been spoken. In this sense, autotheory involuntarily expresses a form of translation.

As mentioned, although the terms life writing and autotheory are more recent, the movement that they abide by can be traced back historically and mirrors an understanding of power and coming to power. Within these instances, I wish to highlight some older traits of theory that contributed to making life writing and autotheory possible, implicitly and explicitly paving the way for their current understanding. I believe these traits are still important for analyzing and evolving their meanings, as well as for further reflecting on the work of autotheory and life writing in general. Yet, they remain quite forgotten and marginalized. This tradition encompasses a variety of approaches and the work of numerous critical theorists. I am referring to three such thinkers here, two of whom, I think, have explicitly employed life writing in the critical sense of autotheory, approaching thought and

[15] Cf. Amina Hussein: "Theorising Post-Truth: A Postmodern Phenomenon". In: Journal of Comparative Literature and Aesthetics 42/1 (2019), pp. 150-62, here p.150.
[16] Diana Mistreanu: « Écrire le soi à l'âge de la post vérité. De la cognition « 5 e » à la solidarité démocratique : une grille conceptuelle pour théoriser l'autothéorie". In: Studia Ubb Philologia, LXX/1 (2025) pp. 31 – 52, here p. 35.

how we think without using the terms. One of them has done so implicitly, taking refuge in the logic and logistics of the splitting that any utterance entails. I will argue that this shows the intertwining of the spaces of the so-called private and public in language and what we gain from reconsidering them for critical thought, with hindsight to the work of Hannah Arendt. These specific aspects appear in the work of Sigmund Freud, Émile Benveniste, and Jacques Derrida.

The three authors wrote from different Jewish and thus marginalized experiences and positions and intervened in (academic) discourse in their writing and epistemic work in ways that have changed our perceptions of the self and of writing for good. However, in more recent scholarship, they remain increasingly absent, perhaps due to another divide-and-rule trait, and perhaps as part of uncritical, automated advances, also within postcoloniality. Such a forgetting would ultimately conceal the already hitherto minimally researched overlaps between different forms of dominance worldwide as well as the historical effects of (internal) European colonialism, including internal forms – which also encompass Judaism and the experiences of Jewish lives and histories, as Paul Gilroy and others have repeatedly emphasized in their various works – and therefore it is of immanent importance to keep these insights in mind, I think. Moreover, all three mentioned thinkers are pivotal for understanding different instances of the becoming of the self and of subjectivity in relation to the wor(l)d, to writing. With Freud's exploration of the unconscious any notion of a stable, self-regulating self is rendered futile. This is a major component that, like little nudges, keeps informing understandings of autotheory. Freud's work has been pivotal in many approaches of critical theories, especially for the early Frankfurt School but also for Hannah Arendt, and later a number of postcolonial critics like Edward W. Said, Homi K. Bhabha, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Subjectivity, his work inevitably suggests, may not only be informed by what we belief to know and sense, but also by what we repress, not say, or say in indirect and implicit ways in processes of concealment and displacement, where writing, too, occupies a space of dreaming. Life writing is likewise observable in the work of Sigmund Freud, particularly in his first-person reflections on his psychoanalytic theories,[17] where one of its cornerstones may in fact lie beyond the

[17] Cf. Achim Geisenhanslüke: Unheimliche Nähen: Literatur und Psychoanalyse. Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, p. 32 ff.

literary realm (and psychoanalytic reflections). In this context, it is interesting to consider Freud's thoughts on poetic work and the imagination (*Phantasie*). For Freud, the writer/ poet has the ability to transform daydreams and unfulfilled wishes into an imagined world, transposing them from a sociopolitically forbidden scene and space of possible shame and thus insuperability into an unprohibited space of possibilities, of playfulness, of fantasy. It is an in-between place of past and future possibilities. In the writing process the 'I' is, moreover, parceled into different parts that fulfill different tasks in the text. The act of writing creates a space in which vulnerability and invulnerability are lastly negotiated.[18] A space is thus construed where power and empowerment can be sorted out and different forms for identification, acknowledgement, and closeness, between an implied writing and an implied reading self, is created, while the prosaic 'I' seems to oscillate between the real author and a narrative instance that seems closer to the trace of an implied reading position in the text. This Freudian reference to writing could be described as a stage where autotheory is unleashed and where alternative forms of thought and imagination can be rehearsed.[19]

The language-related and ethical touches imbued in the works of Émile Benveniste and Jacques Derrida have given similar nuances to such thoughts from other, linguistic, and philosophic quarters. These also resonate in many subsequent critical approaches, especially those around poststructuralist thought (including postcolonial and decolonial ones). I am referring specifically to Benveniste's understanding of the divided subject in language.[20] For an autotheoretical approach

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[18] Sigmund Freud: "Der Dichter und das Phantasieren": Schriften zur Kunst und Kultur. Hg. v. Oliver Jahraus. Stuttgart: Reclam 2010, p. 103 ff.

[19] See, for example, Sarah Kofman's L'enfance de l'art: Une interprétation de l'esthétique freudienne. Paris: petite bibliothèque Payot 1970. In this book Kofman reads Freud against the grain of his approach to art, revealing ambivalence and psychoanalytic resistance to art. See also the more recent work of Achim Geisenhanslüke on Freud, which establishes links between Freud's life experiences and his oeuvre employing an autotheoretically inspired reading lens. Achim Geisenhanslüke: Unheimliche Nähen: Literatur und Psychoanalyse. Bielefeld: transcript Verlag 2026.

[20] I am referring here in particular to the distinction that Benveniste makes between the utterance and the uttered, when language is "conversed" into discourse. See Stéphane Mosès: "Émile Benveniste and the Linguistics of Dialogue" In: Revue de métaphysique et de morale 4/32 (2001): 1-18, here p. 5. The article can be found online in English and French at https://shs.cairn.info/journal-revue-de-metaphysique-et-de-morale-2001-4-page-509?lang=en. See regarding the term enunciation and énoncé in the work of Émile Benveniste furthermore Russell Smith: "Enunciation" (25 Mar. 2021). In: Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Literature. Edited by Deidre Shauna Lynch. New York: online edition - Oxford Academic 31 Aug 2016-, (accessed January 2026). Cf. also Èmile Benveniste:

this means that the writing self may not reflect a self-conscious self but the process of becoming a subject through the written: "C'est dans l'instance de discours où *je* désigne le locuteur que celui-ci s'enonce comme 'sujet'"[21]. Notably in autotheory this process involves the production of meaning in language as an act of what Émile Benveniste calls *énunciation*. It is in the act of *enunciation*, of utterance – the appropriation of language in a given context through an 'I' – that language is given form along with the subjectivity that forms it and forms itself through it. This also marks the act, according to Benveniste, in which time as a presence is formed within the utterance and which also sheds light on the past – from this moment of presence – and the threads that reach into the future.[22] The *énunciation* is thus an individuated singular, interventionist act through language. But it also is one that gives meaning to language in a specific manner and (in)forms it. Benveniste distinguishes, therefore, between the *enunciation* as a singular act of language-use in a specific form and the *product* of this act, the *énoncé*. The *énoncé* leaves a trace in discourse while also shedding light on the context of the act of *énonciation*, historicizing it in a way. However, it remains a part of the overall language.[23] The self, subject to the mechanisms of its own writing, of the utterance it performs in writing, seems to fall apart in the economy of speaking/writing, between the enunciation and the enunciated – a distinction that Benveniste assesses in his linguistic-philosophic observations as this splitting of the self in writing.

There is thus, in the act of autotheoretical writing already a doubling of the self, conceivable within the possibilities that language as a matter provides. On the one hand, the 'I' appropriates this material to refer to the experiences of a singular subject, on the other hand, in the *énoncé*, the 'I' extends the limits of this 'I' that it produces, leaving a trace of the utterance in language/discourse. Each time it is an

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Problèmes de linguistique générale, I. Paris: Èditions Gallimard [1966] 2022, p. 230-236, 251-266.

[21] Cf. Èmile Benveniste: Problèmes de linguistique générale, I. Paris: Èditions Gallimard [1966] 2022, p. 262. Emphasis in the original.

[22] Benveniste speaks here about specific verbs that indicate reflection, denoting subjectivity beyond the moment of speaking and, thus, transcending 'time' in the sense of the present. Cf. Èmile Benveniste: Problèmes de linguistique Générale, I. Paris: Èditions Gallimard [1966] 2022, p. 264 ff. See also Stéphane Mosès: "Émile Benveniste and the Linguistics of Dialogue" In: Revue de métaphysique et de morale 4/32 (2001): 1-18, here p. XIV.

[23] Cf. Èmile Benveniste: Problèmes de linguistique générale, I. Paris: Èditions Gallimard [1966] 2022, p. 254 ff.; Stéphane Mosès: "Émile Benveniste and the Linguistics of Dialogue" In: Revue de métaphysique et de morale 4/32 (2001): 1-18, here p. V.

other ego speaking through the 'I', saying something else. This makes the utterance and its possible meanings more accessible and generalizable as such in language, through the process of reading as well as within its epistemological reach and re-issuing. There is thus a gap between the writing of a subject, and the text that is produced by them. While the enunciation displays and reflects specific experiences of a speaking subject in a historically driven context and situation, the *énoncé* seems to override the singularity of the subject's limit and widen the scope of language as well as discourse through the act of transmission and (self-)'translation' of these internal processes into language and into the sphere of discourse.

These instances are also pivotal aspects of Jacques Derrida's thought and work, particularly his work on *autobiography* as a genre- and perhaps even discipline-busting form of writing. While hinting at the singularity of experience and historically driven, sociopolitical contexts, Derrida does not mystify his approach but connects it to the wayward work of language and representation (and questions of access to representation and speaking). Through this, he highlights our need to continually recognize the mechanisms of power, domination, and claims of 'truth' within the discourses we engage in. In this sense, he addresses the mechanisms and regimes of 'truth' that serve the economy of power and develop exclusionary politics. Lastly, Derrida problematizes language as a neutral space, displacing it from within such a reading. In *Monolingualism of the Other; or the Prothesis of Origin* Derrida complicates the notions of *belonging to a language* and of *language as oneness*. In his terminology the self appears as multi-structured, united only by some lose strings and so does language as a matter that occupies the space before any singularity and before the entry of the subject. So, any subject in using some strings of language (never ever its totality) uses it and abuses it at the same time and is used and abused by it.[24] Following Derrida Robert Smith writes of autobiography as an act of and in subjectivity, not only a core or characteristic element of life writing but a residue in any given text, something that remains, when all other sides of it are stripped up, something that at the same time contradicts universalization, something that speaks against sameness and absolutization as that, which "is even more specific within the subjective" and Smith goes on: "We could even describe it

[24] See Jaques Derrida: Monolingualism of the Other OR The Prothesis of Origin, Translated by Patrick Mensah. Stanford: Stanford University Press [1996] 1998, p. 44 ff.

(very gingerly) as the dehiscence of the literary into the philosophical".[25] While Derrida makes out this specificity of the autobiographical in philosophical works, Hegel's for example, Smith describes it as a literary element, or maybe one could say as an element of literariness. Smith calls the autobiographical thus an irritant "in the body of philosophical reason".[26]

The element of narcissism that is part of self-seeking is transformed in an alteration that happens in writing. Drawing on Derrida's reading of Hegel's *Phenomenology of the Mind* Smith identifies three elements of this autobiographical instance: an admixture of life and work, a deconstructive residue that goes against 'a principle of reason' – which Derrida calls 'an originary ruin'[27] and that no autobiography can be finite or show a finished and closed subjectivity.[28] All of this results in what Derrida calls mythological narrative effects, which, in their radical singularity, unhinge 'reason'-related presuppositions.[29]

Paradoxically autobiography, life writing as well as autotheory, are also forms of writing that claim to write what is *felt* to be true, yet in the face of an other within and without – by the touch of an other and as if replying and awaiting a reply in this space in touch.

Autotheory, is thus instituted not only as a trait of writing, whether philosophical or otherwise, but rather as a literary residue—a poetics of particularity that endows writing with a specific poetic sensibility. It marks the particularity of the writing subject in invisible, intersectional ways. It gives impetus to writing, how one writes, and what is written. Thus, questions of the self must be linked to those of subjectivity, as well as to the singularity of *auto.bio.graphy* – the inscription of 'life' in the self, both embodied and psychic and the 'I's position to it.

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[25] Robert Smith: Derrida and autobiography. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1995, p. 4.
[26] Robert Smith: Derrida and autobiography. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1995, p. 5.
[27] Robert Smith: Derrida and autobiography. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1995, p. 5; Smith is referring here to Jacques Derrida's *Memoirs of the Blind: the self-portrait and other ruins*. Translated by Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas, Chicago, London: The University of Chicago Press, 1993, p. 68-69.
[28] Robert Smith: Derrida and autobiography. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1995, p. 5.
[29] See Robert Smith: Derrida and autobiography. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1995, p. 7.

The question of subjectivity is, thus, what lends auto.bio.graphy, and its critical assessment, autotheory, a distinctive note of difference. It is the thread that enables individuation and the experience of living (and dying) in unique and unfinished ways; the peculiar line of subjectivity is inscribed thus in singular way in the text and in life, leaving a trace of significance in the written 'self'(-text).

2 The Writing Self Without a Banister

It is against the backdrop of these considerations that the work of Hannah Arendt is approached here, as it seems as if it would follow such questions, but without a specifically programmatic epistemological, ideological, or disciplinary regime; rather the autotheoretical trait of her work seems to be a self-questioning and anti-theoretical theory that remains suspicious to hitherto beliefs as well as its own theorizing. This is an attempt, then, to read the text of Hannah Arendt as autotheoretical using autotheory as a category of analysis. What I want to dwell on here is, firstly, the value of autotheory as a critical lens of reading and secondly, the merits of autotheory in disclosing moments of self-positioning and response-ability within and despite the girdling contexts and historically circumscribed (im-)possibilities that trigger and shape a self while indulgeing in relation with others.[30] Finally, the question for me lies in the insights we may gain from these agential interactions as well as the markers of thought and affectivity that the singularity of involvement in the wor(l)d opens up, enabling further thought and engagement on a much broader spectrum. Reading Arendt from an autotheoretical angle, furthermore, may shed new light on the depth and richness of her work and thought, and may, moreover, deepen our insights on the meanings and structures of the conglomerate of a public space, the poetics of literary writing, of the future emergence of togetherness, of *amor mundi*, in a shared wor(l)d.

[30] In his preface to the biography of Hannah Arendt, Thomas Meyer not only points to the fact how intertwined and inseparable Hannah Arendt's thought and actions were, but also emphasizes this as the impetus for the new approach to her biography based on new archival material and research. He thus implicitly, stresses autotheory as an important element of her thought and life. Cf. Thomas Meyer: Hannah Arendt: Die Biographie. München: Piper Verlag 2023 and the critical edition of Arendt's writings, edited by Meyer since 2020, which owes its publication not least to the continued relevance of her thought and work. While using the term 'life writing' Samantha C. Grayck, too, emphasizes the enmeshment of Arendt's theoretical reflections and (political) and engaged life; see Samantha C. Grayck (2021) The Dialogical Self: Elements of Life Writing in the Works of Hannah Arendt, Life Writing, 18:2 (2021), 261-279.

Many of Hannah Arendt's texts like the volume *Thinking without a banister* (*Denken ohne Geländer*), her *Denktagebuch* (thought diary) as well as the poetic instances of her writing can be conceived as autotheoretical in this more recent understanding of the term. Arendt's situated and yet wor(ld)-attentive style develops its own highly poetical literariness while remaining committed to the wor(l)d, to literature and (critical) thought.

The deep embeddedness of Hannah Arendt's thought within the sphere of 'life' (as political theory), of critique and praxis is not a self-sufficient act, or an auto-referential flood of reflections for the mere benefit of being just that, or a form of attachment and indebtedness to, and 'belief' in intersubjectivity. Arendt's work may not be a conscious form of life writing or autotheoretical writing[31] for the benefit of itself. However, it is a way of reading and writing in the world that attempts to create a wider, more open space in order to be able to write at all. She questions traditional ways of thinking, perceiving them useless in light of the atrocities of the historical moment she lives in. She also tries to find a new 'self'. This self is inscribed in and by these discourses and thoughts. For Arendt, this is also a questioning of the texture of the wor(l)d itself, while she must maintain the languages (German, Greek, French, and English) in which this texture is woven. In this situation she takes recourse to the poetics of writing and the rich and flavored meaningfulness of literary writing in a double sense: to reading literary texts and to a form of writing littered with a verve of literariness. In this way, thought is opened up as a poetics that the text, the writing offers: a space is created between the possibility of older and conventional understandings and another (more *willful*) attention to the possibilities of writing in ways deemed 'unobjective'. This is a movement close to the second wave of the normativizations of specific writings and thought – against and *after* poststructuralism and semiotics. In both cases it comes with a historical context (and respective languages). In both cases it is the form of language that is paid attention to, an attention that goes against conventionalized, normative, and 'scientific' languages, disinterested style. Autotheoretical writing questions the fixation of 'knowledge' and 'truth' and tries to carve out space for thought by opening up meaning through the errands of unfixed and unfixing significations in

[31] Robyn Wiegman: "Introduction: Autotheory Theory." In: Arizona Quarterly A Journal of American Literature, Culture, and Theory, 1(2020):1-14, here p. 9.

writing from positions of marginality. In times when language and critique can be appropriated by regressive accounts and powers, this approach is crucial. Referencing the auto is another mechanism for positioning oneself against such forms of appropriation. Moreover, it implicitly demands responsibility as a subjective and singular act. In *The Argonauts*, Maggie Nelson invokes Ludwig Wittgenstein to convey such thoughts and express the inexpressible within the expressed. At the end of a quasi-dialogue with Wittgenstein and her spouse, Harry, she says, citing them: "Words are good enough". Maybe, maybe not. It may emanate from the surplus, excess, and reduction that words simultaneously seem to contain. In the middle of her text, Hannah Arendt cites Karl Marx's axiom, '[n]obody is free who enslaves others,' linking a similar idea to speech via Marx. She thereby reads Marx against himself, drawing attention to the stipulation of this more traditional thought that along Plato links 'truth' rather to speech than praxis. However, Arendt argues that Marx turns this idea on its head by radicalizing it and relating praxis to 'truth'. According to Marx, it is not only *praxis* per se that shows more truth than speech, but the one kind of *praxis* that has severed all bonds with speech. Speech on the other hand is not only deemed to partake less of truth than action, but is now conceived to be mere 'ideological' talk whose chief function is to conceal the truth.[32] Instead of rejecting Marx' view, Arendt argues that his stance is rooted in his theoretical assumptions, showing that it is not so easy to dismiss 'traditional' thoughts in order to forge a new path (in language or thought). Instead of following either path, however, Arendt emphasizes speech and writing as forms of praxis – language in performance – (while remaining more loyal to Marx than a Platonian understanding). This is what they share: a performative quality. However, since any praxis signifies, it is neither feasible nor desirable to preempt a signified – even though it is not arbitrariness that prevails, but rather a subjective preference within an infinite continuum of possibilities. This introduces another layer, by referencing (auto-)writing as a mode of 'speech/writing' as praxis, as an act, alongside 'traditions' and their counters and negations.

No memoir, autobiography, or diary of Hannah Arendt exists in a strict sense. Even her letters to friends entail much more than 'just' friendly and intimate exchanges

[32] Hannah Arendt: Thinking without a Banister. Essays in Understanding 1953-1975. Edited and with an Introduction by Jerome Kohn. New York: Schocken Books, 2018, p.16 ff.

and reports about her whereabouts and everyday life. She seemingly didn't write in accordance with any other protocol than an inner urge and sense of orientation. Her self-reflecting style seems to be a point of convergence and departure between the poetics of historically conditioned political structures and the experiences and poetics of a singular writing.

Her autoreflective writing, at times melancholic in tone, has a specific temporality, spatiality, subjectivity while it – like a poem and a lyrical I – tends to go beyond them as well, keeping the presence close to itself. This writing emerges from immense and immediate experiences of catastrophe, crisis, and loss. Therefore, I think that the term autotheory might be accurate with regard to her writing as a form of life writing in the sense of a critical poetics of inscribing a self in the wor(l)d, in order to critique and to shed light on erased or excluded aspects of the materiality of the wor(l)d and its discourses.

For Arendt, writing also appears to be a way to navigate and overcome the presence of catastrophe, its routs/roots, and the sense of loss and crisis that accompany it. It also seems to be a way of withdrawing from the world in order to identify, problematize, name, and reflect on the dire challenges of the past and its presences and implications, and what may lie ahead. She describes these meditations as 'two-in-one': a soliloquy in dialogue within the experience of a divided self – a historically situated activity of the psyche within powerlessness and sorrow that destabilizes the authority of the self. As a result, it has the faculty to question the authority of any text. For Arendt, this step in the process of thinking, which involves the rupture of the self in thought-writing, is the very experience of thought. It is not an act in and of itself, but rather a necessity for what she calls 'understanding' (*verstehen*) – a dive into absolute uncertainty beyond known 'truths': "To engage in the activity of thinking was, for Arendt, akin to stepping up and down a staircase […] without the support of a banister on either side."[33]

Arendt also refers to this act of thinking as an act of *reconciliation*. This reconciliatory critique may constitute an autotheoretical technique for Arendt. Theory emerges as doubt as a result of experiencing sorrow, power-lessness, and rupture, all of which accompany her meditations. This prerequisite of her writing is

[33] Jerome Kohn. "Introduction" In: Hannah Arendt: Thinking without a Banister. Essays in Understanding 1953-1975. Edited and with an Introduction by Jerome Kohn. New York: Schocken Books, 2018, p. xiv.

closely tied to experiences of intellectual and personal disillusionment and grief, which call for a new beginning:

> Thinking without a banister complements another of Arendt's metaphors: the abyss that suddenly gaped between past and future when the bridge of traditional norms spanning the passage of time, relating the past to the future, was mocked out of existence by the hitherto unimagined political crimes of totalitarianism. This abyss lacks all spatial dimensions, including depth, for it is bottomless.[34]

Rather than occupying the place of the other, the self divides itself. This is how otherness and the relationship of the self to an other are evoked initially in her thinking and writing. Self-separation and the dialogical remain attributes of her autotheoretical reflections and may invite, or even premise, a search for the division and sorrow of the writing subject in an 'implied audience'. In Hannah Arendt's work, this search is explored through a reflective tone and construed as a reflective zone within the text – and the texture of the wor(l)d. This autotheoretical theorizing seems to problematize a subtle, deep nuance in the textuality of (Western?) philosophical thinking that Arendt links to the polis and Plato's 'victory' over Aristotelian thinking, which she also reveals as a utopian element in Marx's writing. This deep nuance references the relationship between speech, action, freedom, and truth. In all of this, Arendt breaks away from the continuum of her own experience of 'history', which she, citing Immanuel Kant, calls das *trostlose Ungefähr*—an untranslatable expression. It could be vaguely rendered as a *gloomy approximation* inherent in the work of history. While she sees a disregard for and impatience with speech as 'mere opinion' in Plato's texts, which is politically founded in the decaying city-state of Athens, she recognizes Aristotle as the thinker who could still connect them through experience and speech. However, Arendt argues that for both, it was their experience of the *bios*, as reflected in the historical events of their time, that led them to such specific thoughts in relation to a specific context. Thinking that is not related to praxis becomes meaningless; 'action' haphazard; and freedom a 'problem'. "Aristotle" she continues "is the last for whom freedom is not yet

[34] Jerome Kohn. "Introduction" In: Hannah Arendt: Thinking without a Banister. Essays in Understanding 1953-1975. Edited and with an Introduction by Jerome Kohn. New York: Schocken Books, 2018, p. xiv.

'problematic' but inherent in the faculty of speech; in other words Aristotle still knew that men, as long as they talk with each other and act together in the *modus* of speech, are free."[35] In Marx she sees the break from a tradition that no longer sees the human being as an *animal rationale* but as an *animal laborans* – one that has to be freed from labor to be free.

This impossible freedom from labor seems missing in the new turn to the autotheoretical. But is it not a deep nuance of its effects and affects, in a double sense? Who implicitly and explicitly authorizes the auto? Does it not have a specific language and space referring to a specific aeon? Whose 'autos' do we hear and listen to (and whose do we not)?

> This early experience [of enslavement so that 'the citizens' could be free], however, was never altogether lost. […] [F]reedom remained connected with exerting rule and only rulers were deemed free. This is the context in which freedom could become a 'good', something to be enjoyed, closely connected with the power of doing as one pleases, either within or beyond the limits of the law. Freedom remained with the 'ruling class,' and continued to presuppose others being ruled, even though it was no longer the condition but had become the very content of political life.[36]

For Arendt Marx's political understanding is not just 'moralizing' but concrete and material. Maybe we have to think the ethical in the auto-theoretical of writing and its im/possibilities from such angles (again) – the labor and freedom invested in auto-theorizing for the political good? Whose labor (and freedom) and whose politics are invested in it (and why) – and whose are not? (and why so?).[37] For Arendt, the *bios theōreticus* and *bios politikos* should belong together as in Roman political thought that she allegorizes in the figure of Cicero – a *writer and politician*. Arendt considers Cicero a model that has been lost with the 'victory' of Greek (Platonian) philosophy. Practical theorizing, or *thought*, as it were, must then be perceived as part of aesthetics, a writing self within a 'community' (thus social) and political indulgence and engagement in language and writing.

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[35] Hannah Arendt: Thinking without a Banister. Essays in Understanding 1953-1975. Edited and with an Introduction by Jerome Kohn. New York: Schocken Books, 2018, p.19 ff., p. 25-26.
[36] Hannah Arendt: Thinking without a Banister. Essays in Understanding 1953-1975. Edited and with an Introduction by Jerome Kohn. New York: Schocken Books, 2018, p.32.
[37] Hannah Arendt: The Life of the Mind. New York, London: Harcourt [1971] 2021, p. 39ff.

In her final work, *The Life of the Mind* (1978), Hannah Arendt underscores her argument from *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (1963) asserting that thoughtlessness inevitably fosters evil. This insight prompts her to engage in further reflection on the question of thinking.[38] At the core of her reflections is a profoundly political and ethical quest that repudiates forms of violence that are abhorrent and unthinkable. Arendt's theoretical framework encompasses a nuanced conceptualization of thought, extending beyond the confines of the conventional notion of 'thought' as a mere cognitive process. This assertion extends to Derrida. Derrida places significant emphasis on what he terms the 'eschatology to measure' what is termed as 'thought' and its implications. In contrast, Arendt conceptualizes thought as an 'activity' (thus labor? Being in labor?) seeking to investigate its potential connection to ethics, which is conventionally regarded as a discipline within philosophy. Nonetheless, despite their divergent philosophical orientations that are embedded in *auto.bio.graphical* experiences of the 'self' and their embodiments, both thinkers accentuate disparate aspects of thought. For Derrida

> '[t]hought' […] means nothing: it is the substantified void of a highly derivative ideality, the effect of a *différance* of forces, the illusory autonomy of a discourse or a consciousness whose hypothesis is to be deconstructed, whose 'causality' is to be analyzed, etc. first[39]

For Arendt

> [t]he question that imposed itself was: Could the activity of thinking as such, the habit of examining whatever happens to come to pass or to attract attention, regardless of results and specific content, could this activity be among the conditions that make men abstain from evil-doing or even actually 'conditions' them against it?[40]

In Arendt's quotation, Derrida's approach to thinking thus seems to unfold from a different angle within this 'nothingness'. Rather than viewing thinking as 'ideality,' she, too, appears to problematize it as an act, as an event; rather than merely linking

[38] Hannah Arendt: The Life of the Mind. New York, London: Harcourt [1971] 2021, p. 4.
[39] Jacques Derrida. *Positions*. Translated and annotated by Alan Bass. London: Continuum [1972] 2010, p. 44. Emphasis in the original.
[40] Hannah Arendt. *The Life of the Mind*. New York, London: Harcourt [1971] 2021, p. 5.

it to something in the lofty spheres of philosophy, she seeks to problematize it as a form that encompasses ethics – along the Greek understanding of the term as a 'habit' and its Roman meaning as 'behavior'. This approach is insofar revolutionary as it reframes thinking as an action, as a behavior that approaches the image of the humanimal as a 'creature of habit.' Thinking thus appears as something at the center of 'everyday life', from which it can be (re-)examined in terms of its habitual and behavioral 'conditions' as well as its practical meanings and relevance.

In these instances, in Arendt's as well as Derrida's accounts thinking appears as nothing but a trace – and the trace makes the difference is what Arendt seems to underline, it is not neutral. However, in both approaches thought and writing appear as enmeshed and intertwined within each other and contain each other as the material content of the performance of this act, event, or 'habit' – and its performative quality it may be added with Derrida.

Against the backdrop of these considerations, autotheoretical writing would be the trace that may disclose the process of ethical 'investment' (or lack thereof) in the process and subjectivity of thinking/writing. This would be significant and accountable, representing a trace of how we want to inter-act with another (each other). Autotheoretical writing may thus commence in thought and may not be 'self-bound' or centered upon the self; rather, it may circumscribe the dependent relation of this self and of the text to the other, even within the confines of the self.

Hannah Arendt employs this mode of writing not for the purposes of addressing or persuading an audience, but rather to comprehend the presence and overcome it. The concept of presence remains problematic for Derrida as well, pervading his philosophical thought.

What Arendt rather seeks and attends to in her writing is a movement between the texture of the past for the texturing of the future, beginning with the very historical situatedness – the presence – she is forced to find herself in.

The elements of autotheory employed in these texts do not advance the unfolding of a narrative but rather its discontinuation: the interruption and the act of intervening in what is written and written as. Gaps and breaks are identified, examined, and transformed into a novel form of writing, thereby offering an approach to both the word and the world.

Accordingly, both thinkers utilize writing with an other in mind. In Arendt's case this explicitly amounts to 'amor mundi', a major tenet of her thought, encapsulating her profound 'love', care, for 'the world'. This phenomenon resonates with what Derrida in his *Circumfession* (1993) terms the auto-bio-thanato-hetero-graphical, in which the other, even in death, seems enmeshed with the life of the self.[41]

For Hannah Arendt, writing in a way constitutes an experience of life as an experience of being in the world, of positioning oneself in it, of taking responsibility. Above all, however, it seems to be perceived as a practice of discerning nascent entry points of dialogicity with the wor(l)ds of the other. Autotheoreical writing becomes a vital component of critical, political praxis, acting as a prerequisite for engaging freely in a wor(l)d predicated on an ethics of inter-action with an other.

3 About the Person – Hannah Arendt – in Conversation with Günther Gaus

In her famous interview with Günther Grass, part of which is transcribed and published in *Denken ohne Geländer* (2005) Hannah Arendt actually mentions that for her writing is an epistemological tool bound to 'understanding'. 'Understanding' through writing for her also seems to be a form of recording one's thought processes, which take shape in the activity and absorbance that comes with writing while one seems to be, absentmindedly, in a permanent dialogue with different parts of oneself, with others.[42]

Although Arendt never published explicit autobiographical work a lot of her personal life has been on display through the posthumous publication of her many letters to her friends and intimate relationships, which entail close personal exchanges, and yet are also peppered with thoughtful musings. An exception to this rule is her much cited interview with Günther Gaus in the program *Zur Person* (1964)[43] that, between instances of an oral biographical and a correcting auto.bio.graphical account, also shows glimpses of the embeddedness of her thought

[41] Andrew Clark: "The Death of the Other: On Derrida's Conceptualization of Autobiography". In: Journal of Cultural Research 17/3 (2013): 279-294, here p. 281.
[42] Hannah Arendt: Denken ohne Geländer: Texte und Briefe. Hg. v. Heidi Bohnet und Klaus Stadler. München: Piper Verlag, p. 16 ff.
[43] The complete interview of Hannah Arendt with Günther Gaus from 1964 in the program *Zur Person* is available on You Tube under the following URL https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J9SyTEUi6Kw&t=4204s; all citations and corresponding English translation in this text refer to this source. Referenced bellow as follows: Cf. Hannah Arendt in *Zur Person*, 1964 with the time indicated.

and experience within different everyday macro and micro political events that may also shed light on the formation of subjectivity. In this interview she explicitly emphasizes the historically situated form of thought and writing.

At the end of this interview Arendt, scanning the terrain of thought for some form of insight, for a new step, a stone in high waters to get on, brings together some remnants of ancient Greek philosophy and Marx's human being as an *animal labore* to describe the "venture of the public" (*Wagnis der Öffentlichkeit*), an expression that she attributes to Karl Jaspers, as an act (*ein Handeln*) of self-exposure. For Arendt 'being public', to publish one's inner dialogical thoughts is an act of speech and as such a political act with which one takes a risk and in which one, nevertheless, takes the responsibility 'to be political', to position oneself, to be accountable for the saying, and, thus, to act in a responsible way, awaiting the response of the other. She equates acting (*handeln*) here with 'speaking' as a form of acting in the wor(l)d that comes close to maybe the most anti-violent form of interaction and 'freedom', in a world that is not yet, and perhaps never will be, fully free of bondage – at least in relation to the words of others. In acting (and speaking) 'the person' more than in anything else comes to the fore, she continues. She links being public here with taking a risk and, thus, with embodying courage in the sense of daring (*wagen*) to perform.

A public appearance in the form of a book driven by an autotheoretical appeal, then, may be understood as a performative act of responsibility in such an Arendtian sense. It is a risk taken in order to position oneself in an open sociopolitical space and to take responsibility in public – a self-situating that can be threatened and menaced, but that is also vectored against threating and menacing. Taking a position functions like a (private) shield in the gladiatorial arena of the public.

Arendt describes this positioning that lies in the public performance as a *beginning*, one other of her central concerns. Here, she describes *beginning* as an intertwining lace within an infinite texture or relationality:

> We weave our thread into a web of relationships. We never know what will come of it. We are all dependent on saying, 'Lord, forgive them for what they do, for they know not what they do.' This applies to all actions, because quite simply, because one cannot know. It is a venture. And now, in conclusion, I would say that this venture is only possible if we trust in people, that is, if we

> have some kind of the fundamental trust, difficult to define with precision, in the humanity of all human beings. There is no other way.[44]

Arendt's political theory and writing, enmeshed with her political life, reveal an 'auto' in an undiscernible unthinking mass. They unveil an 'auto' that is left alone within the racist, antisemitic politics of Nazi Germany. The 'auto' must speak against the many that has become an ('innocent') crowd. Against the backdrop of the Nazi term and practice of *Gleichschaltung* (cooptation) Arendt speaks of being suddenly left alone (*plötzlichen Verlassens*): "The problem, the personal problem, wasn't what our enemies were doing, but what our friends were doing. [...] It was as if an empty space had suddenly formed around one."[45]

She relates this to a double form of abandonment, linking it to the experience of modernity. Beginning with the (working) human being in modern times, "a peculiar sense of human alienation arises" (*entsteht eine eigentümliche menschliche Verlassenheit*), describing it as a falling back to oneself (*auf sich selbst zurückgeworfen werden*), which leads to consumption (das Konsumieren) in place of all relevant public activities (*an die Stelle aller relevanten Tätigkeiten des öffentlichen Handelns tritt*).

Within such a trajectory what she seems to emphasize as a form of action (*handeln*), albeit not as an equivalence to it, is the singularity of thinking as a vigilant praxis that can induce some form of agency, when she states:

> I do not believe that there is any thought process that occurs without personal [experience] – that is, all thinking is reflection. Thinking about the matter at hand. I live in the modern world, and naturally I have my experiences in the modern world.[46]

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[44] „*Wir schlagen unseren Faden in ein Netz der Beziehungen. Was daraus wird wissen wir nie. Wir sind alle darauf angewiesen zu sagen ‚Herr vergib Ihnen was sie tun, sie wissen nicht, was sie tun'. Das gilt für alles Handeln, weil einfach ganz konkret, weil man es nicht wissen kann. Das ist ein Wagnis. Und nun würde ich sagen, abschließend, dass dies Wagnis nur möglich ist, im Vertrauen auf die Menschen, d.h. in irgendeinem, schwer genau zu fassenden grundsätzliche Vertrauen, in das Menschliche aller Menschen. Anders könnte man nicht.*" Cf. Hannah Arendt in *Zur Person*, 1964, 1:9 ff.

[45] „*Das Problem, das persönliche Problem war doch nicht etwa, was unsere Feinde taten, sondern was unsere Freude taten. [...] Es war als ob sich plötzlich ein leerer Raum um einen bildete.*" Cf. Hannah Arendt in *Zur Person*, 1964, 31:54 ff.

[46] „*Ich glaube nicht, dass es irgendein Denkvorgang gibt, der ohne persönliche [Erfahrung] geschieht – d.h. alles Denken ist Nachdenken. Der Sache nach denken. Ich lebe in der modernen Welt, und selbstverständlich habe ich in der modernen Welt meine Erfahrungen*." Cf. Hannah Arendt in *Zur Person*, 1964, 1:02 ff.

The formation of a menacing collectivity and alliance of another kind, a fascist one, that she must experience – and perhaps this is also a warning that conformist group thinking must always to be scrutinized and questioned – seems to mark the root and resentment at the very base of critical theory regarding any form of compliance. Theory and politics easily swape the line between foe and friend in the face of power dynamics on micro and macro levels. At its core, this demonstrates the fallacy of unquestioningly conforming to (political) ideology or the politics of a dominant theory. Such conformity can engulf everyday discourse and critical thought as they become mainstreamed, distorting them in the process. The singularity of an autotheoretical input, therefore, can indeed be an engaged scheme of and for thinking, and praxis beyond and *against* the logics of conformity as a fundamental work of critique per se. Regarding her political activism and detention in Berlin by the Gestapo in 1933 Arendt, therefore, speaks of a specific satisfaction (*Befriedigung*) when arrested as she felt she acted in a subversive and resistant way[47]:

> I thought, at least I did something. At least I'm not innocent. No one can say I didn't do anything. [...] I was very satisfied. First of all, it seemed very sensible to me. And second, I felt that there was something I could do about it after all.[48]

It is indeed noteworthy how Arendt uses here the word 'innocent' (*unschuldig*) critically, as an expression marked by violence, as if from an unconscious threshold, revealing its embeddedness in a disinterested style of deliberate ignoring. This comes especially through in German as the guilt (*Schuld*) that uncannily sticks to the word 'innocent' (*un-schuldig*) remains palpable in the word itself resounding a

[47] The opportunity came when the The Zionist Organisation (Die zionistische organization) and her close friend Kurz Blumenfeld offered her a cooperation. Here she also refers to Zionism as a form of (self-) critique by which she states to have been influenced (without becoming one). The task was to gather and archive antisemitic utterances on different public levels (in schools, professional associations, academic journals) so it could be communicated to the world. She was asked as it would have been too dangerous from someone of the organization itself, which would have jeopardized the whole organization.

[48] "*Ich dachte, wenigstens habe ich was gemacht. Wenigstens bin ich nicht unschuldig. Das soll mir keiner nachsagen. [...] Ich war sehr zufrieden. Erstens schien mir das sehr vernünftig. Und zweitens hatte ich das Gefühl man kann doch irgendwas tun.*" Cf. Hannah Arendt in *Zur Person*, 1964, 12:43 ff., 14: 24ff.

reverberance that seems to linger in the air, as if waiting for an affirmation. It discloses the performative political praxis that is attached to it and its power stabilizing quality as well as the supremacist attitude behind it, which denies and at the same time confesses to be guilty.

Moreover, in the passage the singular (or collective experience) of the other comes to the fore. The 'I` that speaks here, drafts, in retrospect and after the immediacy of trauma, the possibilities of agency in times out of joint. This form of agency is knotted with experiences of Jewishness as an othered and marginalized sociopolitical ideograph that is regularly, and unexpectedly under attack:

> I always used to say a sentence then, I can remember. If you are attacked as a Jew, you have to defend yourself as a Jew. Not as a German, not as a citizen of the world or because of the human rights or so. Rather, very concrete. How can I do this, what can I do?[49]

It is therefore that 'good', that sense of indebtedness, which emanates from the historical experience of a group of people attacked that gives impetus for defense – in the name of the other who cannot speak, in the name of otherness.

Arendt thus situates thinking in the presence of writing and as a linkage to a time-space. In thinking itself though thought is free and can travel through time and space, bouncing back to the singularity of a situated thinking self and the peculiar open space of a book, challenging a potential audience.

4 A Jewelry Box for Thought – Arendt's *Denktagebuch*

On another note, finally, I wish to look at some theoretical insights of Hannah Arendt's thought within her rather neglected lyrical, almost elegiac work, which found a place, for example, in her fragmentary philosophic diary that she called her *thought diary* (*Denktagebuch* 2005; 2020) as mentioned previously. Already by its name, this work can be seen as an other instance of autotheory, one that, first and foremost, writes to her own sense of self – as a kind of treasure trunk with glistening

[49] „*Ich habe damals immer wieder einen Satz gesagt, darauf besinn ich mich. Wenn man als Jude angegriffen ist, muss man sich als Jude verteidigen. Nicht als Deutscher oder als Bürger der Welt oder der Menschenrechte oder so. Sondern ganz konkret. Wie kann ich, was kann ich machen?*" Cf. Hannah Arendt in *Zur Person*, 1964, 34:48 ff.

thought-sparkles that can be stored there and taken out some time and marveled at, or find their place in a future book like a missing or initializing piece of a puzzle. Arendt's *Denktagebuch* that she began in June 1950 remained a space of exploration and a repository for her work. It can be regarded as a receptacle for bits and pieces, single reflections, and insights – a kind of 'pensive' or, in German, *Denkarium*, as it is called in *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* (2000) – an artefact for storing and reviewing memories and scattered thoughts. The work is assumed to be particularly important for her last work *The Life of the Mind* (1978) that she could not finish before her death and that, too, was posthumously published.

Arendt's *Denktagebuch*, the book that reflects her thoughts to herself, has a specific language. While it entails also passages and poems in Englich, French, and Greek, it is mainly written in German, a language that she wanted to take with her, her mother tongue, a language she wanted to retain.

I would like to begin with a passage here that shows how Arendt uses poetic prose to express an intimate state of her life, mentioning a painful event, and giving form to it in almost lyrical writing. A thought and thought process are instigated in it. In another, later passage she then develops this into a – as she did not like to be called a philosopher, I will not call it a 'philosophical' – theoretical insight.

I was particularly taken by this short phrase. In its stillness, lingering within the very atmosphere and view before one's eyes, it somehow turns a changing, ecliptic moment in life into a haiku. It appears in her last and shortest notebook from 1971 to 1973, which contains only a few entries, along with a few dates from her travels. The phrase reads as follows:

"*Frei – wie ein Blatt im Wind*".[50]

Is a leaf in the wind free? What might be the freedom of a leaf in the wind? Is it the freedom of vulnerability, in vulnerability? Is there a freedom when one is vulnerable?

Here, it seems to indicate the echo of a silence, of an end. The usual positive connotation and value of 'freedom' in her work – is rescinded here through the image of a leaf in the wind – which evokes feelings of lostness, disconnection, doom.

[50] "*1971 – Without Heinrich. Free – like a leaf in the wind."* Hannah Arendt: Denktagebuch: 1950-1973. Hg. v. Ursula Ludz u. Ingeborg Nordmann, in Zusammenarbeit mit dem Hannah Arendt-Institut Dresden. München: Piper Verlag [2020] 2022, p. 801, 1.

The line is written beneath a brief entry recording the name of her husband, Heinrich Blücher, and the year of his death. It seems to announce a kind of halt, while she still has to figure out what it means. Like a leaf fallen from a bough in the wind, having lost its anchoring ground, she seems to dwell midway in the air, not knowing what comes next, what it means to settle down as a leaf in the wind, or be carried away by it:

"1971
Ohne Heinrich."

The whole entry thus could be read as a short, elegiac poem:

"*1971*
Ohne Heinrich.
Frei – wie ein Blatt im Wind"[51]

Freedom is, at the same time a theme that Hannah Arendt consistently writes about and that also exists almost as a kind of formulaic expression in her work. It was also taken for one of her posthumously published texts *The Freedom to Be Free*[52].
There is a phrase in this long essay that seems to capture, in a nutshell, freedom as a kind of movement in and play with language: *a freedom from to a freedom to*. Even here, freedom does not seem as lost as the leaf. It has a destination: the freedom *to* – a proposition that the leaf seems to lack.
F*rom* and *to* give meaning and orientation to freedom. On the one hand, the phrase, thus seems to describe a movement in relation to a political, historical context; on the other hand, it also expresses a form of agency. Although in the above haiku-like line free (*frei*) seems unrelated somehow, on its own, as if it would describe a kind of awaiting, it also indicates something like contemplation, even a state of relief – out of shock maybe, but also some recognition of riddance – a specific form of liberation without destination, a freedom *from* with a freedom *to* that remains uncertain, as if from another layer of melancholic thought, an experience of immediate, personal life that writes itself into the leaf.

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[51] Hannah Arendt: Denktagebuch: 1950-1973. Hg. v. Ursula Ludz u. Ingeborg Nordmann, in Zusammenarbeit mit dem Hannah Arendt-Institut Dresden. München: Piper Verlag [2020] 2022, p. 801,1.
[52] Regarding the term and concept of 'freedom', see Hannah Arendt: "The Freedom to be Free." In: New England Review 38/2 (2017), pp. 56-69.

In a letter to her friend Mary MaCarthy, Hannah Arendt writes about this loss. She also mentions the related entry in her thought diary. Describing how exhausted and empty she feels having lost her husband, she also speaks of the half-truth of this poem-image, the free leaf in the wind, noting its other side: "the whole weight of the past (gravitas)"[53], which makes the leaf stand still in the air, in a moment of reflection on life perhaps, a *still* life.

Free here is doubly ambiguous indicating a great loss as well as the heaviness that can build up in a long-during intimate relationship and everything that may be part of it – a whole, unpacked specter of affectivity and an unspoken trail of thoughts that remains as an imperceptible trace. The vacuum in which this 'free' stands does not emerge from the word that seems to indicate here a form of pause. It rather is evoked by a line, a dash. In German a dash is called *Gedankenstrich*. It can be assumed that Hannah Arendt was aware of the German word for dash, of the *Gedankenstrich* that she drew at the end of this free ~~leaf~~ while she was writing. It may mean a free line of thought, a free line in thought. A dash signals thought in the process of forming – thoughts then that are not yet or cannot be expressed in language. Perhaps it indicates a void, *eine Leere*, or a break – from thought? 'Free' here may describe forlornness in a profound way and suggest a paradox, indicating a form of freedom that is not free, or remains empty – a transparent teardrop, water, and thus life, dried out on a leaf, paper, addressed to no one specific, setting down on the earth – letting thoughts undecided, following the free leaf.

Then there comes another, longer entry in her notebook from the summer of the same year, just three pages afterwards, from July 1971, which reads as if it would stand in a direct relation to that poem-like first entry of the notebook with the 'free leaf', rounding it off with another line, with some form of conclusion that is also written in an almost haiku-like other phrase:

"The will to power out of the will's impotence".[54]

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[53] See editors' note in Hannah Arendt: Denktagebuch: 1950-1973. Hg. v. Ursula Ludz u. Ingeborg Nordmann, in Zusammenarbeit mit dem Hannah Arendt-Institut Dresden. München: Piper Verlag [2020] 2022, p. 1153,1. See also Elisabeth Young-Bruehl: Hannah Arendt: For Love of the World. New Haven, London: Yale University Press 1982, p. 434 ff. and Grit Straßenberger: Die Denkerin: Hannah Arendt und ihr Jahrhundert. München: C.H. Beck 2025, p. 419 ff.

[54] Hannah Arendt: Denktagebuch: 1950-1973. Hg. v. Ursula Ludz u. Ingeborg Nordmann, in Zusammenarbeit mit dem Hannah Arendt-Institut Dresden. München: Piper Verlag [2020] 2022, p. 804,1.

This sentence is followed by a passage – the only longer passage in the whole last notebook – in which she cites from Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883) in English and later there are some lines from a narrative of Franz Kafka and from his diaries in German.

The passage shows how she seems to have sought some kind of answer of how to deal with this freedom of loss in an affirmative rather than self-destructive way. Her *thought-train*[55], another concept-metaphor that she often mentions, reveals not only aspects of her own affective state, but a theoretical reflection and perspective on melancholy and the experience of loss as such. She thereby switches between and varies the two languages, Englich and German, in a fluid manner.
We read first from Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* semi-philosophical, semi-literary work: "[…] The will cannot will backwards; that he cannot break time and time's desire – that is the will's loneliest melancholy … ."[56] The will, desire?, is always directed towards the arrivant. It cannot go back in time. Nietzsche seems to see a struggle between *will* and *time* and his answer to this debacle, Arendt concludes, is the "creative will".

The *creative will* speaks back to 'the past', as it were, to the past *will* and to what has already taken place, in order to displace it, to overcome it, or through some kind of resolution, to be able to move on (from it), reinscribing it differently:
'This is the way I willed it: Thus I shall will it'".[57] Citing Kafka she subsequently writes on the next page in this context:

> Will and (versus) Desire – Die Weltlosigkeit des Willens, die Objektverhaftetheit der Begierde.
> Beispiel: Spazierengehen – Kafkas plötzlicher Spaziergang = Begierde; das gleiche auf ärztlichen Rat: Jetzt will ich, dass ich spazieren gehe.[58]

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[55] See regarding the meanings and semantics of this expression in Hannah Arendt's work and how it could be read Robert Eagleston's insightful contribution "Arendt's Creole 'Thought-Trains'." In: Creolizing Hannah Arendt. Edited by Marilyn Nissin-Sabat, Neil Roberts. London, New York: Rowman & Littlefield 2024, pp. 27-43.
[56] Hannah Arendt: Denktagebuch: 1950-1973. Hg. v. Ursula Ludz u. Ingeborg Nordmann, in Zusammenarbeit mit dem Hannah Arendt-Institut Dresden. München: Piper Verlag [2020] 2022, p. 804. Punctuation as in the original.
[57] Hannah Arendt: Denktagebuch: 1950-1973. Hg. v. Ursula Ludz u. Ingeborg Nordmann, in Zusammenarbeit mit dem Hannah Arendt-Institut Dresden. München: Piper Verlag [2020] 2022, p. 804.
[58] Hannah Arendt: Denktagebuch: 1950-1973. Hg. v. Ursula Ludz u. Ingeborg Nordmann, in Zusammenarbeit mit dem Hannah Arendt-Institut Dresden. München: Piper Verlag [2020] 2022, p. 805.

Arendt refers here to Kafka's short narrative, *Der plötzliche Spaziergang* that was published in the Schocken-books edition of his *Complete Stories* or *The Tales of Franz Kafka*, his *Erzählungen*, in 1946. She also refers to a diary entry of Kafka, to an auto.bio.graphical inscription, thus, where he talks about a sudden desire to walk.[59] This experience of 'unwillingness' in a state of melancholy, as it seems, appears to emerge without our will. Arendt apparently struggles with how to deal with the will where to place it against desire and the unwillingness of a subject on the one hand, and what she calls 'time' and 'time's will' as an outward event within the world, one's sociopolitical context perhaps, on the other hand.

Arendt forms her insight from a lived experience, puts this into writing and later combines it with a theoretical as well as literary text to further explore it. We can conclude then that in her *thought diary* Hannah Arendt not only uses philosophical as well as literary works, but also uses experiences of affectivity in an autotheoretical mode within poetic and prose poetic reflections to find to some form of insight. This process appears itself as a autotheoretical performative act of agency.

The *will* as a phenomenon, a philosophical concept, also is one of the three topics of Arendt's last work *The Life of the Mind* (1978) that she could not finish. I would like to briefly-refer here to a note of hers in this work. As becomes evident in this posthumously published book, Hannah Arendt not only is aware of the thought-forming and self-forming 'reality' of the world out there and its influences, she also faces it and remains in dialogue with it to find answers. The world as it appears to us, 'reality', 'life' the way it is experienced presupposes, she suggests following Edmund Husserl, not only intentionality, or, as we might rather say now, relationality, but also a kind of recognition by others as well. Without such acknowledgement of others, she continues, "we would not even be able to put faith in the way we appear to ourselves."[60]

Conjoined in writing she thus discerns a relation between 'world' and 'self' in writing.' Thought as a response and a form of positionality through writing in this

[59] Hannah Arendt: Denktagebuch: 1950-1973. Hg. v. Ursula Ludz u. Ingeborg Nordmann, in Zusammenarbeit mit dem Hannah Arendt-Institut Dresden. München: Piper Verlag [2020] 2022, p. 810. See here also the editors' note, p. 1156,10.
[60] Cf. Hannah Arendt: The Life of the Mind. New York, London: Harcourt, Inc. 1978, p. 46.

manner becomes part of a 'radical subjectivism'[61]. It is precisely the singular "thinking activity – the experience of the thinking ego – that gives rise to doubt of the world's reality and of my own."[62]

5 Conclusion

Autotheory may not be just about the creation, placement, and displacement of a self but about an other not only through the formation of subjectivity in writing, but also by writing as a political act. Thus, while life writing may be an overarching term for a praxis of expressing a self within historically conditioned contexts and discursive and social values, it is, I argue, dependent on questions of subjectivity, subject-positions, and positioning, how someone and something is written and *re*inscribed in 'life' (writing).

Autotheorizing is done from a reflective, critical stance with the other, 'the world', the im/possibility of response-ability, in mind, and in a questioning manner, not in order to give an adequate and correct response or representation of 'the self' or 'the other' – but in order to let something glitter on the surface, to problematize, to find to dialogue along new, other paths. This is what autotheory may share among other things with its critical and often poststructuralist influenced underpinnings – a work against silence, a work against silencing. Hannah Arendt writing is, it can be assumed, also influenced by her reading of literature and thus the aesthetically trained trait of her epistemology. She seems often enough to take refuge within the realm of the aesthetic, and I would argue the literariness of her own writing as a kind of line of flight for further thought. Not only do all these instances and forms of writing intermingle in her texts – they also find a home in her concept of *thinking* as an act of being in the world and of taking responsibility. Going beyond a psychoanalytical schema – this stance also signifies change on the level of language and intervention in discourse as well as on the level of the mobilization or a *re*orientation of the self within a transforming wor(l)d. Arendt not only uses images of the split subject in the process of writing and not only employs her life-experiences as a source of departure for her political reflections. Her writing

[61] Hannah Arendt: The Life of the Mind. New York, London: Harcourt, Inc. 1978, p. 47.
[62] Hannah Arendt: The Life of the Mind. New York, London: Harcourt, Inc. 1978, p. 49.

remains embedded, at least partly, in a poetic prose, while remaining critical of hitherto philosophical cornerstones, seeking insight that reflects on political sites. She thus attempts to use language and thought in another way, one that is deeply critical of former beliefs and that tries to find new entry points to it. Although Arendt's work is preoccupied with the world and how to engage with it, she does not geographize herself within a specific country or 'culture'. Her thoughts and critical stances rather foreground an understanding of 'being in the wor(l)d' that is engaged and yet does not let itself be squeezed into a particular 'identity' for longer than necessary. This understanding is both free and relational.

I would like to conclude with a sentence that encapsulates the cosmopolitan character of her thought and concern for the world, which she seems to perceive as a cohesive entity in which subjects think *to be free from to be free to* – in infinite ways. This is another form of freedom, one that is connected to critique and thought, a kind of universalism without universalism, even without a specific 'identity' – but with an 'I' – always facing 'you' – maybe the most common bond people can share – an unbound relationality that can exceed all possible frontiers:

„*Das denkende Ich* [...] *ist, streng genommen*, *nirgends, es ist heimatlos* [...]."[63]

Like 'you', the 'I' seems to say to ‚you' –.

[63] Hannah Arendt: Denken ohne Geländer: Texte und Briefe. Hg. v. Heidi Bohnet und Klaus Stadler. München: Piper Verlag, p. 16.